

Northamptonshire 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

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| 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

This is a local authority adoption service which undertakes to prepare, train, assess and support adopters. It comprises three teams. The adoption team matches approved adopters with children and provides ongoing support for them directly and through support groups, training, family days and a regular newsletter. The service also assesses and supports prospective inter-country adopters and step-parent adoptions, although the latter are not part of this inspection. Adoption support post-adoption order is provided through two teams, who work with adoptive families and birth families at any time during the adopted child's childhood. A specialist team provides birth records counselling and intermediary services to adopted adults, and their birth families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

Despite some satisfactory and good elements of practice, children and adopters receive overall an inadequate service.

Children are safe and experience satisfactory outcomes for health and education. Adopters feel that preparation training is good and that the service provided by individual members of the adoption team is excellent. Some children move quickly to their adoptive placements once the right match has been identified and some post-adoption interventions are very effective, helping to sustain adoptive families through difficult times.

The journey to adoption for both children and adopters is however too often characterised by delay, inconsistent practice and a lack of recognition of and adherence to regulations, national minimum standards and statutory guidance on adoption.

Ineffective management and less than robust monitoring of the service means that patterns of concern and shortfalls in practice are not identified and addressed in a timely fashion. A series of interim management arrangements means that there has not been the strong management presence required to drive through changes in a timeframe that meets the needs of children.

The provider took immediate action to address some of the issues highlighted at the inspection however a number of recommendations are raised in order to facilitate improved outcomes for children and develop practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were raised. These related to checks on prospective adopters, staff and panel members and the providing of annual joint training for panel members and staff.

The agency was asked to give consideration to strengthening the role of panel adviser and to ensure that effective systems and resources were in place to allow social workers to obtain clear and appropriate information for the child about their birth family.

Allowing contact to be initiated by the agency providing independent support to birth parents, rather than leaving this to birth parents themselves was also recommended, along with suggested improvements to information in the Statement of Purpose, child protection policies and procedures and the disaster recovery plan.

The agency has met all of these recommendations, thereby improving outcomes for children in these areas.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

Children are safe in their placements and continue to be protected through routine statutory monitoring arrangements. Prospective adopters and staff are subject to rigorous vetting procedures to ensure they present no risk to children and when current or historical allegations emerge these are dealt with promptly.

Children's good health is promoted and maintained through access to primary and specialist health care resources, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and children receive comprehensive medical assessments prior to adoption. Children move into adoptive homes which are assessed as being free from hazards, thereby providing them with safe environments. Adopters confirm that they receive the fullest information about children's health status and potential health issues that may emerge.

Some children move swiftly to successful placements with their adoptive parents. Links with prospective adopters are often made at an early stage and progress quickly. Matching takes priority at panel and the agency works closely with the local judiciary to facilitate more efficient court timetabling. For other children however, matching is not achieved within recommended timescales. This has a detrimental impact on children in that it reduces the chances of them experiencing the long-term

stability and security of family life.

A number of factors contribute to children experiencing delay. For example, although there are some focused and successful recruitment events the overall recruitment strategy is less effective. On occasion, family finding is considered only when other options or court proceedings have been exhausted. Some children's permanence reports provide a poor basis on which to make recommendations and decisions about children's best interests and matching options.

Even after matching, children's needs are not always central to proceedings, and the move to their new families can be postponed. One adopter noted the reasons for this as 'the child's report not being completed properly, the medical report was missing and delay in introductions were due to child's social worker being on annual leave'. Another adopter commented that 'introductions were due to be completed earlier however it was not convenient for the foster carer'.

Frequent placement moves and changes of social worker also compromise the journey to successful adoption for some children. For example, one adopter commented that 'our child had many moves in her five years - three moves in 12 months'. Minutes of a disruption meeting record that the child in question 'had attended four primary schools due to changes in carers'. Another adopter noted that 'our adoptive daughter is on her fifth social worker and she is only 20 months old'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Children receive support for help with establishing positive relationships and behaviours, and to recover from adverse life events. Adoptive parents receive training on attachment and therapeutic parenting and confirm that this is highly effective in helping them to understand how past experiences may influence children's behaviour and offer them practical strategies to deal with this.

