

# Derbyshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman
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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

Derbyshire County Council's adoption agency is placed in the Department for Children and Younger Adults. The service is provided by a central team currently based in Darley Dale, near Matlock. It carries out all the statutory functions required by legislation. The duties it undertakes are as follows: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and intercountry; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post-adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; and support to birth parents of children placed for adoption, or who have been adopted. The team also undertakes step-parent adoption applications.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service overall, with some aspects of outstanding practice within the outcome areas. A significant strength is the calibre of staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and skilled, and work together as a team to provide a very child-focused and integrated approach to placing and supporting children within their adoptive families.

Matching, introducing and placing children with suitable adopters are carried out very well to ensure children's needs are well met by adopters who understand the challenges they may bring. There is a range of flexible support to sustain placements, help children enjoy and achieve, promote their self-esteem and reach their full potential.

Of particular note is the service to birth families. There is a real commitment to involving birth families in the plans for their children, obtaining information for children, supporting birth families so they understand what is happening and promoting effective contact arrangements. This is of significant benefit to children, as it means they have a real and ongoing understanding of their heritage.

Areas of weakness include: obtaining the wishes and feelings of younger children; the timing of life story books and later life letters; timely referral of children to the Adoption Register; evidence of telephone verification of references; a missing detail in the children's guides; and staffing capacity. The latter impacts on the further development of the service to ensure consistently high practice in all aspects is delivered throughout the county.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

Two requirements and 14 recommendations to improve practice were made at the previous inspection. These related to: issues about safer staff recruitment; recruiting sufficient adopters; panel processes; matching; safeguarding procedures; case recording; and some documentary and monitoring shortfalls. These have all been satisfactorily implemented to significantly improve the service provided to children and families.

## **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.

Children are placed with adoptive families who understand and are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and keep them safe. Safeguarding and attachment form a significant part of the preparation course and subsequent training, ensuring adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety and secure attachments.

Children's health needs are well met. Adopters promote healthy lifestyles, and access appropriate medical services for their children once they are placed with them. Prospective adopters have good access to the agency's medical adviser, and other medical personnel, so they can discuss the implications of any health needs a child may have. This ensures that they have full information, and can access the necessary resources. Clear guidance on the scope of parental responsibility and medical consents ensure there is no delay in accessing treatment in an emergency. Social workers commented how children have blossomed since being with their adoptive families.

Matching children with adopters is a real strength of the agency, which ensures children benefit from stable families who can meet their needs. There is a formal, thorough approach to ensuring only adopters who can meet the child's assessed needs are matched with them. This area has been significantly strengthened since the previous inspection, with the addition of a designated family-finder post and a more formalised matching matrix which comprehensively identifies children's needs and how prospective adopters can meet them. The agency has been involved in some innovative and effective approaches to family finding, particularly for children with more complex needs, for example, family-finding events using DVDs of children, showing them in a more realistic and positive light than a written profile. Despite these strenuous efforts, and the use of inter-agency placements, a number of children, particularly older children and those with complex needs, are waiting for quite some time, and not all have been referred to the Adoption Register within three

months of the agency decision that they should be placed for adoption. This may have a detrimental impact on placement choice.

Prospective adopters get very comprehensive information about the children to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they feel they can meet their needs. This is complemented by life appreciation days, which are routinely held on all children placed for adoption; these give adopters the opportunity to hear about the children's experiences first hand, so they can have a real understanding of their histories and pass the information on to their children more effectively, at an appropriate time. An adopter commented: 'I was impressed with the information about our children.' Another said: 'I was very impressed with how the placement was made; they go out of their way to help, for example, by getting health information from the birth family.' Introductions are well planned with the full involvement of the prospective adopters, and reviewed prior to placement, so that any doubts or queries can be addressed. Prospective adopters provide the child with an appropriately child-focused book about their prospective family so they know what to expect and thus make a smoother transition to their new family. The low disruption rate is testament to the effective matching and placement planning for children and ensures placement stability.

Assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas are rare. However, when there is an enquiry, or placement of a child from another country, it is dealt with by appropriately skilled, experienced and knowledgeable staff who are guided by clear procedures to provide an effective and safe service.

The agency has a robust understanding of its responsibilities in relation to handling allegations. Staff are appropriately trained in safeguarding issues, including shadowing staff in the fieldwork teams to refresh their knowledge and understanding. The policy and appropriate procedures are easily accessible and these specifically refer to children placed for adoption.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The agency has a strategic and considered approach to supporting adoptive families so that children remain in stable placements and enjoy and achieve to their full potential. There is a significant emphasis on helping adopters understand attachment issues, supplemented by a post-placement workshop to reinforce the initial learning gained on the preparation course. As adopters have children in placement at this point, it makes it more meaningful and they can use particular examples of their own children's behaviour to seek further advice. Adopters understand the impact of abuse and neglect and how this may affect children's behaviour. They develop strategies based on this knowledge and understanding, and as a result, children are able to develop positive relationships with their adoptive parents. Families receive a lot of support and advice post placement to supplement this.

