

Lincolnshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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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

Lincolnshire County Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory duties relating to current legislation and regulations. The service assesses and approves adopters and matches children with those adopters. In addition the service provides adoption support to all those affected by adoption and those wishing to adopt from abroad.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Children enjoy outstanding developmental outcomes with quick progress to successful placements with their adoptive parents. Children's needs are central to the operation of the service and they benefit from a wealth of good practice from staff who are highly competent, well supported and appropriately qualified.

Safeguarding features strongly at every stage and the service ensures that children are protected and kept safe from harm. The adoption panel plays an important and highly effective role in determining the ability of prospective adopters to safeguard children and meet their needs.

Excellent inter-agency working provides children and their adoptive parents with an efficient and effective service which helps to sustain and maintain adoptive placements. The service learns through consultation with children and adapts the delivery of services accordingly.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection recommendations were raised in connection with the placement of relinquished babies, the frequency of preparation courses and improving the content of child permanence reports in relation to children's views and wishes and appropriate information.

The service was also asked to develop clearer systems to improve the recording of telephone verification of references and notification of the death of an adopted child. Additionally it was recommended that the service ensure that adoption panel minutes referred to each individual sibling and that the role of panel adviser be properly implemented.

The service has demonstrated its commitment to continual improvement of the service by meeting these recommendations and thereby improving outcomes for children.

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 are safe in their adoptive placements as a consequence of the robust approach taken to all aspects of safeguarding. Children are protected because staff are vetted as being suitable to work with vulnerable children and the service makes an extremely thorough assessment of prospective adopters.

The adoption panel acts as a highly effective safeguarding mechanism. It scrutinises assessments and is keen to satisfy itself that prospective adopters can manage a wide range of safeguarding matters such as, for example, safety in the home, contact and disclosure.

Adopters are equipped with the knowledge they need to protect their adopted children. Safeguarding is a central theme of preparatory training and includes information on cyber-bullying and internet safety. One adoptive parent described this as 'a real eye-opener, but delivered in a way that was well-balanced and didn't scare you off.'

From the point at which they are admitted to care and throughout their journey to adoption, children are regularly reminded that they have the right to be safe and free from intimidation and bullying. The service makes information widely available to them which details how they can make a complaint and the different people to whom they can express their concerns.

This message impacts on even very young children, who have felt confident and empowered enough to share their worries. Foster carers are extremely alert to children's comments and behaviour which might suggest adverse experiences. In these instances child protection systems are highly effective in implementation.

Children's safety in their adoptive placements is regularly reviewed. This includes unannounced visits to adopters and staff routinely seeing and speaking to children alone. Identical rigor is applied to children who have been adopted from abroad which ensures that they are similarly protected, and there is training for staff on cultural awareness in safeguarding.

Children enjoy improved health outcomes. This is achieved through routine practices which means, for example, their immunisations and dental checks are up to date and their growth and development monitored. They have access to specialist services and resources where required which has had particular impact on children with disability, some of whom experience significant progress in their health and wellbeing.

These resources include the love and commitment of adopters who ensure their adoptive children have a good diet, take exercise and are emotionally nurtured. The service also expects adoptive parents to provide children with a safe healthy home environment and to keep themselves in good health.

Children gain enormous benefit from the service's absolute determination to avoid any delay in placing them for adoption. Planning for permanency through adoption is made at the very earliest opportunity of a child's entry into the care system. One interested party commented that planning for children is 'tackled robustly by having adoption panel dates fixed.'

Once that decision is made children are very quickly and efficiently matched and placed with their adoptive parents. One adopter noted that, 'once the link was made, it all moved on really quickly. It's proved to be a perfect match!'

In the overwhelming majority of cases children are placed with their adoptive parents within the more ambitious six-month rather than 12-month timescale. This means children have an excellent opportunity to begin a life of stability, safety and security at a much earlier stage with all the improved long-term outcomes that brings.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children experience significant emotional and psychological sustenance from their adoptive parents. Key to this is the focus on therapeutic parenting, which is strongly emphasised during preparatory training for adopters. Adopters report increased understanding for them and improved behaviours in their children as a result of this approach, which in turn promotes strong attachments between parent and child.

Children are enabled to overcome early disadvantage through the service's sharp focus on education. This ranges from the early year's foundation stage and throughout their school career, where they receive excellent support to achieve academic success and develop their skills to the best of their ability. Children enjoy a wealth of extra-curricular activities such as drama, football, horse riding and athletics. This helps children to develop confidence in their abilities as well as improve their general well-being and self-esteem.

