

Cambridgeshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC048977
Inspection date	19/01/2011
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Sean White
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Cambridgeshire County Council Adoption Service, Box No CC1004, Castle Court, Shire Hall Site, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, CB3 0AP
Telephone number	01480 372525
Email	
Registered person	Cambridgeshire County Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Jacqueline Marie Coventry
Date of last inspection	09/11/2007

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Cambridgeshire County Council's adoption service is part of the Office of Children and Young People and is managed by the County Manager, Fostering and Adoption. The service consists of an adoption team and an adoption support team, each with a team manager. It undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. The council has a contract with a registered voluntary adoption agency to provide a service for the preparation and assessment of people who wish to adopt from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection which considered all the relevant key national minimum standards and regulations associated with local authority adoption agencies. It also assessed the progress the agency has made in relation to the actions and recommendations set at the previous inspection.

The agency is a good service with some outstanding features. It has particular strengths in supporting adopters, excellent access to psychological services, a committed and thorough medical advisor and very comprehensive information sharing to support the matching of children. Children are placed in safe families who meet their needs. Birth families are encouraged and supported to contribute to permanency planning and maintaining their child's heritage. Staff are knowledgeable, skilled, committed and appropriately supported to enable them to provide a good service to children and families. Senior managers are committed to ensuring that adoption is a viable placement choice, and provide a good level of operational oversight and strategic development to drive the service forwards.

Weaknesses identified do not impact significantly on the well-being of children. They include procedural and documentary shortfalls and an inconsistent approach to the provision of life story books.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection in November 2007, five actions and eight recommendations were made. The actions related to procedural and documentary

requirements, all of which have been met.

The eight recommendations to improve good practice related to sibling assessments, health and safety assessments, life appreciation days, telephone verification of references, the quality of child permanence reports, work with birth parents, life story work with children, and ensuring documents within case files are signed and dated. All these have been addressed, although life story books are not always provided in as timely a way as possible, so that recommendation has been repeated.

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 targeted approach to the recruitment of adopters, to ensure they are able to meet the needs of Cambridgeshire children. There are good systems to ensure the adoption team are aware of the needs of the children who may require an adoptive placement, and the recruitment strategy is focused to meet those needs. Applicants are prioritised if they are offering a resource for either a specific child or children who are generally more difficult to place, to prevent delay. Most children are placed with adopters approved by Cambridgeshire, showing that the right adopters are recruited to meet the needs of local children. However, when there is a need for an interagency placement, there is no delay in seeking this out, for example, for a child with particular needs in relation to ethnicity which cannot be met by in-house adoptive families. A child's social worker commented: 'It's what meets the needs of the child that counts.' The agency has plans to strengthen recruitment further through the appointment of a marketing officer.

The agency has a formal, thorough approach to the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters but there is evidence of significant delay between enquiry and preparation training. This has been addressed by increasing the number of information meetings and preparation courses, although the changes are too recent to assess the impact. The agency takes the application to adopt after the preparation training, which is contrary to statutory guidance, as it leaves enquirers without the right to go to the Independent Review Mechanism if their application is refused. Once applicants undertake the preparation training, their application is pursued promptly. The prospective adopter reports are evaluative, evidence based and demonstrate a thorough assessment to ensure safe placements. Adopters comment positively about their experience of preparation and assessment: 'Our social worker was great, always there to talk to when we needed to ask questions.'

Prospective adopters receive full information to help them decide whether or not they are the right parents for the children being proposed. One adopter commented:

'We received much more information than we expected, which was a real help. We also had the opportunity to speak to many people who had been involved with the children, from social services and medical advisers.' Systems for matching are well thought out and demonstrate a thorough and thoughtful approach to ensuring only adopters who can meet the challenges and needs of children are chosen. This is well documented in adoption placement reports, which are of an extremely high quality. Introductions are well planned and taken at the child's pace to enable them to make the transition as smoothly as possible. In the words of an adopter: 'We had thorough meetings to plan the timetable and our social worker was fantastic to guide us through the process.'

