

Worcestershire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson / Helen Walker
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Date of last inspection	17/07/2007
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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

Worcestershire Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. The service assesses and makes decisions on prospective adopters and matches children with those approved adopters. It also provides adoption support and birth records counselling. In addition the service provides advice, support and information for those wishing to embark on inter-country adoptions.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This is a satisfactory service with some good features. Children are safe and their health and education is promoted and supported. They are consulted by the service and their views and opinions make a difference to their daily lives and case-planning decisions.

Children experience careful and successful matching with adoptive parents who undergo thorough but fair and well-balanced assessment. These applications are scrutinised by an adoption panel who provide effective scrutiny and challenge to the service. Both adoptive parents and birth parents receive good support from the service.

Staff receive effective support and work in successful partnership with their colleagues in other agencies to achieve positive outcomes for children. Senior managers have a sound overview of the service and have an adoption action plan in place to further develop the service.

A number of shortfalls are identified which result in some children experiencing delay in being placed with adoptive parents. Recommendations are raised therefore to address these issues and so improve outcomes for children.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection it was recommended that the service develop the following areas to improve practice: child permanence reports; preparation training for foster carers who wish to adopt and recruitment of panel members. In addition the service was asked to address its approach to working with birth families and maintain consistency in the preparation of life story work and the recording of decisions on adopters' case files.

The majority of these recommendations are met which has contributed to improved outcomes for children. However, the recommendation to improve consistency in child

permanence reports has not been met which leads to delay for some children in being matched with adoptive parents.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Children live in safe, nurturing and loving homes in the care of their adoptive parents. This is achieved through the implementation of good practice such as the careful assessment of prospective adopters and in ensuring they have a good understanding of children's needs. There are extensive checks on the suitability and safety of adopters' homes and adopters confirm that training addresses a number of safeguarding issues, including internet safety.

Children are protected because the service maintains its vigilance of their safety and well-being through regular monitoring of children and their adoptive parents, both informally and through the statutory review process. The service ensures its own staff are deemed suitable to work with children and it has effective systems in place to respond to any allegations or other safeguarding issues.

Adoptive parents confirm they are given sufficient information to help them understand and meet their children's health needs. The service has well-established working relationships with key professionals in health and other agencies, notably the integrated service for looked after children (ISL). This joint working successfully promotes the physical and emotional health needs of children and results in demonstrable improvement in their health outcomes.

Children's needs are central to the matching process and adoptive parents confirm that introductions are paced to meet the child's needs. One stakeholder noted that 'the service makes a very good job at matching children to their adopters'.

Some children benefit from being matched with their adoptive parents within very efficient timescales from the point at which the agency decision was made. Despite ongoing improvement in this area, however, a number of children experience varying degrees of delay. One adopted young person noted that 'the length of time between leaving my birth parents and getting new ones was far too long'.

A number of factors relating to child permanence reports contribute to this delay. Child permanence reports are sometimes incomplete and inaccurate when presented to panel. When the adoption panel requests further information, this is not always provided in a timely manner. In some cases frequent changes of social worker affect the consistency and prompt compilation of children's permanence reports.

This impacts negatively on children's prospects to be matched with adoptive parents within a timeframe which meets their needs. For some children the delay is significant, and the adoption panel noted in one case that 'the children had not received an adequate service from the department'.

The quality of child permanence reports therefore remains inconsistent. This was a recommendation made at the last inspection which has not been met.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adoptive parents receive good support to help them understand how past experiences can shape their children's behaviour, and how to manage that behaviour in a nurturing, loving and therapeutic way. This provides children with experience of positive and consistent boundaries and promotes secure attachment to their adoptive parents.

Children's education is strongly promoted. This impacts not only on future life chances but also on children's sense of achievement, confidence and self-esteem. In co-operation with the adoption service, the ISL team helps to set clear outcome objectives for children and fully supports them and their adoptive families. For example, the ISL team works with looked after children for up to three terms before their transfer from nursery into school. It provides support for adoptive parents and ensures that all children, even at the Early Years Foundation Stage, have an effective personal education plan. Children's self-esteem is also reinforced through their participation in a range of extracurricular activities and leisure activities, such as dance, music, clubs and sport.

Children, their adoptive parents and birth parents, all receive good support from the service, some of which is delivered through a contract with Adoption UK. Support needs are comprehensively assessed and plans implemented. Although some adopters expressed concern about some aspects of adoption support, overall adopters feel that this is a positive aspect of the service. One adopter noted that 'the support has been excellent and invaluable'.

