

North East Lincolnshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rosemary Dancer
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Date of last inspection	22/10/2008

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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 provides, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption services required under current legislation. It recruits, prepares and assesses people who apply to be adoptive parents and makes arrangements for children to be placed with approved adopters. Due to the small size and population of the authority, children are, in the main, placed with adopters approved by other agencies. The service also provides, or makes arrangements for, support to people affected by adoption; this includes birth parents, adopted adults and families facing challenges. The agency has a service level agreement with a local voluntary adoption agency in relation to inter-country adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This is an outstanding adoption agency in all respects. Of particular note is the direct work undertaken with children to ascertain their wishes and feelings and help them understand their situation. This results in stable and successful placements. The work undertaken with birth parents is also of a very high quality and very sensitively carried out. This enables birth parents to contribute in a very positive way to maintain their child's heritage and provide information so their children can understand their history and develop a positive sense of self.

Adoptive parents are very well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and are very well supported throughout the child's life. There is excellent multi-agency working to ensure that children's needs are fully met, children are safe and their outcomes are excellent. Matching and information sharing are also very positive aspects of the service; social workers know the children very well which enables them to find the right family to meet the child's needs. All children are deemed to have the right to a permanent family, and extensive efforts are made to find families for all children, including those with very complex needs.

All the staff are highly effective and committed; they are well qualified, knowledgeable and experienced, and supported by exceptionally committed managers. Effective and rigorous monitoring arrangements ensure the service provided is of a very high quality, and delay and drift are avoided.

The only shortfall identified is the timing of the application to adopt; this is currently taken after the preparation course, which is contrary to the guidance but does not have any negative impact on children.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no recommendations made at the previous inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children's safety and well-being are at the heart of everything the agency does. Ensuring safe placements forms a significant part of the preparation and assessment of adoptive parents; this is not only in relation to the suitability of applicants but also their awareness of health and safety issues and safe care. The potential dangers of social networking are thoroughly addressed through training workshops for adopters to make them aware of how to put safeguards in place wherever possible.

Children's health needs are met to an exceptionally high standard. Very comprehensive support plans, which are regularly reviewed and updated, outline any medical and health issues with clear details of how these needs will be met. The medical adviser, who is approachable, thorough, accessible and child-centred, provides extremely good support, information and advice to social workers and adoptive families. Where appropriate, other specialists, for example, the epilepsy nurse, can be accessed for further information. This ensures that adopters are fully aware of the implications of a child's health needs and how they can meet them. Social workers provide very good support to adopters, such as going with them to medical appointments so they can assist in processing the information which is given, as well as providing emotional and practical support. There is very clear information about delegation of parental responsibility and medical consent forms, so adopters know the extent to which they can exercise parental responsibility and prevent unnecessary delay in accessing treatment in an emergency. Children are encouraged to live healthy life styles and adopters ensure children's health needs are met by registering them with the relevant professionals and keeping all appointments. One social worker commented: 'The progress made by my child has been exceptional. The prognosis was very poor. However, the child continues to develop and has surpassed what was expected. The adoptive parents have put everything into ensuring that the child reaches their full potential. To this date the child continues to develop due to the level of care that is received.'

Matching and placing children with adopters who can meet their needs are real strengths of the agency, supported by a formal, thorough and systematic approach which ensures adoption social workers get to know the child and their needs from a very early stage. The very early allocation of an adoption social worker to work alongside the child's social worker to family find promotes very effective matching.

Strenuous efforts are made to find suitable families for children and avoid delay and drift, and these efforts are fully recorded so children have a record of everything that was done. Decisions are clearly well thought-out and supported by thorough, recorded assessments which show why particular families are chosen. Prospective adopters get full information about a child to enable them to make an informed decision, and this is supplemented by life appreciation days for older children. Adopters prepare very sensitive and appropriate family books so that children know something about the family who are chosen for them. Prior to placement a very professional placement information folder is produced so that adopters have all the relevant information in one place.

Introductions are very well planned including the practical arrangements such as where to stay in the area. Adopters are very well supported during this tiring and emotional period, and there is a full review of the introduction plans prior to the placement being made. To quote a stakeholder: 'I have great respect for the adoption service in North East Lincolnshire. They are very thorough and professional and have always ensured that full information is shared with prospective adopters and their adoption agencies in order that successful placements are made, which result in positive outcomes for all children.'