The adoption and permanence panel give robust and independent scrutiny to the work of the agency and play a significant role in improving practice. The agency now has two adoption and permanence panels, which together meet every three weeks in any one month. A new panel was established recently in recognition of the amount of work being scrutinised by the adoption and permanence panel, and to prevent delay in children's cases being presented to the panel. The panels are properly constituted and governed by appropriate policies and procedures which underpin their work. Applicants are invited to attend for their approval as prospective adopters and also for their proposed match with a child or children. The work of the panel is facilitated by very good administrative support which ensures that members receive all the appropriate paperwork in time to give it full consideration. Minutes are comprehensive, written very promptly and give a full and accurate record of the meeting, both to aid decision making and also help an adopted person in the future to understand the rationale behind decisions made about their life. Panel members are given medical and legal advice of a very high standard to inform their consideration of the cases before them.

The agency decision maker takes her role very seriously and demonstrates a timely yet considered and informed approach. Systems have been developed to ensure appropriate notifications are made, both verbally and in writing, following the decision.

The work of the agency is carried out by managers and staff who demonstrate a very clear understanding of contemporary adoption issues. They understand their roles and responsibilities and how they interlink with colleagues in other parts of the service. All staff are recruited by safe recruitment practices and are appropriately qualified, trained and experienced. However, one aspect of adoption work which is prescribed in the national minimum standards and practice guidance to be carried out by social workers is being carried out by unqualified staff.

Staff demonstrate a good understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard children and are guided by readily available policies and procedures. However, these do not reflect how to respond to allegations of historical abuse or directly address the specific needs of children placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services. This was addressed following the previous inspection but had been removed following a recent revision of the policies and procedures, without the knowledge of the adoption manager.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Support to adoptive families is a particularly strong feature of the agency. Adopters are well prepared for the task of parenting an adopted child during the preparation and assessment process, and the information they receive about a proposed match is extremely thorough. They are provided with access to extremely good psychological and medical advice; this enables a thorough exploration of the implications of a child's history to ensure prospective adopters thoroughly understand the issues and can make an informed decision about whether or not they can parent the child effectively.

Social workers, from both the adoption team and post adoption team, are a valuable source of support to adoptive families; families say they are responsive, act quickly in a crisis and provide sound backup. An adopter said: 'Adoption support since the children have been placed is always there with regular meetings and on the end of a phone. I cannot praise my social worker enough.' They provide direct work with children and families, including anger management, work with schools, behaviour management, life story work and general support. In addition to this, there is a breadth of varying support structures. The agency provides an extensive and impressive range of relevant training which is readily available to adoptive families to enable them to provide appropriate care and support to their adopted children. Regular support groups in two parts of the county supplement this and are a valuable resource. The clinical psychologist provides an impressive range of services, which includes work with schools to help them understand the needs of adopted children. She provides consultation to social workers and families, direct work with children and families, psychometric testing, and training for staff and adopters. One adoptive parent commented that the psychometric testing had been 'massively useful' in helping her child who had difficulties in school. All assessments for adoption support are undertaken by a social worker in conjunction with the psychologist which gives an extra dimension, focus and thoroughness to the assessment and subsequent support plan.

The small number of placements which disrupt is testament to the support which the agency provides to ensure that parents are enabled to care for their adopted children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrates a strong approach in its work with birth families to enable them to be involved in the plans and contribute to the maintenance of a child's heritage. Social workers are very committed to involving birth parents in planning for their child's future through the permanency planning meetings which birth parents attend. They encourage them to contribute to the child's permanence report to

provide a written record of their wishes and feelings in relation to their child's adoption. Many of these reports are of a very good quality and demonstrate that social workers see these as ongoing pieces of work which need to be updated to reflect changing needs and wishes. Where possible, the child's wishes and feelings are thoroughly explored, documented and used to inform the planning.

The agency has a worker who is independent of the child's social worker to provide advice, support and counselling to birth parents. An opt-out service is being developed so that more parents will benefit from this. This worker is available to birth parents at any stage and can provide quite extensive assistance. A birth parent commented: 'The worker really helps me to express my feelings. She has changed me a lot and turned me around. She has supported me with a range of things and I have really needed her.'

