

Derby 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

Derby City Council is a unitary local authority. As part of the Children and Families Directorate, the adoption service places the child and their needs at the centre of their activity. The adoption service recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters. It matches children with adopters who can meet their needs and provides a range of support to all those touched by adoption. The agency assesses adoption by relatives, including step-parent adoption. Those interested in adoption from overseas are referred to a voluntary adoption agency.

The agency is part of the East Midlands Family Placement Consortium. The adoption teams are based at Perth Street in Derby; there are nine members of staff in the adoption team, three of whom are full time and a full time manager. The post adoption support team has four members of staff, including a vacancy at the time of the inspection and a full time manager.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection.

The agency is good at recruiting appropriate adopters for the children who require families and makes good matches. The preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is thorough. Adopters are provided with full information about children's histories and the practice of life appreciation days has been established. The adoption panel provides appropriate scrutiny of the work of the agency.

Support to adopters is good and reflects a high level of commitment from a small group of staff. The post adoption support team undertake to provide a range of services that support children with their adoptive families.

The service to birth parents is also good and there is a life-long commitment to all involved in the adoption triangle. There is evidence of sensitive and effective work with birth families and of contact being supported to maintain the child's heritage through a robust letterbox system. There is access to support groups and advice, support and understanding are evident when workers try to contact adopted adults or their families.

The management of the agency is good and staff are supported through regular supervision and training opportunities.

The weaknesses identified relate to shortfalls in records, including the storage of the

adoption archive and personnel and panel members files; the availability of panel dates to avoid delay and the frequency of reports to the executive about the progress of the agency. The areas for improvement do not have a direct impact on the safety or well-being of children and young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection identified three actions two of which have been addressed. Child focused children's guides are now in place and criminal records bureau (CRB) checks are appropriately recorded.

There were 15 recommendations, of which 11 have been addressed. Panel minutes now reflect consideration of the needs of each sibling separately and all notifications are made within the appropriate timescales. There are comprehensive assessments of prospective adopters, which include references from overseas where necessary. The medical adviser plays a full role in the agency, contributes appropriately to assessments and meets with adopters to talk about their child's health needs. Life appreciation days have been established. There are well-structured adoption support assessments in place. The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed. Records have evidence of supervision and file audits. Rooms holding files are now locked when the office is closed and there is a back-up for the electronic files.

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.

Derby has a strong commitment to recruiting suitable adopters for their children who need adoptive placements. The system is well organised and run by a recruitment officer for fostering and adoption, who is well informed and has effective links with both the children's and adoption teams. He sees all children's profiles, which makes him aware of the needs of each child. He has developed the website and a range of informative and readable leaflets, which provide essential information for prospective adopters.

The duty system run by the adoption team allows all those interested in adoption to speak with someone who is knowledgeable and experienced in the field. There is a smooth process of sending information packs to prospective adopters and inviting them to information evenings, which are run every two months.

Adopters commented that these evenings are 'brilliant', and 'informative and welcoming'. The information book for prospective adopters gives clear, inclusive information about adoption. The step-by-step guide is effective but states that the application to be assessed is taken after the preparation groups, which is not the

practice of the team.

There are systems in place which ensure that those offering a much needed resource are 'fast-tracked'. All prospective adopters attend the preparation course, which is run three times per year. All the adopters said they found the preparation group useful and that it gave a clear view of the children needing adoptive families. They felt the balance was right, one said; 'the course was realistic but not off-putting'; another said it was 'intense, but really good'.

The aim of the team manager is that the assessing social worker should be allocated to prospective adopters by the end of the preparation group. This is the case currently but was not the experience of all the adopters. Some identified the period after the preparation group as a period when they lacked information and felt they had to 'chase-up' their application, others spoke positively about meeting the assessing worker at the preparation groups.

The assessment reports on prospective adopters are well written and comprehensive. The assessments include enhanced CRB checks, employer references for all applicants, overseas checks where appropriate and references from previous partners. The health and safety checks were amended during the inspection to include ceremonial weapons, poisonous plants and hanging cords. The assessment process is well supported by a mid-way review, which was developed in response to issues raised by adopters, and a second opinion report, both usually undertaken by the team manager. This is effective, sound practice.

The agency operates two adoption panels. Both are supported by appropriate policies and procedures, including the facility to hold additional or urgent panels. There is evidence of some delay in workers being able to book dates to attend the panel. An example was given by more than one worker that if they were to request a date now, in December they would be offered a date in March. There is another example of adopters whose assessment report was ready in November but did not go to panel until March.