The agency has clear procedural guidance about safeguarding, social workers have updated training on a regular basis and adopters are given written information so they know what will happen in the event of an allegation and the support they will receive. All this promotes an effective and transparent approach to ensuring children are safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides an impressive range of support which is sustained over time so that children remain with their adoptive family and enjoy and achieve. Children are very well settled in their adoptive placements, which clearly meet their emotional, physical and identity needs to a very good degree. Adopters are well prepared to understand the task of adoptive parenting, attachment, the impact of abuse and loss, and how this may manifest itself in different behaviours. They are given very good advice, including written information, about how to manage this behaviour, set appropriate boundaries, and promote confidence and self-esteem. A social worker commented: 'My child has blossomed since being placed with the prospective adoptive parents. They have given one-to-one attention and age-appropriate stimulation.'

The thorough assessment process ensures that adoptive parents recognise the importance of promoting leisure activities and responding to children's interests. Children are engaged in a variety of activities such as swimming, ballet, and Tae Kwan Do, and are fully engaged within their local community. The agency also provides financial support where necessary to promote young people's engagement in leisure pursuits and thus their range of skills and level of confidence.

The agency has a very clear policy on promoting the educational aspirations and achievement for all children who are either looked after or adopted. This translates into very good and effective support. For example, there is an excellent information booklet to enable teachers to understand the needs of adopted children in school, it has provided training for designated teachers, and the adoption team social workers attend meetings with adopters to provide practical and emotional support when children are struggling in school. Adopters demonstrate a very positive attitude to enabling their children to attain their full potential in educational settings.

Children live in adoptive homes which meet their needs in relation to space, safety and security. The agency considers this during the assessment, and has a comprehensive policy in relation to safety which is underpinned by a health and safety assessment carried out prior to placement. The agency also provides funding to extend properties, where necessary, to meet the needs of children placed. This has been to a considerable and impressive level in some instances.

The support provided to families both before and after the adoption order is made is extensive and geared to individual needs; this is very effective in maintaining stable and secure family placements. Adoptive families are extremely positive about the response to requests for help: 'Whenever I have needed support it has been given in bucket loads. Nothing is too much trouble. I don't know what I would have done without the care, advice and support. I have nothing but praise for the adoption service.' Adopters commented: 'They are always there, the whole team is fantastic and I couldn't have managed without them.' In addition to individual social work support, there is a support group which meets regularly, there is access to training on subjects such as attachment, telling children about adoption, and social networking, there is an adopted children's workshop every summer, and social events. The latter two are very important for children to form networks and relationships with other adopted children and share their experiences. There is also a specialist service for looked after and adopted children provided by the child and adolescent mental health team. This includes play therapy as well as other psychological input. The response to referrals is prompt and they are able to provide a service which is not time limited. The input is reviewed regularly, and on a multi-disciplinary basis, to ensure it is meeting the needs of the child and family. This provides an additional level of specialist support to families who are facing challenges, and prevents breakdown.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

A real strength of this agency is the outstanding work undertaken with children and birth parents. Seeking children's wishes and feelings is strongly embedded in practice and carried out exceptionally well, using a variety of appropriate and child-focused tools. Not only are the views of the child being placed for adoption considered, but also those of their siblings and the birth children of adoptive parents. To quote a stakeholder: 'Direct work with children can't get any better than the adoption team.'

Birth parents are supported by the adoption team from an early stage, although they also have access to completely independent support from a local adoption support agency. The work undertaken with birth parents is carried out with great sensitivity and often results in being able to obtain significant information about the child's family of origin and heritage so that children have a good understanding of their background. Social workers have been described as 'really supportive and very helpful', and one birth parent commented: 'I put my trust in the social worker to find the right family for my child.' Birth parents' views are consistently recorded on the child permanence report; they are shown the report and asked to contribute, so there is a permanent record of their wishes and feelings.

Life story work is carried out to an extremely high standard and results in a life story book of very good quality, prepared in a timely way. These are tailored to meet the needs of the individual child, for example, using an interactive book with voices recorded for a disabled child. Later life letters are also very well written and timely, so that the child is able to understand their situation when they are older. The importance of life story work is fully understood by all the agency, as summed up by a social worker who commented: 'You can't move children on unless they know where they have been.'

Adoptive families are very well prepared to understand the importance of maintaining a child's heritage so that they have a positive self-view. Adopters comment that their views changed during preparation and they were enabled to understand adoption more from the point of view of the child and the birth parents.

