

# Nottingham 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

This local authority adoption agency provides a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities. This includes matching and placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families for domestic adoption; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families, both in-house and through a service level agreement with a local Voluntary Adoption Agency; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions; assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements and court reports for non-agency adoptions. Enquirers who wish to adopt from overseas are directed to a Voluntary Adoption Agency, with whom it has a service level agreement.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a full, announced inspection which covered all the key standards in the Every Child Matters outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation.

The adoption agency provides a good, safe service to children and families. It has a thorough and targeted approach to the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters which ensures they are appropriate to meet the needs of the children placed with them. The adoption panel provides robust independent scrutiny of the work of the agency.

Support to adopters is outstanding; good use of partner agencies ensures there is a range of services available to support adoptive families in caring for their children.

The agency is committed to working with birth parents both before and after an adoption order is made. It offers support and assistance with maintaining contact arrangements to ensure a child's heritage is promoted. It also offers a good service to adopted adults and birth relatives in relation to counselling and intermediary work.

The agency is well managed at all levels; staff are supported to be effective through regular supervision and a good level of training. Good systems for communication ensure that everyone is aware of their roles and responsibilities. Recommendations have been made in relation to panel minutes, telephone verification of references for staff and panel members, and twice yearly reports to the executive of the council in relation to the work of the adoption agency.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

Three actions and 11 recommendations were made at the previous inspection. The actions related to notification of agency decisions, and ensuring that the contents of a child's adoption file and panel members' files complied with the requirements of the regulations. These have now been addressed. The recommendations related to improving adopter assessments and checks, panel policies, panel members' induction and panel minutes, the development of protocols for specialist advisers, improving the children's guide, improving access to computer equipment for staff, formalising file audit systems and risk assessing the archive storage. These have also been addressed.

## **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 agency has a systematic approach to the recruitment of appropriate adopters to meet the needs of the children waiting for adoptive families. There are formalised systems of communication to ensure that those responsible for recruitment and home finding are aware of the needs of children who have a plan for adoption, which leads to a targeted approach to find suitable families. A variety of methods are used: for example, there has been a planned campaign to recruit families who will adopt disabled children and a matching evening for approved adopters to consider children who are traditionally harder to place. A very impressive initiative is the recruitment of dual status adopters who will initially care for children as foster carers, thus enabling very young children to be placed with them, preventing the need for more changes of placement than are absolutely necessary.

The agency has a thorough and formalised approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. Adopters have commented that the preparation training was 'excellent, thought-provoking and well thought out'. The training is underpinned with a very useful handbook of information which adopters can access later on, such as advice on contact. Assessments are thorough, include a second opinion visit as routine practise, and a wide range of checks, including former partners and employers, are carried out. Assessments are analytical and address equality and diversity issues extremely well. Safe caring and health and safety are also comprehensively covered, ensuring that safe placements are promoted. Adopters comment that the social workers are 'supportive and thorough' and they feel they are kept well informed throughout.

Adopters receive full information about the children who may be placed with them which enables them to make an informed decision about whether the placement is

right for them. This includes life appreciation days as routine practice which adds further depth to the information they receive. Adopters are offered the opportunity to meet with the medical adviser to discuss any health implications, which they find useful. Introductions are well planned and include a midway review. Adopters said about the introduction process: 'they knew what they were doing'.

The agency has two adoption panels which meet monthly. These are governed by clearly written policies and procedures. Adopters are invited to attend for their approval and for matching and this practice is well established and well thought out. Although daunting, applicants are made to feel at ease by being well prepared; an adoptive parent waits with them before they go into panel to provide some reassurance and the panel members are welcoming.

The panels are appropriately constituted and the members bring a variety of personal and professional skills and experience to the role. They have regular training, including medical and legal briefings, to ensure they are up to date with recent practice developments and competent to consider the business before them. The panels are chaired by experienced professionals, independent of the agency, who ensure everyone has the chance to contribute effectively. Panels are organised efficiently and the paperwork is sent out in good time to enable panel members to give it thorough consideration.

The minutes of the panel are full and give a good account of the business and the reasons for the recommendations. However, minutes on siblings are not separate and thus there may be issues of confidentiality in the future when the adopted person accesses their birth records. Currently panel members receive a copy of the draft minutes but do not receive the amended minutes to ensure they are an accurate reflection of the meeting.

The agency decision is made in a timely way, with thorough consideration of all the appropriate information. This is communicated to all relevant parties.

The manager and staff are appointed by robust recruitment and selection procedures and all are suitably qualified, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable. However, there is no evidence that telephone verification of references occurs consistently.

The safeguarding procedures make specific reference to children placed for adoption; staff are clear about their role and have appropriate training. This promotes a workforce which is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides a very good range of services to support adoptive families, both before and after the adoption order is made. This enables adoptive parents to provide a stable and permanent home for children. Adopters are prepared well

during the assessment process so they understand the needs of an adoptive child. They are linked with an approved adopter who acts as a 'buddy', there is a support group for lesbian and gay adopters, social activities are arranged and they have one year's membership of a support agency paid for by the agency.

The agency provides an impressive number of training courses for adoptive parents which include disability awareness, caring for black children, attachment issues, identity, safe caring, understanding self harm and supporting adolescents, to name but a few. The post adoption team hold regular duty and surgery sessions to facilitate quick access to advice and support and they also make adopters aware of universal services which may be of benefit, for example, toddler groups. The post adoption team, in conjunction with partner agencies, run activity workshops for children every school holiday, which includes a range of sport and craft activities. The targeted support team, which offers six week crisis intervention work, is also accessed by the post adoption team to provide a quick response to stabilise a placement. Partnership working is impressive and embedded in practice. Partner agencies are enthusiastic about the joint working arrangements and want to develop their services to be accessible and inclusive.

