

# Warwickshire 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

Warwickshire County Council provides a comprehensive adoption and post adoption service to all those people affected by adoption as prescribed by law.

The adoption team is based in Warwick and the social workers work closely with each other and with the social workers within the district teams to progress adoption plans for children.

The adoption service recruits, prepares, assesses and supports domestic adopters. 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 assists in their placement. It provides support and counselling for birth parents, including independent support through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. It also provides a general adoption support service. The agency works with adopted adults to provide birth records counselling. Intermediary services are provided via an agreement with an adoption support agency.

### 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 during which all national minimum standards and related guidance was assessed as was compliance with the relevant regulations related to adoption services.

The systems for the recruitment of adopters and the preparation and assessment processes are child focused and ensure that adopters are well prepared and informed about the complexities of adoption. The assessments are of a good quality and specific attention is paid to issues around equality and diversity. The approval process is robust. The matching process is of a good quality and the agency ensures that adopters are well informed about the needs of the child. The agency has not developed safeguarding procedures that deal with issues raised by or on behalf of people receiving an adoption support service.

The support provided to families is of a good quality. Current adoptive families and those known to the agency are linked into the support services available. The services are wide and ranging and a flexible approach is taken to supporting adopted children and their adoptive families. Families not known to the agency can also access support services but the arrangements for assessing their needs in relation to adoption support are not well defined in every case.

The agency works with birth parents wherever possible in the planning for the child. Birth parents have the option to use an adoption support agency which is independent from Warwickshire and can provide a confidential service. There is an effective letterbox contact system in place and a birth records counselling service. The agency does not offer an intermediary service but refers these cases to the commissioned adoption support service.

This agency is well managed and managers provide a high level of support to the staff. The social workers and other staff are committed to providing a child centred service to children and adoptive families. There is a good level of communication between managers and staff, and across teams and agencies. This helps good outcomes for adopted children and their families to be achieved. There is not currently a room for attendees to panel to wait while the panel makes its recommendation and reports are not being provided to the executive of the council at the required frequency. The files relating to adoption support cases are not well ordered and maintained; basic information is not easy to find within these files.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

There was one requirement and nine recommendations made following the last inspection.

The staffing resources were considered to have shortfalls and a requirement was made regarding staffing levels. This has been addressed and the agency has sufficient staff who are appropriately skilled and qualified.

In respect to the assessment of adopters suitability it was recommended that written references from each prospective adopter's employer be taken up where possible; this is now routinely carried out

It was recommended that the matching processes be strengthened; there have been improvements in the matching processes. The needs of the child and the strengths of the prospective adopters are clearly identified and shortfalls are addressed via support plans. The matching processes are further strengthened by the introduction of life appreciation days as was recommended. These are held for each complex case and ensure that prospective adopters are provided with as much information as is possible about the child.

The minutes made of panel meetings did not include the reasons why panel had reached the recommendation made; all panel minutes now include this information.

The agency was asked to strengthen the strategic arrangements for the delivery of the adoption support services. Some improvements have been made in this area but a further recommendation has been made in relation to the assessment for support services.

The arrangements for the administration and delivery of the letterbox contact arrangements were not clearly defined. A review of the arrangements has taken

place and there are now clear systems in place and there are workers dedicated to this work.

For some children the standard of the life story work was not very good; work is now given appropriate priority and as a result the quality and timeliness has improved.

In respect to the adopters' and children's case files there now is clear evidence filed of supervisors' decision making and of file audits having taken place.

### **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's recruitment plans and activities are focused on the recruitment of those adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of the children waiting for an adoptive placement locally. The website and personal recommendation are two of the ways in which interested parties are informed about the service. For children with more complex needs the recruitment activity involves a more targeted approach, for example, via the links to the local consortium, the national adoption register and national advertising. There is also some work carried out in raising awareness about adoption in various local communities.

For children needing an adoptive placement there are robust tracking systems which ensure that delay is kept to a minimum. These systems include a meeting whereby children and prospective adopters coming through the system are considered to see if there are any potential links.