The panel that was observed was well organised and effectively chaired. The panel members are well prepared and make full contributions to the discussion. Adopters are well prepared for the panel, which they find daunting but appropriate and feel welcomed by the chair and the panel members. A useful booklet is available to those attending, which introduces the members and explains the process. Feedback forms are now available for all those who attend the panels. There is a clear record of the views of each panel members but the reasons for the recommendation of the whole panel are not clear.

The agency decision is made well within the specified timescales and allowance is made for urgent decisions to be made even more rapidly. The decision is informed by all the information available to panel members and the draft minutes. There are systems in place to provide cover in the absence of the decision maker and for him to seek consultation with another senior manager about his decision should the need arise.

There are effective systems in place that match children appropriately with adopters, including monthly match planning meetings. All the adopters commented that they had full and accurate information about the children placed with them. They feel well prepared and value the meeting which is now in place with the medical adviser. The introduction of children and adopters is well planned and includes a midway 'pause and plan' meeting, which robustly holds those involved to the plan, resisting requests to speed-up the process. Life appreciation days are now established after the child has moved to the adopters and are seen positively. The low level of disruptions supports the view that there is effective matching taking place. One adopter said 'They've chosen a little boy who fits perfectly.'

There are appropriate safeguarding procedures in place which relate to children placed for adoption.

Managers and staff are subject to appropriate recruitment and selection procedures. The staff employed by the agency are knowledgeable, qualified, skilled and committed to providing a good service for adoptive families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides a good service to adopters and children both pre and post adoption order. Adopters comment positively on the support they receive. This includes the period before a link has been made, when some adopters commented that their assessing social worker specifically asked about the level of contact they would prefer. The support continues with the placement of a child. There is a wide range of support available including children's groups, social events, a regular newsletter, support groups run by an adoption support agency and a surgery run once per month. In addition to this respite care offered and therapeutic work is bought in by the agency when it is necessary. The workers in the post adoption team are committed to the work they do and focused on the needs of each individual, as one member of the team said: 'what's fine for one adopter isn't for another'. Links are made with local resources for adopters who live away from Derby.

Post adoption support is provided on the basis of clear, well-structured adoption support assessments, which are shared with the adopters and regularly reviewed and updated. Adopters viewed the service positively and there is evidence of challenging placements being maintained through the level of support provided. An adopter commented that the support she receives is flexible and varies to meet her needs and her child's needs. Her worker has visited the same day during a crisis and is felt to be; 'always there, at the end of the phone.'

Managers and staff recognise that the service provided by the child and adolescent mental health team (CAMHS) is limited. There are no shared posts and no opportunity for adopted children to gain a faster service to address their needs. One worker stated: 'the biggest problem is not having CAMHS on board.' There is access

to effective and useful consultation with a clinical psychologist, which the post adoption support team and children's social workers comment on very positively. Post approval training is organised by a dedicated training officer. There is a wide range of appropriate training available and publicised but the take-up is not as good as staff expect.

Specialist advice is provided by two medical advisers and appropriate legal advice is available. The medical advice has improved considerably and is valued by both adopters and staff.

There are very few disruptions and support is provided to maintain placements where appropriate. However, there has been no consideration of the issues raised by the one disruption that has happened and the information has not been drawn together and points of learning considered.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrates a real understanding of the life-long implications of adoption and a commitment to supporting those involved in adoption. At the stage of identifying the plan for adoption, the child permanence reports (CPR) identify the views of birth parents, and if these are not included, why that is the case. Work is undertaken with birth families to seek their views about adoptive parents and wherever possible to arrange a meeting with them and the adoptive parents. An independent worker for birth families is based in the post adoption team. The worker is keen to be involved with families as early as possible. The current system provides birth families with information but leaves them to make contact with the service rather than the independent worker initiating contact. The leaflets provided give useful information about support for birth families.

Birth parents gave a very positive view of the independent work they received. One survey stated: '(it is) a fantastic, trustworthy valued team. The person seeing to my needs on this 'rocky road' is absolutely brilliant, helping me every step of the way.' There is evidence of some very effective work in engaging birth parents, which has a direct impact on the information and contact available to adopted children. A birth parent said: 'the worker gave me the time and space to make the decision on my own.'

There is a well-organised, robust system for letterbox exchange. All the exchanges are read and copied. There is a reminder system in place a month before the exchange is due and further reminders are sent if a letter is not received. Post 18 contact is maintained where requested and renewals are initiated where appropriate if there has been no contact.