There is a strong commitment to preparing children for adoption through life story work to enable them to understand their history and what is happening to them; however, the life story book which supports this vital piece of work is not always prepared in as timely a way as it should be. This is variable; it is sometimes available when the child is being placed but there are times when it is not available until the adoption order is made. This may impact on adopters' ability to use this as an effective tool to help children explore and understand their lives.

There is a well-established post box for indirect contact arrangements. This generally works well, with advice and assistance available on letter writing where necessary. The agency supports a number of direct contact arrangements, with siblings and other birth relatives, to ensure a child's heritage is maintained.

In recognition of the life-long implications of adoption, the agency also provides a service to adopted adults and birth relatives including birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, intermediary services and assistance with reunions. Workers demonstrate commitment and sensitivity to this specialist area of work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well-managed agency with good operational practices and strong strategic development. The aims and objectives of the adoption agency are comprehensively outlined in the Statement of Purpose, which gives a good overview of the services provided. This is underpinned by clear, up-to-date and detailed policies and procedures which give good guidance to staff to enable them to carry out their work effectively. The children's guide is well written; it is a child-friendly document which

explains in an appropriate way what the service aims to provide for children who are being placed for adoption. It is geared towards older children, however, and there is no equivalent document for younger children.

Enquirers are provided with clear written information; this ensures they are aware of the needs of the children who may require an adoptive family, the application process and the qualities which adoptive parents require to parent effectively. This written information is further supported by verbal information, given at information meetings which are held on a monthly basis, and a subsequent initial visit carried out by a social worker if the enquirer still wishes to proceed further. These mechanisms give clarity and transparency to the application, preparation, assessment and approval process and ensure that enquirers know what the agency expects of them and what they can expect to receive from the agency.

The agency is well managed, both strategically and operationally. There is a well-considered workload management system which supports staff to work to the best of their ability. There is a recognition of the additional needs of newly qualified workers, who receive appropriate support and training. All staff are encouraged to undertake a broad range of training to develop and update their practice. They are supported by regular supervision of good quality, in addition to managers, including senior managers, who are accessible at other times. Children's social workers work together with the adoption team to provide a good service for children and adoptive families, and are very clear about their differing roles and responsibilities. Administrative support for the adoption team is described as impressive and administrative staff are very committed to provide a responsive service, seeing themselves as part of the team.

There are very good systems for monitoring the work of the agency. These include regular meetings at all levels of management, effective links between the independent reviewing service and the policy, practice and standards manager, and regular oversight from the executive side of the council.

Case files for adopters and children are generally well organised so that information is readily accessible. There are appropriate security arrangements, both for current case records and those which are archived. Personnel and panel members' files are well ordered and contain all the required information to evidence safe and appropriate recruitment. The premises are appropriate for the purpose, accessible and secure.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear commitment to match children with adoptive families who can meet their assessed needs, including those relating to culture and ethnicity, and make appropriate interagency placements if these needs cannot be met by adopters approved by the agency. Adopters and staff can access a variety of training to improve their understanding of equality and diversity, and this is held at different times and venues to facilitate attendance, particularly of adoptive parents. The role of fathers has been identified as a neglected area and support has been identified to improve this. There are links with minority ethnic groups to encourage adopter recruitment. There are links with a

number of resources to provide support and information for adopters in relation to disability. Likewise, the agency is a member of an organisation for gay and lesbian adopters and foster carers, to facilitate support for those adoptive families. Staff demonstrate a good understanding of anti-discriminatory practice, promote individuality in casework actions and decision-making, and can access specialist knowledge to support this.

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 application to adopt is taken prior to preparation training, in line with statutory guidance (NMS 4)
- ensure that birth records counselling under Schedule 2 to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 is provided by qualified social workers (NMS 19.17)
- ensure the agency's safeguarding procedures comply with Regulation 9 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 as amended in 2005, and also include historical abuse (NMS 32.1 and 32.5)
- ensure clear and appropriate information is obtained from the birth family. This relates to the timely provision of life story books (NMS 8.2)
- develop a children's guide which is suitable for all children being placed for adoption. (NMS 1.4)