

Wiltshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Heather Chaplin
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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

Wiltshire local authority adoption service provides a comprehensive adoption and post adoption service to all people affected by adoption as is prescribed by law.

The adoption team is based in Trowbridge and the social workers work closely with each other and with the social workers within the children's teams to progress adoption plans for children.

The adoption service recruits, prepares, assesses and supports domestic adopters. Inter-country adopters are referred to a specialist agency. The agency works with children's social workers to identify matches for looked after children and assists in their placement. It provides support and counselling for birth parents, including independent support through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. It also provides a general adoption support service. The agency works with adopted adults to provide birth records counselling; intermediary services are provided via an agreement with an adoption support agency.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a full announced inspection during which compliance with all adoption national minimum standards, regulations and related guidance was assessed.

The recruitment, preparation and assessment processes are child focused; this ensures that adopters are well prepared for meeting the often complex needs children needing an adoptive placement have. The preparation courses are of a good quality as are the assessments of prospective adopters. The matching processes are sound and good attention is paid to issues around equality and diversity. There is a robust approval process. The agency is taking formal applications from prospective adopters at too late a stage in the process. The agency has not developed safeguarding procedures that deal with issues raised by or on behalf of people receiving an adoption support service or procedures relating to allegations of historical abuse. However, the arrangements in practice for safeguarding children are sound.

The support services available are outstanding. The service is both responsive and geared to meet individual needs and some very impressive support packages have been set up, and are being delivered. The support service is underpinned by a strong ethos that adoption is a lifelong process and there is a clear understanding about the affects adoption has on all involved. The agency is clearly fully committed to supporting families and individuals in the long term.

The agency has good arrangements for supporting birth parents. Birth parents are invited to be involved in the planning for their child and are informed about the services available to them. They are told about the services as soon as there is a potential plan for their child for adoption. The service available to them is independent from Wiltshire and therefore can provide a confidential service. Contact arrangements for children with their birth families are managed by the agency and there are systems to ensure contact arrangements meet the child's needs. Work with adult adoptees is carried out to a good standard.

This is a well-managed agency that provides its workers with a good level of support. The service is child centred and the calibre of staff is high. There are good working relationships between the workers, the fieldwork teams, the managers and external agencies, which helps to achieve positive outcomes for children. The arrangements for maintaining personnel files for staff are not as robust as they should be and the Statement of Purpose has a minor shortfall in its content.

Improvements since the last inspection

There was one requirement and ten recommendations made following the last inspection. One recommendation is no longer relevant.

The agency was asked to include in the safeguarding procedures reference to children receiving adoption support services and those children placed for adoption in the area of another local authority. This has been partially met as there is reference to children in the area of another local authority but not in relation to those receiving a support service.

It was recommended that the agency recruit more adopters to open up placement choice for children; the arrangements for recruiting adopters are now satisfactory. There are plans to further develop this area of work to ensure that resources are focused on those most likely to be the best resource for children waiting for an adoptive placement.

It was recommended that the agency ensures that the adoption support services have sufficient capacity and resources to cope with growth in this area; this has been fully addressed and is now an outstanding area of practice.

It was recommended that life-story work was given a greater priority; this work is appropriately prioritised and in most cases is carried out in a timely way.

It was recommended that there was annual training provided for panel members with the social workers; this now takes place and includes the independent reviewing officers.

It was recommended that the systems for Criminal Records Bureau checks updates be improved; there is now an effective system in place to ensure that checks are updated every three years.

It was recommended that the agency better manage the tensions between adoption and fostering work; this has now been addressed by the introduction of a dedicated adoption team.

It was recommended that the agency maintain children's adoption files more consistently; ensure supervisors decision making is retained on the relevant files and ensure that file audits are more consistently managed. These three recommendations have been fully addressed.

