

Coventry City 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

Coventry City Council provides a comprehensive adoption and post adoption service to all those people affected by adoption. This includes children for whom adoption is the plan, birth parents and relatives, prospective and approved adoptive parents and adopted adults.

The adoption teams are based at Stoke House and work closely with each other and with the looked after children's team to progress adoption plans for children.

The service recruits, prepares, assesses, supports and provides welfare supervision to domestic adopters and inter-country adopters are referred to a specialist agency for their preparation and come back to the adoption service for assessment and support. The agency works with children's social workers to identify matches for looked after children and assist in their placement. It provides support and counselling for birth parents, including independent support through a service level agreement with a voluntary organisation and provides a general adoption support service. The agency also works with adopted adults and adult birth relatives of adopted adults including birth records counselling and an intermediary service. This includes a service provided via service level agreements with adoption support agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection of the provision. The service has a thorough approach to the recruitment of adopters who will be likely to be able to meet the often complex needs of children waiting for a placement. The approach to the assessment of adopters is sound and overall the quality of assessments are good. The arrangements for approval of adopters via the adoption panel are robust but panel does not always consider if a placement order should be applied for. The decision making is undertaken in a timely way and the relevant people are informed promptly of the decision. The decision process is not always robustly undertaken as not all of the papers are read.

The agency approach to providing adoption support is especially strong. An impressive range of support services are available and these are provided internally and via external providers. Sound assessments for support are made and work is carried out in a timely way. Feedback from adopters and young people about the support provided are extremely positive and people using the services feel that the work carried out has led to an improvement in their lives.

Support to birth parents is provided internally and via an external agency. To improve the take up of the services the agency ensures that birth family members are reminded of the services available at various stages of the process. The arrangements for direct work with children to help them understand their situation are good in terms of the quality of the work but the timeliness is variable. There are various contact arrangements in place but some the agreed arrangements do not always fully focus on the child's needs.

There is a strong management team in place and the staff are overall well supported. The social workers employed within the various teams are skilled and experienced in their roles and many adopters made positive comments about their worker. However, staff shortages have led to the employment of sessional staff and this work is not always supervised to a high standard and as a result on some occasions work submitted to panel has been of an inferior quality.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were two requirements and four recommendations made as a result of the last inspection. The agency was required to ensure there is evidence that the notifications to birth parents have been sent to them; the letters are now being sent out and copied on the child's file. The agency was required to ensure that children's case files comply with the requirements of the legislation; this has been addressed and files are set up in a timely way and contain the required information. It was recommended that the agency ensure that the panel minutes state the reasons for the recommendations and the capacity in which panel members appear, and that this information is also available on the extract in the file. This has been fully implemented. It was recommended that the agency should ensure that the decision is made in accordance with the recommended timescales. Decisions are now being made in a timely way. The agency was asked to ensure that the children's guide was reviewed to ensure it is more age appropriate and engaging. The agency has developed new guides which are accessible to most children. The agency was asked to ensure there is an adequate number of administrative staff to support the work of the service. Some developments in numbers of admin staff have taken place but due to unforeseen circumstances progress has not yet gone as far as was hoped.

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.

A planned approach to the recruitment of adopters who will be best able to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement is taken. While the approach to recruitment is underpinned by an understanding of diversity issues the needs of

children requiring adoptive placements remain the paramount consideration. This is very clearly a service which finds families for children not children for families. The agency successfully places children with very complex needs and histories with people who are best equipped to meet those needs.

The preparation course is well-established and all applicants, including foster carers who wish to adopt the child they are caring for, are expected to attend. People wishing to adopt a child from overseas are referred to an agency specialising in this work for their preparation and then are assessed and supported by the agency. The course run by the agency is of a good quality. A range of speakers provide information to the applicants about all aspects of the adoption process and explain the specific needs children waiting for a placement are likely to have. Established adopters help to present the course and this is seen as very valuable by the social workers and the attendees. The course is subject to regular review in light of comments about the sessions. There were many positive comments from adopters about how useful the courses had been to them. One comment which sums up the majority view was, 'The preparation groups are very interactive, informative, sensitive and thought provoking. We found the whole experience very beneficial.'