There are regular information evenings held and these provide interested parties with an opportunity to find out more about adoption and what it might mean for them. For people who remain interested in adopting, a meeting is arranged with a social worker. During this meeting the potential applicants are further informed about adoption and the worker assesses if they are likely to be a good resource.

People seeking to adopt a child from another country are referred to a voluntary adoption agency specialising in this work to undergo their preparation. They then return to the agency for assessment and support. There is a social worker within the adoption team who is knowledgeable and experienced in this work and she takes the lead for this area of adoption.

For people wishing to adopt from this country there are formal preparation sessions held by Warwickshire. These sessions are viewed by adopters as being informative and comments from adopters included, 'We found the course we attended to be

really helpful and gave us good knowledge of the adoption process and what to expect.' Another adopter said 'The workshops really did show what it meant to be an adopter, the potential highs and lows. We were left in no doubt what it may be like.' Placing social workers stated that overall adopters are well prepared for the often difficult task ahead.

The assessment process is robust. Information obtained about prospective adopters is subject to detailed analysis and a sound competency approach is taken to assessment. A clear view is reached about the suitability of the applicants to become adoptive parents. Assessments read showed that the social worker had explored, in detail, issues around equality and diversity. All required checks are undertaken, such as criminal records bureau checks and a number of referees are visited. This helps to ensure that prospective adopters are safe and suitable people to be placing children with. There is a health and safety checklist which is used to check the environment of the home and premises; this does not include an assessment of the risk from hanging cords on window blinds and curtains. Adopters' views of the assessment process were overall positive and one stated that their social worker is 'reliable and sensitive.'

The agency adoption panel policies and procedures are comprehensive and set out how the panel operates. Prospective adopters are given the opportunity to attend the panel hearing at which their approval will be heard. Attendees are prepared for attendance by their social worker and there is a system to gather attendees views about the experience. This is used to consider future developments in the operation of panel. There is not a room for attendees to use while waiting for the news of the panel recommendation and this can mean that attendees sit in an area of the office which lacks privacy. The panel is appropriately constituted and its membership is diverse. Panel members are subject to a formal and robust recruitment process which ensures that all members are suitable people to be making such life changing decisions about children and families. For new panel members there is a programme of induction which involves observation of at least one panel. There is a range of training provided to members, some of which includes the adoption and children's social workers. This is good practice as it allows for a joint understanding about each others roles and responsibilities to develop. Panels are chaired by an independent person who has a good knowledge, understanding and experience in adoption work. Panel meetings are organised and conducted in an efficient manner as is the administration of panel. The agency decision is made without delay. The decision maker reaches his decision following careful consideration of all information surrounding the case and all decisions are relayed in a timely way to the relevant people.

The agency has a strong approach to matching children with adopters who are most likely to be able to meet their needs to a high standard. Prospective adopters are provided with full written information about a child they are considering and have the opportunity to speak to the medical adviser if there are medical issues. This allows them to explore any implications health needs may have for the child and for them. For older children and these with more complex needs life appreciation days are held and these are an excellent opportunity for information sharing, especially information

which is not routinely written down such as early likes and dislikes. There is a document called a matching matrix which when completed sets out clearly the child's needs, how the adopters will meet those needs and allows for any shortfalls to be identified and addressed through the support plan. Adopters stated that they felt they had good enough information about a child to be able to parent him or her effectively. Children are prepared for placement in a variety of ways, dependent on their age and level of understanding. The introduction and placement processes are well planned and based on the needs of the child. There a mentoring scheme which can provide support to adoptive families during the introduction process and early days of the placement. One adopter commended the agency for their help in the match to 'Our wonderful little boy'.

The recruitment processes for staff and managers are robust and ensure that only suitable people with the required skills, knowledge and qualifications work for the agency.

The agency has safeguarding procedures which refer to children placed for adoption and allegations of historical abuse; the procedures do not include those receiving an adoption support service, some of whom are vulnerable adults.

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

The provision is good.