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 recruitment plan details the needs of children waiting for adoption, therefore recruitment activity for adopters can be focused on the needs of these children. Good efforts are made to match children with families who reflect their ethnic origin and cultural background. The agency plans to take a more targeted approach to the recruitment of people from diverse backgrounds so that the use of adopters from other agencies can be minimised. Formal assessments are carried out to establish if siblings should be placed together or separately. Some of the home-finding activity is impressive and has led to children being placed with adopters assessed by the agency who are living out of the county.

There is a formal, thorough and comprehensive preparation and assessment process for those wishing to adopt from this country. The agency carries out their preparation, assessment and approval. Enquirers who wish to adopt from another country are referred to a voluntary adoption agency specialising in this work.

Prospective adopters are expected to attend the preparation sessions during which they learn about the complexities of adoption, especially adopting children who are likely to have complex needs arising from their early lives, and from being in the care system. Overall adopters said they found the preparation prepared them well for parenting a child who may have complex needs. One adopter reported 'We learnt a lot at our preparation class and felt that we were indeed very well informed about many aspects of the adoption process.' The preparation sessions are subject to review by the agency in light of prospective adopters' comments and these views are used to develop and improve the content of the course. The agency is taking formal applications from prospective adopters after the preparation sessions; this is not in line with the requirements laid down in legislation which requires the applications to be made prior to the formal preparation stage.

The adoption social workers carry out in-depth assessments of applicants' capacity to parent a child with complex needs. Prospective adopters were overall positive about the quality of the work with them in these areas. One prospective adopter stated 'The interviews for the report were very interesting and beneficial.' Overall the quality of the assessments are good and reach sound conclusions about the suitability of the applicants.

Good attention is paid to the consideration of a match for a child. Prospective adopters are provided with information about the child and are supported in considering the information to establish if they can meet the identified needs of the child. Where there are already children in the family consideration is given to the needs of these children's needs as well as the child waiting for a placement; this best ensures that the needs of all of the children can be met.

The adoption panel is governed by clear policies and procedures which are followed in practice. Panels are held on a regular basis and if required extra panels are arranged to ensure there are no delays to children's cases. Prospective adopters attend the panel, supported by their social worker, and they are given the opportunity to be heard.

The panel is well chaired by an independent chair who is suitably qualified and experienced in adoption work. The panel members are committed to their work and are child focused throughout the proceedings.

Clear minutes are made of each panel hearing and these are accurate, informative and clearly show the discussions between members and the reasons why a recommendation has been made. The panel is properly constituted. The agency has recognised, and is seeking to address, a current gap in terms of the diversity of members. Panel members have been assessed as suitable people to become a member of the panel and they receive support to carry out their roles effectively via induction and ongoing training.

The manager and staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in adoption work and have undergone a formal recruitment process.

Practice in relation to the protection of children is of a good quality. Allegations are dealt with in a timely way and are fully investigated to ensure the safety and well-being of children is best ensured. However, the safeguarding procedures do not contain the arrangements for the protection of children receiving an adoption support service or procedures relating to allegations of historical abuse.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The support provided to children and families is a real strength of this agency. The support services are provided by the agency and by two registered adoption agencies via formal contracts. Adopters are also signposted to other local and national services

which can provide a service to adoptive families. The response to support needs is very quick and tailored to meet individual needs. Some very inventive packages of support are provided and these have meant that placements have been sustained through the most difficult times. Packages of support include: financial support to allow adopters to leave work to care for children who need a full-time parent at home; respite arrangements geared to meeting the children's needs; therapeutic input for the child and for the adopters; support to meet educational needs and training in relevant areas, such as understanding disruptive behaviours and attachment disorders. More than one adopter said that without the support their child's placement would have broken down. Another adopter said 'The agency should be proud of its support service.'