The assessment process is overall of a good quality and the majority of assessments show that all relevant information has been gathered and subjected to robust analysis. Clear conclusions are reached about the applicants capacity to parent a child who may have complex needs. For the few less thorough assessments the adoption panel had been effective in picking up the issues and the assessments were deferred until outstanding work had been carried out. On a small number of assessments the months of the applicants work histories had not been obtained which means it is difficult to check out if there have been any gaps in their employment.

There is a formal process in place for the approval of applicants as prospective adopters. The adoption panel makes recommendations about applicants suitability and whether a child should be placed for adoption. The panel is governed by written policies and procedures. There is no formal process in place to ensure that panel members receive progress reports on cases. Applicants are invited to attend the panel at which their case is being heard and are informed about the recommendation panel will be making to the decision maker. Panels are properly constituted and convened on a regular basis. The proceedings are organised and managed effectively and minutes are made. The minutes are informative and detail the recommendations and the reasons for these but where cases relating to sibling groups are heard each child does not have a separate minute made. When panel hears children's cases consideration is not always given to if the local authority should apply for a placement order as is stated in the adoption guidance. The agency decision is made following consideration of the papers submitted to panel and the panel minutes. The decision maker also has discussions with relevant people, such as the adviser to panel, about specific cases. The decision is made in a timely way and all relevant people are informed promptly.

There are good processes in place in respect to matching. The family finding

processes are thorough and provide a choice of families for children. The agency ensures that prospective adopters are well informed about the child's needs and are beginning to hold life appreciation days which are a useful arena for information sharing. The medical adviser will meet with prospective adopters if the child has medical issues and explain the implications these have for the future. There are formal matching meetings held which are chaired by a manager and introductions and placements are well planned and supported. For birth relatives adoption of a child is especially traumatic, however, a birth family member commented that the agency had 'provided a very good link with a caring and loving couple.' This indicates that despite the distress this person had experienced they were satisfied that the child had been placed with people who will be good parents.

The managers and social workers are suitably qualified, skilled and experienced in adoption work. Managers and staff show a strong commitment to making and maintaining good quality placements for children and demonstrate a high level of professionalism. Issues around safeguarding are dealt with due rigour and the safety and well-being of children and young people is promoted to a good level.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

This agency has a strong approach to supporting adoptive placements. Many adopters commented on the quality of the support provided. One adopter commented, 'We've got a long haul in front of us and it's good to know the support is there' and 'They are there in every way.' The dedicated adoption support team works closely with families to identify needs and develop support packages to meet those needs. Support packages are well resourced and are reviewed over time to ensure that changing needs are catered for.

There is an impressive range of support services provided by the agency which range from support groups to generous financial packages. These packages range from supporting families in funding extensions to their homes in order that suitable accommodation can be provided to providing an allowance to enable an adoptive parent to provide full-time care to a child. There is the services of a clinical psychologist who offers a consultation service to social workers and adopters and can gain prompt access to the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) when needed. This service is seen by social workers and adopters as invaluable. One worker commented that there is an, 'extremely good working relationship with the psychologist.' Some of the workers in the support team have been trained in the use of therapeutic techniques and these workers carry out direct work with children and families. There is also a years paid membership of a national support agency provided to each family and use of the support agency's buddy system. These resources along with other services commissioned by the agency ensure that families are extremely well supported in providing a high quality of care to the children placed. The low number of disruptions of adoptive placements indicate the high level of success this agency has in supporting families.

There are a range of specialist advisors who support the workers and adopters in gaining an insight into the often complex needs children needing adoptive placements have. The medical and legal advisers are seen as especially supportive, accessible and knowledgeable. There is an educational psychologist who sits on the panel and these advisors along with the clinical psychologist ensure the agency is well informed in their specialist area. Other specialists can be accessed as and when required and there is a clear inter-agency approach taken to supporting placements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a commitment to work as closely with birth parents and family members in planning for their child's futures. This is a difficult and distressing time for parents but there is some success in engaging productively with birth families. This means that their wishes and feeling can be taken into account. It also enables information about the child's background and family circumstances can be gathered and used to help the child understand their situation. The child's social workers work hard to help birth family members understand what is happening and birth parents are also supported by their own legal representative. There is a commissioned independent birth parents support service available to all birth parents and while the take up of this is slow at the early stages good efforts are made to keep the parents informed about the service.