Education is promoted and children have personal education plans to support them in their learning. Younger children attend nurseries and playgroups which helps to develop early years skills and prepare them for formal education. Children enjoy a wide range of extra-curricula and leisure activities and are supported through universal services and access to a fund for vulnerable children. This helps children to develop their social skills, gain a sense of achievement and improve their self-esteem.

Adoption support is variable. One adopter wrote that 'we couldn't have asked for better support' and another that the interventions of the post-adoption support team had 'made a positive difference to our family'. Another adopter said that the service had provided a mobility aid which 'was fantastic'. There are a range of support groups and annual events, which are evaluated by the service, and a regular newsletter to keep adopters informed of events and information.

Although some adopters are therefore satisfied with the support they receive, other adopter's experiences were less favourable. For example, one adopter noted 'we don't see either social worker much now and during a very difficult time in the summer we saw no-one and referrals that were supposed to happen didn't until later than we needed them'. Another reflected that 'the pre-adoption team are fine. Post-adoption is a different matter – the telephone rings continuously, you leave messages and they do not get to the correct person. They visit and tell you there is a waiting list. Then because we have CAMHS support, the post-adoption team will not provide support'.

Adopters are on occasion delaying the application for an adoption order as they do not feel confident their children will receive the services they require. One adopter explained that they had postponed this part of the process so their child would be sure to be given priority, as a looked after child, at a preferred school. Another adopter wanted to ensure that access to CAMHS services were secured.

The current remit of the Adoption Support Services Adviser focuses largely on post-order families and children, and although adoption support assessments are routinely undertaken, these plans and interventions are not reviewed through statutory reviewing processes.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is inadequate.

Children's views and wishes are taken into account in the running of the agency. They are frequently consulted and represented on a range of matters and their views carry some weight. Where adoption specifically is concerned, children feature in a video for prospective adopters as part of their training.

Child permanence reports vary in quality. Some give a good and measured account of children's life prior to adoption, and include birth parents wishes and views of the plan for their child. For example, a birth parent's wish for their child to be brought up in a specific religion was taken into account during matching. This enables children, in later life, to have a clear understanding of their heritage and an accurate account of their life before adoption. This good practice is somewhat undermined however as the life story book and later life letter is not always handed over to adopters within recommended timescales.

Some child permanence reports are not fit for purpose. In these the content is sometimes inappropriate and often contains more description than analysis. It is evident that some sections are 'cut and paste' from other reports. Information about siblings is sometimes conflated and transposed. Some lack photographs of birth parents or evidence that they have been consulted on information in the report.

Training has been provided for staff on the writing of child permanence reports but has not been effective in achieving consistency in practice. Managers and panel advisers are not robust enough in challenging the quality of these reports prior to

submission to adoption panel. This means that the panel and agency decision-maker are making recommendations and decisions based on poor quality information. Children, coming back to look at these documents in later life, will find they do not contribute to an understanding of their early life.

Birth parents are included in plans for their children as far as possible and some have the opportunity to meet the adopters of their children. The extended adoptive family and friendship network are offered training to help them understand the implications of adoption and prepare them for the arrival of the child into the family. This contributes to the wider support of adoptive placements. Contact arrangements are facilitated with the needs and safety of the child in mind and letterbox contact is efficiently facilitated through the post-adoption service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

Individual testimonies reflect the positive experience enjoyed by some adopters during assessment and training. Children benefit because their adoptive parents feel they have been given the chance to really explore their decision to adopt. They appreciate the chance to acquire an understanding of the needs of children available for adoption, and practical advice on how to address those needs.

Adopters say that the range and availability of preparation training is 'excellent' and they confirm that it fully prepares them for the challenges of adoption. One adopter commented 'we have received a fantastic service from the Northamptonshire adoption team. They have been fully supportive throughout the entire process. We always had a lot of information and access to professional help. Can only give praise!'