Children engage in meaningful activities within their adoptive families to help them

develop their confidence and self-esteem. The agency also supports adopters with this by giving practical information, for example, the names of local playgroups, or financially to fund specific interests. The agency holds adopted children's activity days six times a year, and social events for adoptive families twice a year. These are important as a forum for adopted children to meet together and share common experiences, and also for adopters to meet with other adopters for mutual support. As one adopter commented: 'It is very important to provide a forum for adoptive families to get together and enjoy themselves. It helped our children understand that other families are involved in adoption.'

The agency is committed to improving educational outcomes for adopted children. There is a named person to liaise with schools when children are placed out of Derbyshire so that children have a school place which meets their needs. The adoption support workers provide good advice and information to schools so they can care more appropriately for adopted children. They also support families by attending meetings, and writing letters of support for additional funding or for statements of special educational needs. The newsletter contains useful information for adopters about education, including young people's comments about their own experiences. These mechanisms ensure that adopters provide appropriate support, and children reach their educational potential.

Children live in suitable and safe homes with their adoptive parents. Suitability and safety of accommodation are comprehensively assessed during the home study, as is car ownership.

Children and adopters are well supported by a range of adoption support geared to meet individual needs. This is achieved by cooperative working and good corporate parenting. Assessing social workers retain responsibility for the families for six months after the adoption order, and ensure all the needs are being met before they end their contact. The post-adoption team ensures all families are aware of the support available, including a professional and informative newsletter, surgeries in different parts of the county, training, social events, children's groups and direct work. Support plans and ongoing assessments inform the provision of services. Therapeutic interventions are funded where necessary, and this has been for quite lengthy periods at times, showing a real commitment to sustaining placements. Adopters feel well supported and said the service was 'fantastic and responsive', and, 'I can't praise them enough, they are an exceptional, professional service.' However, some adopters felt resources were limited and that they had a slow response. Given the size of the county, the small number of workers in the team and the increasing number of families requiring support, the capacity of the service to deliver prompt and consistent support is limited.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account, recorded and used to develop the service, particularly in relation to adoption support. There are very good

examples of older children being listened to and a service provided in response to this, they contribute articles to the newsletter, and their views are always elicited after the activity groups. One young person commented: 'They have helped me quite a lot.' However, there are occasions when younger children are deemed too young to give a view, even when they are of an age to do so, for example, three and four years old.

A real strength of the agency is the work it does with birth families so that children have a positive self-view and a significant understanding of their background. The birth family support workers make early contact with birth families so they understand what is happening and the importance of contributing their views to the child permanence report. They have developed a variety of tools to ensure that birth families understand, for example, a visual representation of twin tracking. The workers are extremely committed to engaging birth families and their efforts are often rewarded by quite significant information being gathered, when this did not seem possible. Birth families are encouraged to provide a memory box for their child, write their own account of what has happened, and correct any perceived inaccuracy in the child permanence report. This means that the child has a balanced view of their history and can move forward. Child permanence reports are of a reasonable standard and many include a lot of information from the birth family, as well as their wishes and feelings.

Birth families are effectively supported in one-off meetings with adopters, and assisted to think about the sorts of things they want to know. These meetings are written up so the birth parent has an accurate record of what was said. Birth families also are encouraged to contribute to the matching by expressing their wishes about the type of adoptive family they would like for their child, and also what information they would like to contribute to the life appreciation day. This means the child has a really full account of their birth family's involvement in their adoption. Support to birth families can be sustained over quite lengthy periods of time. Birth parents have commented: 'My worker has been amazing and really helpful and listens when you talk.' Another said they would have 'hit rock bottom without it'. It is very clear that birth parents are valued and treated with respect, and a birth parent commented: 'My worker never looks down on me.'

Life story books and later life letters are of a good quality to provide a child with clear and accurate information about their past. However, they are not consistently provided to adoptive families in a timely way, which may impact on their usefulness as a working tool to help a child understand what is happening to them.

Children benefit from well-considered, child-focused contact arrangements which are supported by the adoption team to ensure they are effective. Birth parents have a useful pack of information which includes example letters, and this is supplemented by practical support to write letters. The letterbox is robust and well administered. Although it is not formally reviewed, the active involvement of workers from the adoption team means that arrangements are considered and amended to meet the changing needs of children. A lot of effort has been put into ensuring adopters are aware of the potential risks of social networking. Adoptive families demonstrate a



positive attitude towards contact and an understanding of why it is important for a child to know about their birth family; their preparation includes watching a powerful DVD of a birth father talking about contact arrangements, and this is reinforced by informative articles in the newsletter written by all parties involved in the arrangements.

