

# Cheshire East Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Cheshire East is a local authority adoption service which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service works closely with children's social workers within the authority to ensure that children are matched with suitable adoptive families. Currently the agency places children with its own approved adopters and those approved by other agencies. The council commissions a service for those wishing to adopt from overseas from a voluntary adoption agency.

The agency provides support for adoption placements. It also provides post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption. Support is provided to birth families, both by the service itself and through a contract with an adoption support agency. This agency also provides birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The agency approved 14 adoptive families and placed 17 children for adoption in the year preceding this inspection. At the time of the inspection there were 27 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement; of these, eight have been linked to adopters. There are also four other potential links with families pending the finalisation of court proceedings.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good adoption service which produces good outcomes for children through adoption.

The adoption process is timely. Preparation training is thorough and there is a robust assessment, approval and decision-making process in place. This ensures adopters are suitable and able to undertake their parenting role. Children are placed in stable, secure homes, which meet their assessed needs. Consequently, children make good

progress in all areas of their development, including their ability to attach and form positive relationships with their adoptive family.

The local authority is working hard for looked after children to achieve permanence through adoption. There are good tracking and monitoring systems to ensure this is always considered. Consequently, the number of children placed for adoption has increased. The service is good at placing siblings together, and has managed to do this quickly in some cases, taking into account the ages and needs of the children. The service works well with its partner agencies to provide children with appropriate and effective adoptive families. Stakeholders and adopters spoken with were generally positive and expressed satisfaction about the quality of the service provided. During 2009-2010, local government reorganisation, staff shortages and the volume of adopters' applications had an impact on the timeliness of assessments; however, this has now been resolved.

Adopters are well supported so that families stay together and placements do not disrupt. The disruption rate is low, with two placements disrupting in the last three years. Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of its practice, which ensures children are safe in their adoptive families. The service provided to adult service users is sensitively delivered and of good quality.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. Staff are extremely hard working, qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and committed to delivering a good quality service. They are supported by good communication, effective supervision and access to appropriate training.

Life work and the production of life story books are of a very high standard and are produced in a timely manner. However, while children's written assessments have improved during the past 18 months, there is still some variability in their quality. This means that adopters do not always receive full and detailed information regarding their child. However, considerable work is being undertaken to address this through the provision of additional training and support from the specialist adoption advisor, to ensure there is a high quality analysis of children's needs.

Service user, stakeholder and children's feedback influences the development of adoption practice and the service delivered.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure prospective adopters are fully aware of the child's background, health, emotional and developmental needs and the practical implications for parenting that child (NMS 13.5)
- ensure the management of the agency makes sure all staff's work and activity

are consistent with adoption regulations and national minimum standards and with the service's policies and procedures, with specific reference to improving the quality of child permanence reports. (NMS 25.3)

## **Outcomes for children and young people**

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

The local authority is improving in its care planning, decision making and the early placement of children in adoptive families. The co-location of teams, including the adoption and cared for team has also assisted this process. The local authority has increased the ratio of children from the looked after system being adopted. A very large majority of children who have an adoption plan are placed within 12 months of an adoption decision being made. This ensures children do not wait too long before being placed with an adoptive family. In situations where this is not achieved, it is usually due to court delays or the complexity of a child's needs, which makes it more difficult to find families in the required timescale. However, recently, the authority has worked effectively with the courts. This has resulted in a new court protocol being developed and a significant reduction in court delays during legal proceedings.

Children are very well prepared for their adoptive placements. Their wishes and feelings are explored and adhered to, if possible and appropriate. They are encouraged to say what they would like regarding their new family, for example, to be with their siblings, to have their own bedroom, or to live with a family that has pets.

Children are helped to understand what is happening to them and there were some good examples of individually tailored resources used to undertake direct work with children. Social workers make use of a number of books which are appropriate for children of different ages and stages of development to explain what adoption means.

Foster carers also prepare children for their adoptive placements; for example, pictures and books are used with children to help them recognise their adopters when they first meet. Foster carers keep memory boxes for children and these feed in to the process of developing their life story books.

Life story books are generally of a very good standard and are extremely useful in helping prepare children for their move. They also help them understand their situation when they have moved into their new families. The service fully recognises that life story books can be an evolving part of a child's life and demonstrate this through the provision of workshops and on-going support to adopters.

Adopters are helped to understand the importance of contact and the effective promotion and support of these contact arrangements. This enables children to maintain positive contact with their birth family and further assists them to understand their backgrounds, heritage and identity.

Children's needs are assessed prior to being matched with their adoptive families, although not all are robust. However, good quality matching ensures that adopters can meet a child's identified needs well. Children are usually placed with their siblings and sibling assessments are carried out. The agency is effective in placing siblings together where this is deemed best for the children. This facilitates positive sibling relationships and a shared sense of heritage.

Children are given the best opportunities to develop positive attachments to their adoptive parents. In becoming more emotionally secure, their behaviour improves so they are more able to form positive relationships with adults and other children in school and in the community. This assists children to make good developmental progress, for example, in their health, educational attainment, behaviour and social skills.