The agency has a very good range of specialist advisers. The managers and social workers have built up excellent relationships with professionals from other agencies and this means they can provide a fully integrated support service to children and their families. This ensures that all of the child's needs can be met to a high standard and helps to achieve the stability of placements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the lifelong implications adoption has on all parties, including birth family members. Social workers work hard to try and engage birth parents in the planning for their child; this can be difficult to achieve as birth parents are usually in court proceedings to try to keep their children. The agency recognises the need to provide an independent service to birth parents and does so through an independent agency via a contract. Birth parents are informed about this service at the stage adoption is identified as a possible plan for their child, and again after the panel has made a decision about if the child should be placed for adoption. Support is available for birth parents and other family members before and after an adoption order has been made.

Social workers also work hard to obtain as much information about children and their early life so that children can be helped to understand their background and why they are being or were adopted.

If contact has been deemed in the best interests of the child, the agency operates a letterbox contact service and offers support for direct contact arrangements. This allows children to have up-to-date information about their birth family as they grow into adulthood.

The agency works with adult adoptees providing a birth records counselling service. This is undertaken with sensitivity by experienced workers. If adoptees wish to trace their birth family this work is carried out by an external agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Social workers have a good understanding about equality and diversity issues and have a good understanding about the impact that prejudice and discrimination can have on individuals' lives. This is reflected in the work carried out by the agency.

The Statement of Purpose underpins the work of the agency and there are clear policies and procedures which are used by staff to achieve the agency's aims and objectives. The Statement of Purpose has a minor shortfall in its content but this has no adverse impact on children. There is written information for children which is used to inform children about the adoption process and the support services. Adopters are provided with useful information at various stages of the adoption process; this ensures they are well informed about the processes involved in adoption and the likely needs of children waiting for a placement.

The agency is well managed by managers of a high calibre who are suitably qualified, skilled and experienced in adoption work. A recent restructure to the adoption and children's teams has been especially well managed and there has been a positive impact on the work of the adoption agency. In particular there have been improvements in the timescales for prospective adopters. There are clearly defined roles for the managers and staff and an effective scheme of delegation; this ensures the agency's efficiency is maintained. Communication between teams, managers and outside agencies is good and this ensures that a coherent approach is taken to benefit all affected by adoption.

The support to staff is good and staff confirm that they feel well supported by the managers. There is a formal induction programme in place for staff starting work on the adoption team, which helps them to develop an understanding about the work and aims and objectives of the agency. There are systems to ensure that workloads are fair and equitable and social workers are consulted about the development of services; social workers views are valued by the managers. Social workers report that peer support is good; supervision is useful and the regular team meetings are of a good quality. Social workers on the adoption team have been encouraged to develop the team's efficiency. Overall the morale is high among the adoption team members. There is a good training programme for staff that is focused on developing their knowledge and skills in the field of adoption.

Staff working for the agency are of a high calibre and take a child-centred approach to their work. Adopters' comments about the workers included 'Our social worker

was very informative and told us what was happening and what to expect at each stage.' and 'Our social worker is very approachable and professional and has made the whole process easier.'

The systems for monitoring and controlling the work of the agency are effective and include close scrutiny by the elected members.

There are case files made and maintained for adopters and children and these are stored safely and securely. There is good attention paid to issues of confidentiality and information is only shared with those who have a legitimate reason.

Personnel files are made and maintained electronically for staff working for the agency. However, there are some shortfalls in the content and the system is not easy to negotiate. This makes it difficult to carry out an audit to establish if all required information is available.

The office the agency operates from is open during normal office hours and is accessible to all. The premises are secure as are the information technology systems. There is a disaster recovery plan, which provides for the safeguarding and back up of records. The plan also makes provision for alternative premises for the agency to use in the event of an emergency situation.

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 the application to adopt is taken following counselling and information has been given but before an assessment of suitability commences (breach of Regulation 22 of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure that the safeguarding policy and procedure include the arrangements for the protection of children receiving an adoption support service (breach of Regulation 9 of the Adoption Agency Regulations 2003)
- develop written procedures for dealing with allegations of historical abuse (NMS 32.4)
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose contains all the details required in Schedule 1 of the regulations (breach of Regulation 3 of the Adoption Agency Regulations 2003)
- ensure that up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff. (NMS 28.1)