Contact arrangements are very well thought-out for the benefit of the child. Well-produced and helpful leaflets give information to birth parents and adopters about the indirect contact arrangements. These are very robust and reviewed and amended to suit the developing needs of the adopted child. The adoption team give birth parents a significant amount of help in writing letters so that contact arrangements are maintained and appropriate. Social networking is fully addressed, and proactive support is given to prevent situations escalating when young people have tried to contact birth parents through this method.

The majority of the work undertaken with adopted adults and birth relatives is carried out by a local adoption support agency with whom there is a service level agreement. This is regularly reviewed and feedback from service users is very positive.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

This agency generally cannot place its own children with its own adopters due to the small geographical area and the potential safety and confidentiality issues which this brings. However, it works closely with the local consortium so is very aware of the needs of the children who may be placed with the adopters approved by North East Lincolnshire Council. The preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters is a very well thought-out, thorough and rigorous process, which ensures that the adopters approved have a clear understanding of the challenges of adoptive parenting, the needs of the children, and are able to meet those needs in a safe and appropriate way. However, the current practice of accepting the formal application to adopt after the preparation training is not in line with current guidance, although this does not have any impact on children.

The success of adoptive placements and comments from adopters and stakeholders give testament to the effectiveness of the preparation and assessment process. Adopters particularly feel it gives them insight into the importance of contact and the child's heritage, and this is borne out in their attitudes and practices once they become adoptive parents. Adopters are very complimentary about all aspects of the process. For example they say: 'The preparation groups were excellent', and, 'The groups prepared us well and made us more child focused.' They describe their assessing social workers as 'brilliant', 'very professional', 'very approachable', 'very supportive' and 'open'.

The adoption panel and decision-making process add further rigour to ensure children's welfare is promoted throughout their lives, both in the initial decision that a child should be placed for adoption, then with whom the child should be placed. The panel is extremely well administered, and members receive the reports in good time to enable them to give full consideration to them. The panel is well run and consists of members who offer a variety of relevant skills, knowledge and experience to make an informed recommendation. They receive full and frequent information on the progress of children, adopters and timescales, and in turn give prompt feedback to the agency to enable it to improve practice where necessary. The minutes are very full so that the decision maker has as much information as possible on which to make an informed and professional decision in the child's best interests. This is done in a very timely and considered way, and relayed to adopters and birth parents promptly.

All the written information, including the Statement of Purpose and children's guides to adoption and adoption support, is very clear and appropriately written so that anyone using the service knows what to expect and where to go for further information or assistance. It is inclusive in its content and includes images which reflect diversity.

The managers at all levels are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced to manage and provide an extremely effective and child-focused service. Recruitment

processes are robust to ensure that anyone who is involved in providing a service is suitable and safe to do so.

Staff, all of whom are appropriately qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced, have access to a very impressive range of training opportunities. To quote one social worker: 'If we did all the training on offer we would never do any social work.' Staff take up these opportunities and have extensive training in a number of very relevant areas to enable them to keep up to date with current practice issues and provide a service of a very high quality. They also have practice development meetings on a regular basis so they can reflect on their current practice and develop consistent and effective ways of working. Staff are very well supported by regular supervision of a very high quality and accessible senior managers. The effectiveness of this training and support is evident in the feedback received from adopters and stakeholders. Comments include: 'I feel that this agency is one of the best; they are well organised and informed, they communicate well, and advocate for appropriate external training for their staff and carers', and, 'We couldn't want for a better team of staff. In our experience of dealing with them there is nothing negative to say.'

The agency is extremely well managed at all levels, both strategically and operationally. Extensive and varied monitoring arrangements ensure that a high quality service is provided and maintained. The executive side of the council is kept informed of the activities of the agency through regular reports, which enables the council to fulfil its corporate parenting responsibilities. There is exceptional cooperative working at all levels, both within the council and with partner agencies, such as the child and adolescent mental health service. Children's social workers are very well supported by the adoption team, who are responsive, knowledgeable and accessible, and the administrative support is excellent, all of which contribute to a child-focused and effective service.

Records are of a very high quality; they are well organised so that information is easily accessible. They are also audited on a regular basis, both for content and quality, so that they provide a good and accurate record of the work involved in a child's life, both now and for future access by an adopted person.

The premises are suitable and provide facilities for private interviews and meetings. Appropriate security measures safeguard the building and the records, and rigorous back-up plans provide a template so that the service can continue to be provided in an emergency.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Equality of opportunity for all children is an ethos which is embedded throughout the agency. Of particular note is the attitude towards disability; however complex a child's needs are, every effort is made to find a permanent family, as that is seen as a right for all children.

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 form is accepted before adoption preparation is provided. (NMS 10.6)