Children's health needs are well met through the prompt provision of very good health resources, including those relating to psychological and health assessments. An effective training programme is also being rolled out to foster carers, which covers issues relating to early trauma and neglect and its effects on brain development. The purpose of this is to increase foster carers' understanding of these matters and help them identify any issues that a child might present as a result of these experiences. It will also ensure that support is offered to children at an earlier stage, to benefit children moving on to adoption.

Similarly, children's educational needs are also well met. Both the adoption service and the virtual school provide advice and support to schools where adopted children are presenting challenging behaviour. The value of this can be best demonstrated by the comments of a headteacher who stated, 'I have been impressed with the fantastic advice and support we have had, which has enabled us to make a positive difference to a child's education and social outcomes.'

They also undertake training within schools regarding the difficulties children face as a result of their early experiences and attachment. This training enables teaching staff to have a better understanding of a child's behaviour and how to manage it better in the school environment. This is clearly demonstrated by the comments of one headteacher, who stated that the training had enabled them to 'keep the child safe', and another stated, 'it helped us all understand the attachment issues a child may have, how they can be seen and how we as professionals can support the child in the best way.'

Adopters are very proactive in ensuring that their children make good progress in all areas of their development. They will advocate effectively, ensuring children's health needs are effectively met. Adopters also encourage and support children at nursery and school; as a consequence they generally do well and improve in their reading, writing and their mathematical ability. Adopters also do their utmost to ensure their children develop into confident, self-assured young people with aspirations for their future.

Children's behaviour improves as a result of living with their adoptive parents and

through the support and advice the service provides to their families. This enables children to access community resources more successfully, as well as to form more positive relationships both within and outside the family. Consequently, children access a variety of community leisure activities such as swimming, horse riding, rugby, football and being in the Guides and Scouts. They also have opportunities to meet with other adopted children through a variety of social events arranged by the adoption service.

Access to leisure activities and adopted children and young people's social events enables children to become more socially confident. It also enables them to develop a strong sense of their own self-worth, identity, as well as aspirations for their future. Clearly, the quality of care provided by the children's adoptive parents is good. This ensures children's needs are effectively met and their life chances are improved.

Children are placed and remain in safe, secure and stable adoptive families. For example, there have been two disruptions in three years, which is below the national average. This demonstrates that considerable care is given to ensure children are well matched with adopters and this contributes further to a child's sense of stability and security.

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **good**.

The local authority receives a large number of adoption enquiries. Enquirers receive comprehensive verbal and written information. Adoption staff visit all those continuing to express an interest in adoption in order that further discussion can take place regarding adoption. This ensures that enquirers are very quickly able to make an informed decision about whether they wish to pursue their interest in adoption. All enquirers are invited to apply based on their own characteristics and the adoption service's knowledge of the needs of children requiring families or who may do so in the future.

The adoption service has good arrangements in place to prepare, assess and approve prospective adopters for its children. Preparation training is good and supported by further training opportunities. Adopters are extremely positive about this training, stating that the training was presented in a very professional manner. They also talked about the quality of the materials presented, stating that, 'it was really good as it viewed a child's life from many angles', and a number said, 'it was thought provoking'. All adopters stated that having adopters present at this training and talking about their experiences really 'brought the reality of being an adoptive parent to life'. Others greatly valued the 'interactive nature of the training', and commented on the variety of methods used, which they felt ensured 'all those present were able to fully participate in the training' and 'learn from the training'.

Adopters' assessments are thorough. Reports produced are analytical and of good quality. For example, the reports carefully consider adopters' attitudes, their

attachment styles, their suitability to care for children, as well as their competence to adopt.

During 2009, the formation of this newly created authority, staff shortages, together with the considerable number of prospective adopters' applications received in 2010, resulted in some applications taking longer than eight months to complete. However, this has been addressed and current applications are completed within timescales. Any exceptions to this are usually due to adopters' situations or their needs, such as health or employment difficulties.

The preparation training and the assessment process prepare people well to adopt. The process also helps them understand the benefits to a child in knowing about their birth families and adoption from an early age. Adopters stated that they greatly value the birth family information and the mementos and photographs that foster carers provide.

Some adopters' views on contact have also changed during this process, as they have come to recognise its importance in maintaining a child's heritage and developing their identity. Consequently, contact is being well promoted, with adopters prepared and committed to ensuring contact with birth families takes place, where this is in the child's best interests. Adopters and children are well prepared regarding safe contact. For example, the agency has done a great deal of work regarding social networking and how to manage this safely. Direct contact with siblings, where this is in children's best interests, is also very well supported.

Placing social workers also commented positively on the preparation training and assessment process and confirmed that adopters are very well prepared for their role as adoptive parents. They stated that this, together with effective matching, contributes to successful and stable adoptive placements.

The adoption panel takes its role seriously and is robust. This ensures that only applicants who have the right skills and abilities to be adoptive parents are recommended for approval. It comprises members with a good mix of personal and professional experiences. This ensures that a full discussion of all relevant aspects takes place, which is particularly effective when matches are being considered. The panel administration is very thorough and good quality panel minutes are provided. These minutes clearly document the panel's discussion, the reasons for conclusions reached and the panel recommendations.

