

Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages a letterbox contact system. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency refers them for training to a registered voluntary adoption agency specialising in this work and then they return for the assessment to Hertfordshire. The agency also has a contract with two registered adoption support agencies to provide independent support to adoptive families and birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The agency approaches the recruitment of adopters in a planned way and ensures that recruitment activity is based on the needs of children needing a placement. The preparation and assessment of applicants is geared to ensuring that people are well informed about and understand the implications of the complex needs children needing adoptive placements often have. The family finding and matching processes are of a very good quality and some excellent direct work with children is carried out. The approval processes are sufficiently robust and ensure that adoption is in the child's best interests, adopters are suitable people to be adoptive parents and matches provide the best opportunity for the child to have a safe, stable and secure family life.

There are a range of support services in place to support adoptive families and birth families but not all adopters and social workers are aware of the range and how to access these. Work with children is of a good quality and helps to ensure they are aware of their situation and ensure they are supported in having the best opportunities possible to make sound attachments to their new parents.

The agency is managed in a effective and efficient way with good support being provided to staff. There is a child centred approach taken to the adoption process by this agency and this means that good outcomes for children are achieved. Communication between managers and staff and across the teams is adequate although there is a lack of clarity for some social workers about some aspects of the various adoption team's work.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection there were four actions made and 18 recommendations. This is an agency which has used the findings of the previous inspection process to improve practice. As a result all of the issues raised at the last key inspection have now been either fully or partly addressed. The most marked improvements are in the family finding and matching processes and the quality of the direct work carried out with children. These are now real strengths which enable sound foundations to be established so that safe stable and secure placements can be made and maintained into adulthood. Other areas of improvements made include the quality of assessments of adopters and children, the introduction of a formal induction process for panel members and the quality of the minutes made of the panel meetings. The training opportunities available to social workers have also improved as has the maintenance of case records for adopters and children.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The arrangements for the recruitment of adopters are sound. Recruitment activity is guided by the needs of children waiting for a placement. There are good links to the local consortium which are being further developed. There has been a recent promotion of adoption for children who have a disability and need a plan for permanence. There are difficulties, as experienced by many agencies, in the recruitment of adopters to meet needs relating to race and culture. The agency has recognised this and is in discussions with a voluntary agency about raising the profile of adoption within various communities.

People who wish to adopt a child from another country attend preparation sessions run by an agency which specialises in this work and then return to the agency for assessment.

Prospective applicants are well informed about the adoption process through written and verbal information which is well presented and comprehensive in content. Interested parties are invited to attend an introduction to adoption course. The formal application to adopt is taken only after this course has been completed, which is not in line with regulations and statutory guidance. This situation means that people do not have access to the formal routes of appealing an adverse decision about their suitability from the point of the preparation and assessment processes commencing. However, the course is viewed by adopters as being very informative and useful. One stated that the sessions had been 'really helpful' and a number

reported that the course had helped them to move on in their thinking about the needs of the children coming through the system and what this would mean for them and their families. Placing social workers also feel that adopters have been well prepared.

A second course is held which essentially takes applicants through the process of compiling their assessment report. This approach, although unusual, is seen by social workers and panel members as being really useful as it is felt that the reports provide a clear view and feeling about what the applicants are like. The information provided is analysed by social workers and clear conclusions are reached about applicants suitability to adopt. Some gaps remain in the assessment process. Namely, consistency in obtaining full details of adopters employment histories, the taking up of overseas checks were people have lived overseas and the routine taking up of statutory checks with other agencies.

The arrangements for family finding, matching and direct work with children are evidenced as being of a very good quality for the cases tracked, especially those referred to the family finding team. In the family finding process the monitoring of cases is robust with regular management involvement and this ensures that any drift can be identified and addressed. The monitoring processes and related meetings ensure that there is a heightened awareness about the needs of the children who will need an adoptive placement and the abilities of the prospective adopters in terms of meeting these needs. There is very good written evidence of the selection process and clear reasons for choices made are recorded.