A highly effective range of adoption support services helps to maintain children in their adoptive placements. Access to a variety of diverse resources, such as children's centres, adopter-led support groups, the Opt2Adopt web-site and discussion forums, or more specialised intervention from the service itself. This means that adopters can seek assistance, should they need it, in a way and at a time that suits them and their children best.

The Opt2Adopt web-site has links to health and education information, such as

family information services education web-site, and adoptive parents can attend courses at the local authority's children's centres. Here they can participate in sessions which are designed to help parents develop their parenting skills, increase their understanding of child development and behaviour, and engage them in nurturing activities with their adopted children, such as 'Big Cook Little Cook'.

This informal approach has a number of significant benefits for children. As well as reinforcing attachments between parent and child, it helps to promote the child's and adopters support networks and friendships within their local communities.

The service recognises the importance of the wider family in adoption support. It provides seminars for grandparents and extended family to help them manage expectations and understand the special needs of adopted children. One adopter commented that, 'the support I receive from this agency is fantastic' and other adopters praised individual workers 'for all the help and support when we had bad times as well as good times.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children have their views taken very seriously by the service. For instance, as a result of listening to children, the service has started to focus more on enabling them to say goodbye to school friends as well as foster carers. After children said there are too many people at their reviews who they did not know this has been addressed and the length of meetings reduced.

Children have a say throughout the adoption process, for example on whether they want siblings older or younger than themselves. One young person attended the adoption panel to ask about the process of adoption and what their role was in making a recommendation about a prospective link.

The service elicits children's views on corporate matters through The Big Conversation and other means, such as an annual activity day and individual consultations. For example, a 'mini' Opt2Adopt website is currently being piloted by adopted children. This helps children to feel respected by the service and to feel that their opinions are valued.

Children are enabled to maintain a strong sense of identity and origin in a number of ways. In one example story tapes were produced in the child's native language to encourage early attachment and recognition of culture. The importance of heritage is reinforced because birth parents are supported to be involved with plans for their children and through clear but protective contact arrangements.

Children's right to have the fullest information about them, their history and birth family accurately and sensitively documented is fulfilled in the overwhelming majority of cases. For example, one adopter commented on the 'very detailed child permanence report and very well prepared reports for the children;' another that 'we

have so much information when our child grows up we have a great story to tell.'

Adopters note that the information sharing meetings were particularly beneficial in giving them a sense of the reality of what their adopted children have experienced, as well as a helpful chronology. This also provides children with important background history of their family of origin.

Birth parents are provided with independent support at the stage where adoption features, and are offered every support to make clear their views regarding plans for their child. Child permanence reports are shared with birth parents wherever possible, and one adopter noted, 'I have met with the birth parents of one of my children.' A birth relative commented on the 'fantastic support' offered by the service and their close involvement in planning for their child with the service being 'very understanding which made the process much easier for us.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Children enjoy stability and security in their adoptive placements and successful developmental outcomes because their needs are central to the operation of the service. Excellent inter-agency working, including close liaison with the local judiciary, means that children are surrounded by highly professional practitioners who have their interests firmly at heart.

Supervising social workers bring extensive knowledge, expertise and skills to the adoption process. One adopter noted that, 'our experience was very good and we knew what was happening and kept up to date about our application every step of the way. Our social worker explained the process and we couldn't have been in better hands.'

The adoption panel is strongly independent with clear expectations about the quality of reports presented to panel. Prospective adopter reports include stringent analysis of applicant's potential to meet the needs of children, however panel is not afraid to defer or turn down applications, and the agency decision maker does not always agree with panel's recommendations. This process of independent checks and scrutiny ensures that children are offered the optimum conditions to prosper and thrive in the care of their adoptive parents with whom they are carefully matched.

Through the creative work of an innovative and enterprising recruitment officer, children are provided with a diverse range of prospective adopters to meet their needs, and in sufficient quantity. Prospective adopters from all sections of the

community are welcome irrespective of age, sexuality, marital and health status or social background.

The service monitors all aspects of its performance and identifies areas for development as well as areas of success. A recommendation is raised however to address some of the minor shortfalls identified at this inspection, none of which have an immediate direct impact on children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding.

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 all staff's work and activity is consistent with adoption regulations and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures. (NMS 25.3)