

Herefordshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

Herefordshire County Council's adoption service consists of one adoption team which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These include the recruitment, preparation and assessment of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees and others and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency provides a service for people wanting to adopt from another country. Preparation in these circumstances is carried out by a registered agency which specialises in this work and assessment and approval is carried out by the adoption service. Some of the support work to birth parents, adopters and adult adoptees is via a contract with an external agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The arrangements for inter-country adoptions were not assessed on this occasion as there have been none carried out for over 12 months.

This is a good agency with some outstanding features. The agency's processes and practice ensures that outcomes for children are good. A real strength of the service is that young people's needs dictate the adoption process and their views are taken into account in planning for their care, and in the development of services. Good attention is paid to issues of equality and diversity that ensure that children, adopters and others using the service are treated with sensitivity and respect. Careful matching and placement processes ensure that children settle very well and thrive in their adoptive placements.

The agency has robust systems for quality assuring the work and these are effectively implemented at all levels of the organisation. When complaints are made these are effectively dealt with and are used as lessons to be learnt from.

The agency has shown that it has a desire to improve and this can be best seen in the attention paid to addressing the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection.

There have been four recommendations made as a result of this inspection and these relate to: improving access for all children to therapeutic services; improving the timescales for providing families with the child's life story book; developing further the strategy for recruiting adopters and amending the adoption safeguarding procedure to be in line with Government guidance and regulations.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection carried out in May 2008 there were two requirements and 15 recommendations made. Of these both requirements have been met and 13 of the 15 recommendations have been addressed. Of the two remaining recommendations one relates to amending the safeguarding procedures, this has been partially met; the other relates to ensuring children and families have prompt access to all the services they need.

The requirements the agency has met relate to updating the Statement of Purpose and ensuring that the archive storage is safe and secure.

The recommendations met relate to: the stage the adopters' applications are made; ensuring full work histories of applicants are obtained; documenting the procedure for managing an adverse Criminal Records Bureau check; including, in the panel procedures, the method for feedback to the agency about the quality of cases; ensuring the panel is quorate on every occasion; improving the support to birth parents so they are more involved in the planning for their child; developing a clear strategic plan for supporting birth families; ensuring that the manager completes a management training course; ensuring that the corporate parenting group receive regular reports about the adoption service; ensuring the extracts of panel minutes include a list of the attendees; developing and implementing a file audit system and ensuring that staff personnel files contain all required information.

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 needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement are considered in the recruitment of prospective adopters. Children are placed with prospective adopters who have been through comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval processes. Children, when they are of an age and level of understanding, are well supported by the agency and the adopters to develop an understanding about how to keep themselves safe from harm for example by supporting them to achieve small steps to independence in a planned and safe way. For younger children and babies adopters provide a safe and secure environment in which children's physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted to a good standard. An example of how much love and affection adopters give to their child is illustrated in the following comment from an adopter, 'She is an absolute little dream.'

Children's health needs are fully considered throughout the permanency planning process and adopters understand the importance of supporting children's health and

development. For all children, when there is a concern or allegation relating to a child's safety appropriate action is taken to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded.

Children's placements are stable and this is achieved by robust family finding and strong matching and placement processes that ensure that adopters are able to meet the needs of their child. Full information about the child is provided to prospective adopters and they are helped to consider any implications the individual needs of the child may have for them as a family. One adopter said they were 'very well informed and provided with good up-to-date information' (about the child). Specialist advice in areas such as health and education is available to the agency and prospective adopters and any legal implications are considered and discussed fully with prospective adopters.

The systems introduced to the permanency planning systems for children now ensure that, overall, any delays for children are purposeful and kept to the minimum. Children are well settled in their placements and adopters show a strong commitment to work with their child, whatever difficulties arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

At the matching stage children and prospective adopters have their needs assessed and support is planned and provided to meet these assessed needs. For example, children and prospective adopters are supported to develop sound relationships with each other through the careful matching and introduction processes; foster carers are central to this work. Children's physical health needs are identified and plans put into place to ensure that these needs are met.

As a part of growing up children are supported to take part in activities that interest them and to develop an increasing level of independence, in a measured and safe way. Children live in safe and comfortable homes and are provided with toys, games and activities relevant to their age, abilities and interests; this helps to increase their self-esteem and confidence.

There are good working relationships between the team, adopters and educational specialists. There are also good systems that ensure that children are well supported. For example, schools and teachers are appraised of the specific issues facing many children adopted, especially in relation to their often adverse early experiences. This helps them to understand the child better and work with them in a competent and confident way.

After adoption children and their families are supported through the post adoption support services. These are available via the agency and via a commissioned adoption support agency. Specialist support, such as therapeutic input, is provided to help children and families when there are difficulties, although therapeutic help is not always forthcoming in a timely way. However, senior managers are aware of this and are in consultation with health providers to address this.