Children can access individual support should they require it and these arrangements are clearly set out in the children's guide. Birth parents are offered independent support throughout the adoption process and are helped with very challenging issues such as preparing for the final contact and Letterbox arrangements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service recognises the need for children to have some control over their lives and, taking into account their level of understanding, children's views and wishes are

considered in their permanence planning. For example, as a result of listening to children, one child's care plan was changed from adoption to long-term fostering, and the information pack for prospective adoptive parents includes comment from children about some of the things they are looking for in potential adopters.

Children's sense of identity is promoted throughout the care planning process, and more specifically through life story work and the inclusion of birth parents, wherever possible, in planning for their children. Training on life story work and identity is highly valued by adoptive parents. Contact arrangements are sensitive to the child's need for safety and security with their need to understand and maintain links with their family of origin.

Birth parents are routinely offered the opportunity to be included in planning and implementing their child's adoption. This matter is managed sensitively and helps children in future years to understand the different elements and impact of their heritage. Good practice examples include a birth mother and grandmother being invited to meetings for compiling the child's life story book, and another where birth parents met with adoptive parents.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

There are several positive aspects to the management of the service which helps to promote favourable outcomes for children. Training for adoptive parents is highly rated, particularly that on life story work, identity and therapeutic parenting. One adoptive parent noted that, since approval, 'we have been offered several follow-up courses'. Adoptive parents feel that the information provided about adoption is good, with staff at the service being 'easy to talk to' as one adoptive parent noted.

Adopters confirm that the initial training prepared them for the realities of adoption, and that the service is clear about the type of children who need adoption. Adopters were very satisfied with the planning for the move to adoption, the quality of communication and the 'really good matching and introductions'. One adoptive couple noted that 'introductions were well planned and managed, helped by wonderful foster parents'. They feel that complaints procedures are sufficiently signposted and that staff at the service are 'easy to contact'.

Children benefit from the well-established joint working with the ISL team and colleagues in other agencies, including the local judiciary with whom there has been some effective liaison and work in helping to reduce delay for children through the court system.

Children and family social workers confirm that arrangements for placing children are generally efficient. Inter-country adoption applications receive the attention of a specialist worker who has nevertheless managed to persuade people to adopt children from the local authority, rather than from abroad.

Adoption social workers report that they are supported in their work through regular supervision, team meetings and training. These processes ensure that children and their adoptive parents are supported by individuals who are suitably qualified and skilled, and who together contribute to improved outcomes for children. In this respect, the service fulfils the objectives of its Statement of Purpose.

The effective operation of adoption panel means that the welfare of children and young people is safeguarded and protected. The quality of prospective adopter reports is good, and children's interests are well served by the adoption panel who apply rigorous scrutiny to cases presented for recommendation. There is routine evaluation of the service that the adoption panel provide, and adoptive parents report that they were made to feel welcome at panel. Current panel procedures do not take into account new statutory guidance with regard to the agency decision-maker, and the reasons for the recommendation are not entirely clear in each case.

Some children wait for more than a year to be matched with adoptive parents because too few adopters are assessed within reasonable timescales. For example, the service's report to the executive notes that 'there is relatively poor performance in timescales for the assessment of prospective adopters'. Commenting on the experience of assessment, some adoptive parents noted, 'we found the process took a very long time - four years between first meeting and placement, with 18 months waiting for a match'.

Recruitment is reasonably effective. There are significant sections of the community, however, who are not represented in those coming forward to be considered as adoptive parents. For example, no single male carer or same sex couple have been approved as adoptive parents in the last three years. The choice and variety of potential adoptive parents is therefore not wide enough to afford all children a swift move to their 'forever' families, and monitoring of the service is not sufficiently effective in identifying trends and patterns, such as that outlined above.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. There is an emphasis on children understanding their identity and place within their family of heritage, and age is no barrier to adoption. Information presented to the adoption panel and recorded in panel minutes about sibling groups is often conflated, however, and monitoring does not always identify such patterns. Recruitment and panel membership is not fully representative of diverse sections of the community.

Records relating to the care and welfare of children are maintained to a good standard and these are compliant with legal requirements. This ensures that children have an accurate account of their life and decisions made prior to their adoption.

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 children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision-maker that they should be placed for adoption (NMS 13)
- ensure adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopters' application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure the decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the adoption panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 17.11)
- improve the quality and accuracy of child permanence reports and ensure that information contained in the report is checked against the original sources of information (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Guidance, Chapter 2, paragraphs 60 and 61)
- comply with the adoption panel's requests for further information (The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Guidance, Chapter 2, paragraph 65)
- regularly monitor all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)