Life story work is seen as a very important part of work with the child and some very good quality work is carried out with children. Life story books and later in life letters are also developed and these will be useful to the child in maintaining an understanding about his situation. For older children who have been adopted a time ago some very good work is carried out. Comments from adoptees showed the value they place on this work and they felt that the work had helped them to understand their situation and their lives had been enhanced as a result. For some children currently being adopted there are delays to life story work which has caused delays in making placements.

There is a well managed letter-box contact system in place and direct contact arrangements are overall well managed. The letter-box system includes a reminder system for all parties but this is only at the stage an exchange date has passed which can mean some exchanges do not take place on time. The arrangements for contact at the time a placement is made do not always fully evidence that the child's needs have been put at the heart of the arrangements. There is a service to adult adoptees and birth family members in later life. This work is carried out by an experienced worker who is knowledgeable and skilled in this area of work and a service can be provided promptly.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a clear statement of purpose that is underpinned by the agency's policies and procedures. Children are provided with good quality information which has been developed for different age ranges. Prospective adopters are provided with a good quality of information which ensures they are well-informed about adoption and the processes. The needs of children waiting for a placement are highlighted and the eligibility criteria shows that this is an agency which welcomes a diverse range of applicants.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agencies policies, procedures and practice show that there is a good understanding about equality and diversity matters. While the focus is firmly placed on the needs of the child the agency does welcome all who fall within the eligibility criteria. Where it seems unlikely that interested parties would be chosen for a child this is handled in a caring and sensitive way.

The agency is managed effectively by managers who are skilled and experienced in childcare and adoption work. Some changes in the management structure have taken place and these are beginning to bed down. Further changes are being made in the functions of some of the teams and these have been made to hopefully provide an even more effective service. There are good lines of communication within and across the teams and social workers really value their immediate managers. Comments from social workers include, 'so well supported in this area and working with knowledgeable people who support you in other life areas' and 'open style of management in adoption.' However, some social workers feel that senior managers are more difficult to communicate with and are distant in their approach.

The executive are provided with an annual report which informs them about the work of the agency and allows for a level of monitoring. These reports are not being provided often enough, as detailed in the standards, to allow for the executive to be able to monitor the work as closely as recommended.

There are arrangements for the management of caseloads and support to social workers is provided by formal and informal supervision, team meetings and peer support. One social worker said, 'I feel we work well together' and another stated that the team meetings are, 'extremely productive meetings'.

The teams working for the purpose of the agency are in the main well established and stable. There has been an increase in the workload and as a result sessional

workers have been used to meet this need. Some of this work has not been closely supervised and this means that the quality of some assessments have not been as good as usual. Training resources are good with access to specialist training. This helps to ensure that staff are kept up to date and aids the development of services. Overall adopters value their worker and are complimentary about them. Comments about social workers included 'she is full of energy and love of the job' and ' she is lovely, she put us at our ease and explained everything thoroughly. She was very kind to us and very understanding, she let us go at an easy and manageable pace.'

Appropriate case records are made and maintained to a high standard. The arrangements for administration have improved but issues have impacted to date on the level of progress made in this area. However, the calibre of the administrative staff is described by the social workers as being very good.

Personnel records are well maintained. The records for panel members and sessional workers are inconsistently maintained and some do not include all required information. The arrangements for the storage of archived files are sound and ensure that they are protected as far as is possible from damage. The premises are well equipped and provide space for staff and service users to work and meet in comfort.

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, with particular reference to obtaining full employment histories (NMS 4.8)
- ensure that panel receives progress reports on individual cases (NMS 10.2)
- ensure that panels are effectively conducted. This is with specific reference to considering if an application should be made by the authority for a placement order in respect to a child as detailed in Chapter 2 of the Children Act Guidance 2002 (NMS 12.1)
- ensure each child has clear and appropriate information about themselves and their situation. This is with particular reference to ensuring that life story work is carried out in a timely way and that life story books are made available in a timely way (NMS 8.2)
- ensure effective plans are made and implemented for children. This is with specific reference to ensuring that contact arrangements are focused on and shaped around the child's needs as detailed in Chapter 7 of the Children Act Guidance 2002 (NMS 7.2)
- ensure the executive of the council receive reports on the management and outcomes of the services at least every six months (NMS 17.3)
- ensure that up to date comprehensive personnel files are maintained for agency

workers and panel members. (NMS 28.2)