Specialist advice is readily available to the adoption agency. There is very good support from the medical advisers and adoption nurse; they are accessible to the adoption panel, staff and adopters, and ensure information is passed to relevant professionals so children receive appropriate support for their needs. There is good access to the child and adolescent mental health services through a specialist team and also locality arrangements. The legal advisers are accessible to staff and the adoption panel and are proactive in working with court users to encourage good working relationships and highlight any issues of practice which may cause delay for children in the legal process. They also provide training for staff and the panel so they keep up to date with any developments.

The post adoption team have a formalised system for assessing requests for adoption support and these are thoroughly documented, shared with service users and reviewed. Adopters have commented: 'I had a speedy response, without which the placement would have disrupted'.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency tries to involve birth parents in planning for their child's adoption. The child permanence report records their views or the reasons why these have not been obtained, and the adoption panel are very vigilant in ensuring there is something recorded which reflects the work done with birth parents. The agency has a service level agreement with a local Voluntary Adoption Agency to provide an independent service for birth parents and there are clear arrangements for ensuring they know about this service. However, the take-up is low and the manager hopes to improve upon this through further discussion with the provider.

The agency makes good arrangements for the maintenance of a child's heritage. There is clear guidance for staff in relation to contact and all direct contact arrangements are discussed with the post adoption team to ensure they are in the best interests of the child and the reasons are documented. Adopters are encouraged to have one-off meetings with birth parents and keep memory boxes; they are also supported in maintaining contact arrangements. There is a robust letterbox system which is well managed and birth parents are offered help with letter writing if they need it. Life story books and later in life letters are prepared for children and good examples were seen of these.

The agency is committed to providing support to birth parents after the adoption order is made and runs a well established group for birth mothers. This provides good support for a small number of women, some of whom have been coming for many years. One person commented that she attends the group because: 'I don't get judged here'. The agency has also started to run a group for birth fathers at their request; this is a user-led group for a small number of men which offers support.

The agency works well with adopted adults and birth relatives in relation to birth records counselling and birth relative initiated contact. They are committed to providing a good quality service and at present there is no waiting list. There are clear procedures which govern this work and a panel considers the intermediary work to ensure the decision-making is sound, the welfare of all parties is assessed and the reasons for any decision are documented.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has an updated Statement of Purpose which is easy to read and informative; this gives any reader a full picture of what to expect from the service. The Statement of Purpose is underpinned by a comprehensive range of policies and procedures which give clear guidance to staff on how to undertake their roles and the expectations placed upon them. The children's guides have been developed to make them more accessible to children of differing ages and abilities. They are child-friendly and enable children to have a better understanding of what is happening in their lives.

The agency has an inclusive attitude towards all enquirers and the written information makes it very clear that applications are welcomed from a diverse range of people. The agency has a strong awareness of the needs of the children who are more difficult to place and prioritises applications accordingly. All enquirers attend an information evening; these are held monthly and give the opportunity to meet and

talk to adoptive parents and members of staff to answer any queries. Applicants have commented on how useful these sessions are in helping them obtain more information and have a realistic idea of what adoption is about.

The agency is well managed at all levels, both strategically and operationally. There is a systematic approach to ensuring that there is good communication both within the adoption service and with the fieldwork services. All staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities and understand how their part of the service fits in with the wider children's services.

The arrangements for monitoring the service are good. The lead member has regular meetings with senior officers, the councillors on the two adoption panels, and receives performance monitoring reports on a regular basis; this enables him to be satisfied that the agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for children. He demonstrates a good awareness of the issues and a commitment to strengthen partnership working and address any shortfalls. He does not receive reports on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency on a six monthly basis, however.

The agency has a sufficient number of experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the service, including good administrative support for the adoption service. All staff receive supervision on a regular basis and report that managers are accessible and approachable. Their training needs are assessed through an annual appraisal system and all staff receive a good level of training, both internal and external. These systems ensure that staff are effective in undertaking their duties with appropriate professionalism.

Case records for adopters and children are comprehensive and show evidence of discussions and decisions made in supervision. Appropriate policies and procedures address recording, access to information and storage to ensure confidentiality is maintained. There is a formal file audit system to ensure the quality of case records meets the required expectations.

The premises are suitable for the purposes of the agency; they have appropriate accommodation for staff, suitable rooms for meetings and training events and are accessible. Security is robust and records are appropriately stored to minimise risk of danger from fire and water.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. All aspects of diversity are addressed in all of the work which the agency undertakes and are embedded in practice. Staff are respectful and non-judgemental towards users of the service. Children's diverse needs are identified and met wherever possible and their heritage is valued and promoted. The agency makes every effort to recruit adopters to meet the needs of disabled children and children from minority ethnic backgrounds. There is an inclusive attitude towards the recruitment of adopters, with the needs of the child being the paramount concern. Images used in publications reflect diversity in all its forms and the issues are thoroughly addressed in adopter preparation. Approved adopters include single people, same sex couples and people from a range of

different cultural backgrounds. Diversity is also reflected in the staff team at all levels and in the membership of the adoption panel.

## **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 the minutes of the adoption panel are an accurate reflection of the meeting, with specific reference to panel members receiving a copy of the amended minutes and separate minutes being prepared for siblings (National Minimum Standards 12.3)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references in relation to staff and panel members (National Minimum Standards 19.3)
- ensure the executive side of the council receive reports on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency every six months. (National Minimum Standards 17.3)