Work with adopted adults and birth families in intermediary work is carried out to a good standard. For example, one service user said: 'She was brilliant, I was really impressed.' There are particularly good examples of when this work has taken into account the diverse needs of the service users, for example, if they have learning needs. However, there can be a quite a delay in providing this service as the adoption support workers prioritise work with children and families. This supports the view that there is not enough capacity in the adoption team to carry out all its work to achieve the best possible outcomes for service users.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has effective methods to recruit adopters, however, in recognition of the increased numbers of children requiring adoptive families, and the delay between enquiry and allocation, it is in the process of recruiting more social workers for the assessment team to enable them to increase the number of assessments. The information which enquirers receive is informative, and this is complemented by a comprehensive initial visit where any queries can be answered. The preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters is a thorough and rigorous process, which ensures that the adopters understand the challenges of adoptive parenting, the needs of the children, and are able to meet those needs in a safe and appropriate way. Adopters commented that the preparation was 'very thorough' and they feel well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting; this view is supported by the number of successful placements.

The agency holds very frequent adoption panels to ensure there is no delay in progressing children's cases or approving adoptive families. These are effectively administered so that panel members have good opportunity to give all the papers full consideration. The diverse range of experiences of the panel members ensures there is an informed and balanced recommendation. The adoption panel receives regular information on the progress of children, adopters and timescales, and it has recently developed formal quality assurance mechanisms to give feedback to the agency to enable it to improve practice where necessary. The minutes are comprehensive to provide a good and accurate record of the discussion and reasons for the recommendation. This is not only important for the decision-making process but also

for the child in the future. The agency decision maker makes a timely and considered decision based on full information and this is communicated to the relevant people orally and in writing.

There is clear information for children and service users so they know what to expect from the agency. The children's guides are child-focused, professional and suitable for children with a variety of needs. However, they do not mention the independent reviewing officer as someone who can be contacted if there are any concerns, which limits the options available to them.

The managers of the agency are suitable people to work with children and are appropriately skilled, qualified, knowledgeable and experienced to deliver an efficient and effective adoption service. Likewise, the staff and members of the central list are suitably recruited and selected so that they are safe and appropriate to work with children and service users. Although telephone verification is made to referees, this is not consistently recorded so does not provide sufficient evidence of a robust process.

A significant strength of the agency is the calibre of all of its staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, and hard working as well as being knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified. They are well supported through regular supervision of a high quality, and access to relevant training to ensure they retain their competence and up-to-date knowledge of adoption issues. This ensures they deliver a child-focused service of a good quality. The effectiveness of this is reflected in comments received from service users: 'This is a very efficient and caring service with approachable staff.' Another adopter said of their social worker: 'I can't praise her enough.' Staff feel Derbyshire is a good employer who puts children first, listens to staff and enables them to be innovative in their practice, for example, developing a family and friends' day for the supporters of adoptive parents. Staff are reflective in their practice and are constantly looking at ways of developing and improving their service for the benefit of children and families.

The agency is managed effectively to deliver a good service. Everyone is clear about their roles and responsibilities and how they fit into the overall objective. There are good links between the fieldwork teams and the adoption team to provide a child-focused and integrated service, dedicated to improving outcomes for children. The administrative support is excellent; staff are very committed and take ownership of the work, knowing their part in the adoption process is vital for the smooth running and delivery of the service. This support is valued by social workers who described them as 'brilliant' and commented: 'It's the best support I've ever had.'

The service is well monitored at all levels. The executive is well informed and committed to adoption and has good oversight through regular reporting. Complaints are responded to in a positive way as a means to improve practice.

Records are clear, accurate, up to date and stored securely. They provide information which will assist an adopted person understand why decisions were made about their life, if they access their records in the future.

The premises are appropriate for the purpose; they are secure, and have rooms available for meetings and interviews. A business continuity plan addresses the needs of the agency to enable it to carry out its functions in an emergency to limit disruption to its services.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Everyone in the agency shows respect for each other and this extends to respect for anyone using the service. All children, however complex their needs, are given the chance of an adoptive family if this is in their best interests. Their needs are comprehensively assessed and met on an individual basis, with appropriate support as required. All the documentation embraces inclusivity, and facilities are made available for anyone to use the service, for example, by providing interpreters to aid effective communication.

## **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 child's details are referred to the Adoption Register when no locally identified match is being pursued, at the latest by three months after the agency's decision maker has decided that the child should be placed for adoption (NMS 13.1)
- ensure the agency is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare and service provision. This is with particular reference to the provision of adoption support (NMS 19.6)
- ensure that no child is assumed unable to communicate their views (NMS 1.3)
- ensure the life story book and later life letter are provided to the adopters in line with the timescales specified in the national minimum standards (NMS 2.6 and 2.8)
- ensure the children's guides to adoption and adoption support contain information about how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer (NMS 18.5 and 18.6)
- ensure there is a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for staff and persons on the central list. This relates to telephone verification of written references. (NMS 21.3)