There are therapeutic transitional meetings held for complex cases which promote a shared approach to making and maintaining placements and ensure that the professional network is working in an effective way. Theory and practice are linked in the way in which introductions are made and the focus remains clearly on the child. There is a built in review stage during introductions to ensure the needs of the child are being met. After the child has moved in adopters continue to help children develop a plan for the first few weeks of living together. This provides the child with clarity about roles and routines and aids the development of feelings of safety and security. Adopters are well supported in this transition work.

The two adoption panels are governed by clear policies and procedures. Adopters are invited to attend their approval panel and feel that they are treated with respect and sensitively. Hertfordshire adopters do not attend the matching panel currently although there are plans to trial this in the near future. Social workers were of the view that panel gives proper scrutiny to their work and report that the panels have adopted a much more sensitive approach when raising issues about their work. Birth parents views are seen as important and panels monitor this closely. A panel was not observed on this occasion but from reading documents and through the interviews carried out it is concluded that the panels are properly constituted and both meet as a quorum. They are effectively managed and administered and recommendations are only made following careful consideration by members of all required information. Minutes are made and are of a good quality. However, where a sibling group is presented joint minutes are made of the proceedings which is not good

practice. Decisions are based on all available information about a case, including the draft panel minutes, and are made in a timely way.

The manager and staff working for the agency are all appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about working with children and adoption matters. Recruitment practices are overall sound and ensure that people working for the agency are suitable. However, the councillors, who are panel members, are nominated to panel and while there are references and criminal records bureau checks taken up they do not go through the same recruitment procedure as the other panel members. In addition not all managers are evidencing as a part of the staff recruitment process that they have verified references with the writer.

The agency has written local safeguarding procedures which relate to children who are placed for adoption, historical abuse allegations and children receiving a support service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a good approach to supporting placements. Social workers working within the support team are confident that they can develop support services further now there is a manager in post.

The preparation process equips adopters well in understanding the needs and behaviours of children who have had adverse early life experiences. The robust family finding and matching processes ensure that adopters are aware of the individual child's specific needs and the pre-parenting course helps adopters to focus on the transition and introduction stages. Transitions work with children and adopters is of a very good quality and there are some examples of very good practice to ensure that children and adopters are well informed about each other, even down to a pet being introduced to the scent of a child before the child visited the home.

Robust support plans are developed and these are reviewed over time to ensure that the support continues to be appropriate. Assessing social workers continue to offer support for up to a year after the order has been granted and then where required the case is transferred to the adoption support team.

The services available are wide and varied, such as a range of groups, various training sessions, therapeutic input, newsletters, a mentoring service and external support delivered via service level agreements. However, not all adopters and social workers are aware of the services available and how to access them which has left some families feeling less than well supported. Where people have accessed the pre and post adoption support generally they are satisfied with the support provided although for some children there are gaps in terms of support to meet their educational needs.

There is a good range of specialist advice available to the panel and the agency. The medical advisers take a very proactive approach to their role, ensuring that all medical information is obtained and shared with prospective adopters. A report is made of this meeting provided to the adopters for future reference. There are arrangements in place in respect to legal advice to panel and the agency and this is generally felt by most social workers to be accessible and of an adequate quality. There is a good educational resource in the advisory teacher but generally support in meeting educational needs is inconsistent. Likewise the support and input from the local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Team is also inconsistent. However, the agency has the services of clinical psychologists, a play therapist and some social workers are trained in 'Theraplay' so this ensures that children's emotional and mental health needs are met. Not all of these specialists are either employed by the agency or registered as an adoption support agency as is required.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the life long implications adoption has on all parties and works with birth family members in a sensitive non-judgemental way.

There is evidence of some good work carried out with birth family members and useful information packs are provided to birth parents at an early stage of the process. These provide details about the adoption process and the support available to them which includes support from external agencies via a service level agreement. For some birth parents it was clearly evidenced that the support services available to them are promoted throughout the process. Birth family members are encouraged to provide their views and feelings about the plan for adoption and where possible information about the family history and child's early life is obtained for the child. Birth parents are supported in attending a one of meeting with adopters where appropriate and a 'wishing well' meeting with their child.

