

Cheshire West and Chester Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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Date of last inspection	N/A

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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

Cheshire West and Chester Council Adoption Service undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work. The service recruits, assesses and approves adopters, matches and places children with families and provides support services to anyone affected by adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced full inspection is the first inspection of this agency.

This agency has a clear focus and direction in pursuing the best possible outcomes for children and supporting those affected by adoption.

The arrangements for recruiting and assessing adoptive families are robust and the matching process is thorough and improving.

Support services are of an impressive standard and provide a range of skilled and innovative practices to ensure people affected by adoption receive support tailored to their individual circumstances. Birth parents are encouraged and enabled to be involved in the preparation for their children's futures and to produce background information. This is used in the formulation of life-story work of a good standard.

The service is managed and organised well. The staff are supported and encouraged to deliver and develop best practice; administrative arrangements are efficient and there is a considered approach to security, data protection and confidentiality.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this service.

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.

This agency has a clear focus on meeting the needs of children whose plan is for adoption. There is a clearly written recruitment strategy that is aimed at securing prospective adopters who are able to provide for the wide range of often complex and challenging needs of children requiring placements. Recently developed publicity and information material is of a high standard and clearly demonstrates the agency's needs and the qualities of the adopters it wishes to recruit.

Ensuring that children are matched and placed with the most suitable families is at the core of the agency's work. It is developing ever more robust practices that are clearly aimed at refining the matching process, with more involvement of key people. This is, in part, to ensure practices across the region are compatible, but it is also clear that there is significant commitment in the agency to operate in ways that are in children's best interests and to secure the best possible matches and outcomes. There are, however, some inconsistencies in the preparation of child permanence reports. Although many are written to a good standard, some are lacking in detail and content.

There is a rigorous and detailed approach to the assessment of prospective adopters. Screening is robust from the early stages onwards and preparation/assessment practices are of a good standard. The service has recently incorporated a further tier into the information-giving process enabling prospective adopters to undertake their adoption journey from a fully informed standpoint. Prospective adopters reports are detailed, analytical and well written; a systematic quality assurance process adds further value to their content and presentation.

The adoption panel brings additional rigour to the process and undertakes its responsibilities with commitment and a clear focus on the best outcomes for children. It is generally well managed, democratic in style and not excessively formal. All panel members are encouraged and enabled to be involved in proceedings. The arrangements for organising and administering the panel are efficient and informative minutes are produced in a timely way. Decisions are made within required timescales after full consideration has been given to all available material.

The authority has robust staff recruitment and selection practices which ensure that only the most suitable people are employed to work in the agency.

Workers demonstrate a high level of skill, knowledge and competence and operate with considerable commitment and energy. It is clear that they are fully cognisant with current thinking in adoption matters and children's social care, including the legislative framework and contemporary good practice models. They share their skills and expertise with less experienced colleagues and work collaboratively with everyone involved in securing the best outcomes for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Support to people affected by adoption is an impressive and significant aspect of the service's operation, particularly given the relatively short time it has been in existence. The underpinning structure of adoption support and its functions and operations are outstanding.

There is a clear and unequivocal understanding of the importance that support plays in the drive for successful outcomes. There is considerable effort and energy deployed to ensure that adopters are supported and equipped to manage and understand the complex and challenging needs of children. Well-established systems are in place to provide people with a wide range of facilities or experiences that enable them to develop their knowledge and confidence. Highly skilled and enthusiastic workers bring a wide range of competencies that are managed to deliver the most suitable support based on people's needs and circumstances.

Adoption support has excellent resources, both in terms of the number of workers in the team, but more importantly, in the skills and knowledge they bring to the agency. The value that this aspect of the agency's work adds to the service overall cannot be underestimated.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There is a keen awareness of the importance of children's backgrounds and histories and the significance they have in their understanding of themselves, and their place in the world.

Efforts are made throughout the adoption process to encourage and enable birth parents to be involved in, and contribute to, the planning for their children's futures. The agency ensures that birth parents are able to perform a purposeful role in providing information about their child's early life and background. This can have long term benefit for preserving children's true sense of identity. There is also an empathic and non-discriminatory aspect to the service's approach that provides birth families with a supportive framework that they can access at their own pace.

Life-story work is of a very good standard in most areas, and is clearly a developmental aspect of the agency's operations that is being pursued with energy and commitment. Life-story books are produced in a way that provides meaning to children's backgrounds and enables adoptive families to be clear about their child's life before and after placement. Although the agency has developed a clear strategy for producing life-story books in a timely way, there is still some residual delay in some cases.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is an agency that is managed and organised to a good standard and there are clear indications that it is improving as it becomes more established. Its operations are informed and underpinned by a strong, clearly presented Statement of Purpose, which is given depth and meaning by a range of policies, procedures, protocols and guidance. The presentation of this structural framework is of a very high standard in most areas and clearly demonstrates a strong motivation and commitment to developing and improving services. The children's guide is the weakest aspect of published material, although there are plans already advanced to improve this.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency has demonstrated through proactive, yet sensitive, action that it is clearly focused on anti-discriminatory practice aimed at securing the best possible range of outcomes for children.

This is a service that is managed well in all areas and at all levels. There is a clear motivation to succeed both as an operational team and through an informed and supportive executive.

The operations of the agency are clearly outlined and managed efficiently. Workers are given every opportunity to develop and improve their knowledge and skills. Workers feel valued and they are encouraged to use initiative to develop innovative practices; they are supported and supervised well. The agency has excellent staffing resources.

There are clear lines of accountability and everyone is fully aware of the structure of the service, the management arrangements and responsibilities. There are efficient administrative systems in place, and it is evident that the service takes seriously the issues surrounding security, confidentiality and data protection. Case recording and file management is of a high standard with systems in place to monitor and audit content; there are planned improvements to this already in place.

The premises are good. They are in an accessible location, provide a comfortable working environment and are securely protected.

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 prospective adopters receive up to date, accurate information through a consistent approach to the preparation of child permanence reports (NMS 5.2)
- produce life-story books in a consistent timely way to ensure children have up-to-date information about themselves and their situation (NMS 8.2)
- produce a children's guide to adoption of suitable quality. (NMS 1.4)