

Cheshire East Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Dennis Bradley
Type of inspection	Key

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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

The agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for through partnership with other agencies, all statutory adoption work. This includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters, placement of children and support for anyone affected by adoption. The service operates from premises close to the centre of Crewe.

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 and all the national minimum standards were inspected.

This is an agency that is managed well and which undertakes most of its responsibilities to a good standard, and some to an exceptional standard. The approach to recruiting only the most suitable adopters is thorough and stringent, although there has been priority given to family finding and matching activity because of limited resources. These challenges, however, have now been overcome.

The family finding and matching is focused and clearly based on ensuring that children's futures through adoption are as secure and safe as possible. The agency has a strong approach in this area and additional resources should improve things further.

There is a strong commitment to providing a range of support facilities to anyone affected by adoption. There is clear evidence of very sophisticated and innovative work being undertaken by staff who understand and are committed to this area of work.

The most outstanding area of responsibility being undertaken is in respect of ensuring that children's backgrounds and birth family histories are well documented and presented in dynamic and relevant ways. There are concerted efforts made to establish a clear understanding of children's histories and life-story work is developed to a particularly high standard. The inclusion of birth families, foster carers and all others involved in children's lives demonstrates an excellent understanding of the high importance of this aspect of adoption work.

The agency is organised and administered to a good standard and work is undertaken by skilled, qualified and very competent staff and managers.

Improvements since the last inspection

Not applicable. This is the first inspection of the agency.

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 adoption. Although there has been limited recruitment activity in recent times, the service has been very active in family finding and matching. This was clear decision making that has used the service's resources to the best advantage in respect of children requiring adoptive placements. Recruitment planning, nevertheless, has been very active and a sophisticated and professional strategy has been introduced that has produced positive results. The service has attracted a substantial number of applicants.

The service's approach to matching children with the most suitable adopters is one of great care and thoroughness. Family finding is undertaken with diligence and the needs of the children are clearly at the forefront of this activity. Matching has a collective and involved approach that utilises the skills and knowledge of everyone involved in the child's future. Careful planning ensures that all necessary steps and precautions are analysed and undertaken before a placement is made. The writing of child permanence reports, while good and improving in most areas, is not as consistent as it should be overall.

The preparation groups enable applicants to understand, as fully as possible, the current context of adoption, the needs of children and the issues of caring for those with challenging histories. The assessments of prospective adopters are carried out with great care and with a clear focus on their abilities and qualities as adoptive parents of children who may come from complex and troubled backgrounds. All necessary checks are undertaken and stringent efforts made to ensure that applicants are able to offer children safe and secure futures. The health and safety checks of premises, although reasonably detailed, do not cover all possible aspects of safety in the home. The rigour of the monitoring of the process demonstrates a clear commitment to, and understanding of, the importance of quality management.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted, is managed well and is efficiently organised and administered. It has a strong membership who demonstrate a clear commitment to their duties and due diligence in their deliberations. This ensures that the panel brings all necessary rigour to the scrutiny of the business placed before it and makes clear recommendations based on careful analysis of the information

available. Decisions are made carefully and in a timely way.

The managers and staff have considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption issues and demonstrate a deep understanding of current thinking and practice; it is also clear that they are fully informed in respect of the legislative framework. Recruitment practices are rigorous which ensures that only the most suitable people are employed.

The agency has corporate safeguarding procedures that include children placed for adoption but there is an additional procedure in place that is specific to the service and which outlines clearly the commitment to protecting children who are to be adopted. The inclusion of dealing with allegations or suspicions of historical abuse adds further value to these.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a strong commitment to ensuring that families receive considerable levels of support to enable them to provide lasting and optimistic futures for children. This approach is based upon the agency's thorough understanding of the needs of children in adoptive placements and the skills and resources needed to provide them with the necessary levels of support and assistance. Adopters gave praise to the conscientious and responsive approach the service brings to help overcome challenges and complex issues.

The service's strategic overview of the wider implications of adoption provides a comprehensive and detailed operational support network that is aimed at delivering services that are focused on presenting needs. It has developed strategies and partnerships with specialist agencies which ensures that all those affected by adoption, receive services geared to their particular needs and circumstances. This includes children, adopters, adopted adults and birth parents.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The importance to adopted children of understanding their backgrounds, birth families and their place in the world is fully realised in the agency's approach to life-story work. This is an area where the service excels through its diligence and uncompromising approach to producing exceedingly good life work that is presented in an innovative and detailed way. This aspect of the agency's work is based on contemporary research and thinking and has produced excellent results that give children realistic and meaningful outlines of where they are, where they came from, and the reasons for this.

The service demonstrates a significant commitment to this important area of work and involves everyone involved in the child's life, with particular emphasis on the

involvement of birth families. There is also a considerable benefit for the whole adoptive family through the involvement of adopters in workshops that has further demonstrated the importance of this work and the benefits and outcomes it brings.

Birth parents are provided with information about independent support, which is available through an arrangement with a local adoption support agency. However, the practices and arrangements in place within the service have the added advantage of birth parents having assistance and guidance from people who are involved in their children's circumstances. This has engendered a more inclusive approach with added benefits that welcomes and encourages birth families to be as involved as possible in the planning for their child's future and subsequent contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a service that is organised and administered well by managers who demonstrate a clear understanding of, and commitment to, strategic planning and operational outcomes.

The Statement of Purpose provides a clear framework for the service's operations and outlines clearly the aims and objectives of the agency. Policies and procedures underpin and complement the Statement of Purpose. However, the children's guides, while providing basic information about adoption and support, are not of a particularly high standard in presentation or content.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Commitment to anti-discriminatory practice is embedded in the agency's operations and there is a clear approach to inclusion in the way the service welcomes people from all sectors of the community. The clarity of approach when recognising the need to deliver services based on individual circumstances, particularly in respect of children's heritage, demonstrates a thorough commitment to understanding and addressing difference.

Workers are supported well in their endeavours and they are enabled and encouraged to operate to the best of their abilities. Innovative working is promoted and staff feel valued in their efforts. There is regular supervision and workload management is undertaken carefully with a clear focus on producing the most effective outcomes. Training is given high priority at both worker and management levels with a clear commitment to developing expertise, skills and knowledge across all areas. The service also enables colleagues across children's services to develop skills and knowledge of adoption issues which encourages and enables closer,

effective working relationships. Although there are currently staffing vacancies in the service, appointments have been made and workers are due to begin work imminently.

This is a new authority, created only eighteen months ago. The challenges created by reduced resources and reorganisation anxiety have been managed well and there continues to be good morale within the service. Operational activity has been suitably prioritised in respect of meeting the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and outcomes have been positive in most areas.

The administrative infrastructure, after an initial period of confusion, is operating efficiently and the support networks well established.

Record keeping is generally of a good standard. Case records are maintained well and there is a monitoring system in place; all required information is filed in a suitable format and is easily located.

Staff files are kept well, with all required information in place but there were minor omissions in panel members' records.

The service operates from suitable premises close to the centre of Crewe. There is all necessary security in place for contemporary records and archives continue to be housed in secure, protected premises in disused salt mines.

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):

- expand the health and safety check to include all possible risks to children (NMS 4)
- develop more suitable children's guides that provide better information about adoption. (NMS 1)