The agency has a support strategy in place. The development of support plans is given a high priority and these are developed via a formal meeting, are scrutinised the support services adviser and by the panel. The quality of the preparation and the matching processes help to ensure that the workers know and understand the needs the children and adopters have. This knowledge helps to inform these plans so that they are really geared to supporting the family effectively. There is financial support provided to families to secure and maintain placements in appropriate cases. Support is provided for at least a year after the order has been granted usually by a worker who knows the family.

There is a child focused and flexible approach taken to the delivery of support services. This means that a range of needs can be met. The agency provides a variety of services and activities and some of these are delivered in partnership with neighbouring authorities. There are training courses about many issues such as parenting skills, behaviour management and attachment issues. There are support groups, family days and a regular newsletter that informs people of future events. There is also information provided to adoptive families about the local and national support available. All of this helps to keep families in touch with each other and with the agency and this allows for advice and support to be provided on an ongoing basis.

More formal support includes the services of a clinical psychologist, a play therapist and the local children and families adolescent mental health service which works with adopted children and their families. This service has provided an intensive 'wrap



around the child' service for some families and this has been very successful in helping adoptive families to develop and maintain safe, stable and secure placements for children. The agency has funded two workers to attend training in a well known structured play therapy technique. This work helps to enhance the attachment of children to their families, and to raise the child's self esteem. It is planned that these techniques will be cascaded to other social workers and to adoptive parents to use within the family setting.

Adopters feel confident that they will continue to be supported. One adopter said of their social worker, 'Whenever we need her she has been great.' Another stated that they get, 'Genuine support, we would recommend the team to prospective adopters.'

Families previously unknown to the agency, such as those who have moved into the county, have a service provided. There are systems which can allow for a joint children's team and adoption team assessment. However, the structure of this work is not clearly defined and while assessment of the family and child does take place these do not always take full account of the adoptive status of the child, the family and the impact this has on the support needs.

The agency has established procedures for holding meetings when an adoptive placement has disrupted. The findings from these meetings are used to inform future practice. The agency has low rates of disruptions which is a good indication that families are well matched and supported.

The agency has good access to the services of professional advisers in addition to those already mentioned. There is a medical adviser who advises panel and the agency and is held in high regard. There is a legal adviser to panel who is also held in high regard and is accessible to social workers. There is a specialist service which advises and supports social workers in meeting the needs of ethnic communities and a service which provides a consultancy service for social workers and direct work with children around sexually inappropriate behaviour. This is a part of a range of well established services provided for children who have abused or have been abused. There are also well established services that address the educational and health needs of children.

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

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the life long implications of adoption and works with parents, where possible, in planning for their child. This is often difficult where a child is subject to care proceedings and the birth parents are not in agreement with the plan. When birth parents feel unable to engage in work with the agency there is a commissioned adoption support agency that provides advice, support and counselling via a service level agreement. Many birth parents initially feel unable to engage with this work as their distress is too great but both agencies ensure that throughout the adoption process and beyond this service is promoted and accessible to parents.

Birth parents views are sought and recorded on children's assessments and they are encouraged to share information about themselves and the early life of their child. Wherever possible birth parents and adopters are supported to attend a one off meeting with each other and these meetings can allay fears the birth parents have about the adopters. They can also help the adopters talk to the child about the birth parents in the future as the meeting provides them with first hand information. Life story work with children is given a high priority and although the completion of the book is sometimes late, direct work with children to prepare them for adoption is always undertaken before a move takes place. Each child will move to adopters with at least basic information in a pictorial and written form that can be used with them to talk about their background and their birth family.

The agency operates a letterbox contact service for children where this contact has been deemed in their best interests. The service is very well managed and operated efficiently. There are reminder systems help to ensure that exchanges are made in a timely way and the checking systems ensure that the content is appropriate for the child to see. The system is reviewed from time to time and these reviews include consultation with the people who use them. This service provides children with contemporary information about their birth family as they grow throughout their childhood.