Adopters have a real sense of the significance of birth families for their children and of contact with them. An adopter commented that through training they had; 'done a complete U-turn and see how important it is.' They value their children's memory

boxes and there are examples of the life story books being in regular use in adopter's homes. The children's social workers have a strong commitment to life story work and although under considerable time pressure ensure this work is completed to support children as they move. There are examples of innovative and very varied life story books prepared to a high standard.

The agency provides an intermediary service and a service for birth relatives initiating contact. Although this service has a possible waiting list all referrals are assessed to ensure there is no detriment to the wait and an early service provided if necessary. Birth family members commented that they felt well supported and well informed, one said; 'they kept me informed every second'.

It is noteworthy that the this quality of service is provided by a small team who are enthusiastic to develop the service further.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose which has been recently reviewed. This is supported by policies and procedures which govern the work of the agency. The Children's Guide is a child-friendly document which outlines the meaning of adoption for a child and is used as a tool for working with children to help them understand what is going on in their lives. It is in two formats to allow for a range of children's abilities and further formats are available such languages other than English. One of the guides was observed to be in use in an adopter's home.

The agency is well-managed at all levels. All managers are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, experienced and skilled. There are clear roles and lines of responsibility. Staff say they are 'approachable and knowledgeable'. Staff are well organised and managed effectively and efficiently. There are regular monthly team meetings and all staff felt communication was good. Reference was made to the 'Employees Workshop' as a useful forum for communication. Supervision takes place regularly for all staff and they reported that their managers were available for consultation outside the planned supervision times. Appraisal takes place annually. Relevant in-house training is available to staff and they attend refresher courses in safeguarding. They are also able to attend external courses and relevant trainers are bought in to provide for specialist areas of work.

The adoption and post adoption teams feel well supported by the administrative

staff. These staff sit within the teams and feel part of the adoption work. One of them identified that 'we feel very much involved and know what's going on'. The administrative staff support and cover for each other. Across the agency as a whole there are some staff shortages, which have an impact on delays within the service and the post adoption team have not yet been able to appoint to a vacancy they hold. Although staff raised some issues of concern overall they saw Derby City as a reasonable employer and some have been employed by them for many years.

There are systems in place to monitor the service. There is an annual report to the executive of the council, but this does not take place within the six monthly frequency as specified in the national minimum standards.

The records of the agency are well ordered in terms of paper files. These have evidence of supervision decisions and of scrutiny by the manager. The electronic files are not consistently of the same standard; it was not possible to gain a clear view of the work around a placement that disrupted due to the gaps in recording and between the paper and the electronic files.

The personnel files for staff are not fully compliant with the regulations. They lack consistent records of current CRB checks and General Social Care Council (GSCC) certificates, and not all had a recent photograph and verification of two references. There is not a sufficiently robust system for the renewal of CRB checks and GSCC registration. Similarly the panel members' files were not fully compliant lacking verification of references and evidence, where relevant of qualifications and GSCC registration.

The premises used by the agency are accessible, clearly identifiable and secure. The building allows the use of a range of rooms suitable to allow privacy for those attending the adoption panel. The current arrangements for the IT systems are not efficient and robust, as referred to above. The archive of files is now good in relation to the daily back-up of electronic records. However, the storage of archived children's adoption files is not secure and does not minimise the risk of fire or water damage.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The practice of the staff values both service users and colleagues. There is respect for religion, sexual orientation, gender, disability and culture and how these affect decisions about meeting individual needs.

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):

- should ensure that before the initiation of police checks, adoption preparation or

the preparation of the prospective adopter's report a decision is made about whether to provide the applicant with the agency's application form for prospective adopters as specified in Adoption Guidance to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (National Minimum Standard 4)

- ensure that adoption panels are convened regularly to avoid any delays in the consideration of prospective adopters and matching children and adopters (National Minimum Standard 12)
- ensure the minutes of the adoption panel meeting are accurate and informative and clearly state the panel's discussion, with particular reference to the need to clearly state the reasons for the conclusions reached, and all the recommendations made (National Minimum Standard 12)
- ensure that the executive side of the council receive written reports of the services of the adoption agency frequently to be able to monitor progress, the reports should be submitted every six months (National Minimum Standard 17.3)
- ensure comprehensive and accurate records are maintained for each child with whom the adoption agency has worked (National Minimum Standard 25.1)
- ensure up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff and member of the adoption panel as specified in Schedules 3 and 4 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. (National Minimum Standard 28.1)