Direct work is carried out with children to prepare them for their adoption placement and for most information is gathered about their early life. For complex cases the adoption standards workers will do comprehensive pieces of work with children to help them understand their life story. This work includes the development of life story books and later in life letters. These are seen as valuable tools in helping a child understand their situation now and in the future. There are some excellent examples of life story books including a Braille version with an accompanying sighted book for the adopter to read while child follows their book. However, life story work and books are not always being completed in a timely way.

There is a well-managed and administered letterbox system in place and there are leaflets provided to participants explaining the system and help in writing letters is provided wherever necessary. Not all exchanges are currently viewed by a social worker to ensure suitability of the content.

The agency undertakes work with adults affected by adoption issues and offers a prompt and sensitive service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency overall shows a committed approach to ensuring that issues around equality and diversity are given appropriate attention on a strategic and practice level.

The agency has developed a clear and comprehensive statement of purpose and this is underpinned by a full range of policies and procedures. There are some excellent guides to adoption for children including information for siblings of children who are to be adopted. These guides are used to explain to children the adoption process and what it means for them. Adopters are also provided with very good quality information, in a timely way, adopters find this useful.

Despite the recent disruption to managers and staff due to a move to different premises the strategic and operational management of this agency has remained stable. The management arrangements are good and the agency is managed by suitably qualified, experienced and skilled managers. The arrangements for caseload management are adequate but there is a practice of transferring cases between child care teams at an especially crucial stage of the process. This is universally unpopular among staff and managers due to the impact on the child having a new social worker can have. It also has an adverse effect the birth and adoptive family and the social workers involved.

The monitoring and controlling of the agency is undertaken in a robust way. The lead member for children's services is fully involved in monitoring arrangements to ensure that good outcomes for children and adults using the services are maintained. The arrangements for monitoring the reports presented to panel are robust and have ensured that there has been some considerable improvements in the quality of these documents.

The agency is staffed by people who are skilled in their roles and who provide a child focused service which achieve good quality outcomes for children. Communication across the teams is generally adequate but some workers lack clarity about the work of other teams. Staff are well supported in their roles by managers through regular one to one supervision and informal supervision as and when required. The training opportunities for staff have been improved since the last inspection and this had aided the positive developments in the service provided. Most adopters views about

the calibre of social workers are positive. Adopters comments about staff included that they are 'brilliant' and 'couldn't fault them'.

Case records for adopters, children and adoption support services are overall satisfactory but some documents are not signed or dated. Personnel records are kept as are records relating to panel members. Shortfalls in personnel records are reported on in the staying safe section. Records of complaints are kept but do not include the details of the investigation, the conclusions reached and the action taken.

The premises are accessible to the public during normal office hours, including people with a disability. The agency is to be based in different premises in the near future to provide an adoption centre from which all the services will be based. The current premises and electronic systems are secure and electronic records are backed up on a daily basis. The agency has a disaster recovery plan in place which relates to both the back up of records and the provision of premises.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that all enquiries are undertaken about prospective adopters (NMS 4.8)
- ensure that the formal application to adopt is accepted prior to any preparation and assessment work is carried out (Adoption and Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance and Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 22)
- ensure that anyone working in or for the adoption agency are suitable to work with children (NMS19.1)
- improve the strategy for supporting adopters with reference to disseminating information about the support services available and the ways in which services can be accessed (NMS 6.2)
- ensure that specialist support to placements is provided by persons employed by the agency or registered as an Adoption Support Agency (ASA) (ASA regulation 3)
- ensure the maintenance of each child's heritage is carried out in a timely way and that appropriate arrangements for the quality assurance of information from the birth family are in place. This is with reference to life story work and letters and other information shared in contact arrangements (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that no child is disadvantaged by an inefficient and ineffective service due to the transfer of cases between the child care teams (NMS 20.1)
- ensure that the recording of complaints includes the details of the investigation, the conclusions reached and the action taken. (NMS 27.6)