The agency offers an initial birth records counselling service for adoptees. The service provided is of a good quality and work is sensitively undertaken. A user of the service commented, 'I wasn't on my own on this journey I decided to go on.' People who want an intermediary service are referred to the adoption support agency with which Warwickshire has a service level agreement with.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency shows, in a number of ways, that there is a good understanding about the impact diversity and difference can have on the life chances of individuals. There is a focused approach to equality and diversity issues during the assessment process and the agency has an inclusive eligibility criteria. The preparation groups and other training opportunities provide a sound grounding to support adoptive parents in promoting the life chances of children. The opportunities provided to staff in terms of support and 'family friendly' employment practices all indicate that equality and diversity issues are an inherent part of this organisation.

The agency is governed by clear policies and procedures which are underpinned by a

clear and concise statement of purpose. The written information for children is of a very good quality and there is a useful pack for children which can be used to explore their wishes and feelings about their situation. The written information for adopters at all stages of the process is equally impressive and adopters commented that they felt the information is useful. One adopter stated 'We received a helpful manual which we still refer to.' A second adopter said 'We received a comprehensive pack of information.'

This managers of the agency are suitably qualified, skilled and experienced in children and families work and in adoption work. The agency is managed very efficiently and effectively and managers and staff take a child centred approach to their work. Staff say that their managers are nurturing, caring and approachable. There are clearly defined roles for the managers and staff and a scheme of delegation is in place. There is overall excellent communication between all managers and teams in Warwickshire on a formal and informal basis. There is also very good communication to and from other agencies involved in working with children and families. This helps to achieve a well integrated adoption service for all affected by adoption.

Staff feel well supported by the managers and by each other. There is appropriate attention paid to workload management, good arrangements for the formal and informal supervision of staff and induction and training of staff is of a good quality. Newly qualified workers are very well supported through a induction process which is tailored to meet their needs and staff report good opportunities to undertake training which is relevant to adoption work.

The calibre of staff working for the agency is high and this includes social work, administrative and support staff. Adopters' comments about the workers included, 'Can't fault them they have been wonderful.' and 'I felt the social worker assigned to me was particularly efficient/effective and I know that I could trust her implicitly.' There is a clear sense of there being a shared aim and purpose across the adoption agency, and a child focused approach is taken all work. Staff feel that this is a good agency to work for especially the family friendly employment policies and the nurturing approach of managers. Staff say they feel valued.

The monitoring of the agency is satisfactory and service users views are used in the development of services. There is an annual written report about the work of the agency which is presented to the executive of the council; these reports are not presented on a six monthly basis. This means that the executive is not able monitor the progress of the management and outcomes of the work of the agency as frequently as stated in the standard.

Adopters' case records and children's adoption files are well maintained and ordered. The files for adoption support service users are not so well ordered and maintained and it is difficult to find relevant information on some of these files. The storage of records, both current and achieved files, ensure that information is safe and secure. The arrangements for access to information are adequate.

All required information is retained in respect to the staff and panel member recruitment processes and the files confirm that the staff recruitment processes are robust.

There are identifiable office premises used by the agency which are open during normal office hours and are accessible to all. There is not currently a room available for people who are waiting for the panel to make the recommendation in respect to their panel hearing. There are appropriate security systems in place and secure IT systems which are backed up on a daily basis. There is a disaster recovery plan in place which makes provision for premises as well as the safeguarding/back-up of records.

## **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 the assessment process includes consideration of any risks from hanging cords on window blinds or curtains (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that all people receiving an adoption support service are safeguarded from abuse. This is with specific reference to developing the safeguarding policies and procedures to include children, young people and vulnerable adults who are receiving an adoption support service (NMS 32.1)
- ensure that assessments of adoptive children for support are made in the in the context of the adoptive family (Statutory Guidance Children Act 2002 Chapter 9 point 45)
- ensure the executive of the council receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency every six months (NMS 17.3)
- ensure that comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child and adopter. This is with particular reference to those receiving an adoption support service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure the premises used by the adoption agency are appropriate for the purpose. This is with reference only to the provision of a room for applicants waiting to hear the recommendation of the panel. (NMS 29.1)