Less formal support includes activities such as family fun days that adopters and children say they enjoy, training in a range of issues that adopters have said they would appreciate and regular newsletters highlighting forthcoming events and other items of interest. Adopters' comments about support include, 'Hereford have such a lovely supportive adoption team, anyone you speak to is willing to listen or help.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children, who are of an age and level of understanding, have their views listened to and acted upon when possible. This is both in relation to their own situation and in relation to the development of services within the local authority.

Children enjoy appropriate plans for contact with people significant to them and this is assessed, periodically, in line with any changing needs. The letterbox arrangements for children are well-managed and administered and all parties are supported to ensure that contact is of value to the child.

Information for children about their early life is detailed and sensitively written; this helps them to gain an understanding about the reasons they could not remain with their birth family and provides them with a sense of their heritage. However, life story books, although of a good quality, are not always provided to the adopters and child in a timely way. This means that adopters do not always have the tools to discuss the past with the child.

Birth families are supported to take an active part in the care planning for their child as is possible and they are encouraged to provide information for the child about their early lives. Parents' wishes are recorded and acted upon, when it is possible and safe to do so. Support is provided to parents via the agency and via an independent adoption support agency commissioned by the local authority.

When it is appropriate, birth parents and adopters are encouraged to meet. One adopter said of this meeting that they were 'well supported by the relevant social workers and it went really well.... they prepared us really well.'

Adult adoptees are assisted to find out about their adoption in a sensitive way. Birth records counselling is carried out within the adoption team and intermediary services are provided from a commissioned adoption support agency. This complex and sensitive work is carried out to a high standard. Comments about both services were positive. In relation to a worker on the adoption team a service user said 'Brilliant she went more than the mile to get the paperwork.' In relation to the commissioned service 'They are brilliant and sensitive to my needs.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. For example, there is a good understanding about equality and diversity issues and the agency operates in an anti-discriminatory way. It is inclusive, in that all applicants are welcomed on the basis that they are likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that underpins the work of the agency and the agency operates in line with this. Children, adopters and other service users are well informed about adoption and what it means for them. There is a strategy for the recruitment of adopters but this does not include enough detail to enable it to be monitored and evaluated. While there is a safeguarding procedure and staff are competent in dealing with child protection matters the procedure does not meet Government guidance and regulations.

People are welcomed and are treated promptly and with respect. Initial visits serve to inform people interested in adoption and to obtain information from them to assess if they may be suitable applicants.

Prospective adopters are well prepared, the preparation courses are seen by adopters as preparing them well for the often difficult task ahead. The preparation focuses on parenting a child who may have additional needs relating to adverse early experiences. Adopters' views about the course include, 'We found the information very emotional but the support was there, the homework and research was fascinating' and 'it was very helpful and informative, really opened our eyes to the world of adoption.'

Assessments of prospective adopters are of a good quality. All required checks are carried out and they reach a clear view about the parenting capacity of the applicants. Adopters report good experiences of the assessment process and said that the assessments and the conclusions reached provide a fair and balanced view about them as a family.

The panel is effectively chaired and sensitive to adopters' feelings. Questions asked by panel are appropriate and sensitively asked. It is especially good practice that the child's foster carer attends the panel at which a child is being considered. This is because it allows the panel to gain a first hand view about what the child is like to care for and puts the focus of the proceedings firmly on the child. There is an effective and well considered decision making process that ensures that decisions are

based on all available information. All relevant people are notified of the decision in a timely way.

The adoption team are well managed by a qualified, experienced and skilled manager who is fully committed to ensuring safe, stable and secure placement for children are made and maintained. Staff are suitable to work with children and adoptive families, this being ensured by a robust recruitment and selection procedure. Staff are well supported to carry out their respective roles via supervision and training and there is a high level of peer support. Social workers from the adoption and children's team view the manager as being very supportive and knowledgeable in adoption work. Adopters' comments about the social workers on the adoption team show that the calibre of staff is excellent and include, 'I think they have been wonderful and feel very lucky we had the Hereford team to take us on this journey.' and 'Both social workers (adoption team and child's) were absolutely fantastic, caring and professional (the child) loves her visits from them.' The adoption team is especially well supported by administrative staff who are also of a high calibre.

This is overall a well managed agency that strives to improve and develop practice. While there has been some disruption to the children's teams due to recent reorganisation the staff involved have remained professional throughout; this has helped to ensure that the impact on children has been minimised. There are good monitoring systems, at all levels of the organisation, and when shortfalls are identified they are addressed.

Records for children, adopters and other service users are well maintained and provide a good account of the adoption process should the child wish to view them in the future. Records are securely and confidentially stored.

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 children have prompt access to specialist services through liaison with health services (NMS 15.5)
- ensure that life story books are given to the child and adopters in stages as set out in the standards (NMS 2)
- develop further the recruitment strategy and monitor and evaluate its success (NMS 10)
- ensure the safeguarding procedure is in line with Government guidance and requirements. (NMS22.2)