The adoption panel meets frequently and applies stringent scrutiny of prospective adopter reports. These are generally of good quality and keen analysis. The agency decision-maker exercises independent judgement, sometimes overturning the recommendation of panel. Once approved, adopters wait relatively short periods of time before they are matched with children, having often been linked at an early stage to a particular child.

Ineffective management and the impact of organisational change means however that practice lacks consistency, efficiency, quality and timeliness. The agency fails to comply with several elements of statutory guidance and national minimum standards, and staff sometimes appear to be unaware of these frameworks and the timescales within which they must work. This contributes to delay for children

waiting for adoption.

For example, some adopters begin preparation training and on at least one occasion an early medical was undertaken prior to the application being accepted and considered by the agency. On waiting times, one adopter reflected that, 'the approval process was fine apart from the incredible amount of time we had to wait before we got there'. Another noted that, 'Explanations about what was happening is good and the general accessibility to social workers is good. However, there are periods of waiting when you can wonder if you have been forgotten – months pass leaving you wondering; for example, after the initial social worker visit there was a long delay until preparation training - a six-month wait. On completion of preparation training another three months to wait for a social worker. Panel delayed twice.'

There are some initiatives to improve practice, such as the introduction of permanency planning meetings. However the lack of stability in leadership, due to interim arrangements at all levels, means that these have not been implemented with the efficiency and urgency that children need.

Monitoring of the activities of the agency lacks rigour and is not robust enough to ensure that each child's need for permanency through adoption is achieved within recommended timescales. Data recording systems are not efficient enough to give a consistent overview. Adoption panel reports to the agency and the agency's reports to the Executive are not produced within the frequency required. This means that the opportunity for the Executive to consistently satisfy itself that the agency is effective and achieving good outcomes for children and service users is lost.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. There is a clear understanding around respecting cultural identity and the diverse needs of children. For example, a 'heritage planning framework' is implemented to support children in trans-racial adoptive placements. This helps their adoptive parents recognise and address the different ethnic and cultural needs of their adoptive children.

Children are not always recognised as individuals in their own right, however. Their information is sometimes conflated with those of their siblings and panel minutes do not always document separate reasons for recommendations for each child in a sibling group. The absence of a meaningful recruitment strategy means that not all sections of the community are fully represented in the pool of available adopters.

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):

- provide the life story book by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopter, and the complete life story book and later life letter to the prospective adopter within ten working days of the adoption

ceremony (NMS 2.7-8)

- devise and implement an effective strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan, and monitor and evaluate the strategy (NMS 10.1)
- ensure that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents are kept informed, on a regular basis, on the progress (or lack of progress) of their enquiry/application throughout the adoption process (10.2)
- accept the agency's application form after the prospective adopter has been counselled and attended the information meeting, and before police checks, references and health reports are sought, adoption preparation has been provided or the gathering of information for preparation of the adopter's report has begun (10.6)
- place children within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision-maker that they should be placed for adoption (NMS 13)
- ensure the child permanence report is used to identify prospective adopters who can meet the majority, if not all, of the child's needs as set out in the child's permanence report (13.4)
- ensure the ASSA assists prospective adopters and adopters through liaison with education and health services across local authority boundaries and between departments within the local authority (NMS 15.5)
- ensure that the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months which includes all the points noted in this national minimum standard (NMS 17.2)
- equip staff with the skills required to meet the needs of children and service users, keep them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments which reflects the policies, legal obligations and business of the agency. This is with specific reference to child permanence reports and statutory guidance on adoption (NMS 23.1)
- ensure the agency is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently and delivers a good quality service which meets the needs of children and others (NMS 25)
- provide the Executive side of the local authority with written reports on the management and outcomes of the agency every six months and monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and achieving good quality outcomes for children and/or service users (NMS 25.6)
- consider each of the matters set out in paragraph (6) when carrying out a review (breach of Regulation 36 (5) Adoption Agency Regulations 2005)