The panel provides a comprehensive quality assurance feedback regarding every case considered, which is seen by the agency decision maker. The panel chairperson, together with the panel adviser provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to panel. These reports are of an extremely high quality and provide invaluable information regarding the local authority's childcare and adoption practice. This greatly assists the local authority in ensuring improvements within its service.

Decision making is also thorough, well documented and timely to ensure



transparency and to avoid delay. This is carried out at a senior level, which demonstrates the agency's commitment to adoption and facilitates management oversight of the quality and timeliness of the work, so that shortfalls are quickly identified and rectified.

The agency is committed to working with and supporting birth parents throughout the adoption process. It actively works to involve them in the decision making at reviews and ensures that they are aware of the content of the child permanence reports. Birth parents are asked to contribute their wishes and feelings to the process. A local voluntary adoption agency has been commissioned to provide independent support.

Family finding and matching are very well considered. Family finders are allocated at an early stage to prevent delay. This also enables them to have time to gain a good knowledge of a child's needs, including those related to faith, ability and ethnicity, to inform an appropriate match with adopters. This is formalised by a documented matching meeting, which not only ensures that identified needs can be met, but also provides a clear record of the decision making for the child in the future.

Prospective adopters are given information about the child to inform their decision making; however, this is not always comprehensive. Adopters are able to meet with other professionals, such as the adoption panel's medical adviser to discuss any specific medical needs of the child whom they may be considering adopting. This enables adopters to make an informed judgement about whether they can meet a child's needs and provide a home for them.

Child permanence reports are also one of the ways this information is provided. During the past 18 months, the quality of reports has considerably improved, as a result of additional training and latterly, support from the adoption specialist advisor. These reports are now written in a more appropriate style, are child-focused and contain the comments of birth parents and the child where possible. Child appreciation days are also used to give first-hand information to adopters and help them understand the child's history. Introductions are well planned and take into account the needs of the child and are well supported.

Adopters and children have good support, both before and after adoption, which helps families to provide a stable, positive and loving home to their adopted children. Requests for adoption support are responded to promptly. Staff are extremely committed and work hard to provide a quality service to meet the needs of adoptive families. In addition to individual work, a great deal of on-going support is provided through workshops, support groups, children's groups, social activities and events. These support services, such as the training provided, are invaluable, as they enable adopters to understand the impact of this on the development, well-being and behaviour of their child. It also supports adopters to understand the task of adoptive parenting and to become effective parents.

Social workers also provide support with education. Educational professionals are very committed to ensuring children are placed in the right school and given the right

support to help them access education in the best way to suit their abilities. Similarly, health professionals are committed and proactive in ensuring that health issues are followed up. This results in good outcomes for children.

Where the authority's children are placed with adopters in other parts of the country the authority makes effective partnerships to ensure the needs of children are met. This extremely high level of support is a key factor in keeping adoptive families together and preventing breakdowns or disruptions.

The adoption service ensures that contact plans are realistic, child-focused, and are considered at an early stage. Direct contact is supported where appropriate. Indirect contact is well managed. It is proactive and subject to regular review to ensure that issues are resolved at an early stage and that the agreed contact continues to meet the child's needs. Birth parents are offered and receive help to write letters to their children. This ensures contact is sustained and positive and helps children maintain a good sense of their heritage. The authority's letterbox is reviewed frequently to ensure that details are up to date and direct contact is well supported where it occurs. The authority commissions independent support for birth parents from a voluntary adoption agency.

Life story books and later life letters are provided to children in a timely way and are of high quality. They give a child a good understanding of the reasons for their adoption, both now and in the future. Adopters demonstrate a very open attitude to birth families and the importance of using this information with their children on a regular basis.

The agency provides birth records counselling and access to records for adult adoptees, in recognition of the life-long implications of adoption. There is a waiting list for this service, but people are prioritised according to need. To address the waiting list and ensure the current backlog of work is effectively dealt with, the service has recently appointed an assistant, who works with the designated staff member assigned to this work. Feedback from service users is extremely positive, with a very large majority of those using the service stating that it was 'excellent'. This is clearly demonstrated by the comments made, for example, 'the worker gave very careful consideration to my views and needs', 'the worker showed me a great deal of care and sensitivity', and, 'the service provided could not have been better'.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The working practices of this adoption service help promote children's safety and well-being. The recruitment of people working for the adoption service and of prospective adopters is thorough, and careful checking is carried out to ensure their suitability. This helps protect children. Prospective adopters' homes are also assessed to ensure they provide physical safety.

Prospective adopters' preparation training ensures prospective adopters understand

how children's previous experiences, including abusive ones, impact on their behaviour. This work is extremely important as it increases their understanding of the individual needs of any child placed with them. It also ensures that adopters have a good understanding of the long-term impact of any previous abuse that their child has experienced and the specific safeguarding issues that may be applicable to their child. The service, through their support packages, also ensures that the adopters are able to manage this effectively.

Adopters and children receive support and advice on safety matters. For example, adopters are supported to adopt safe caring practices, and where necessary, risk assessments are put in place to protect children. Work is also undertaken with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand adoption and increase their ability to support the adoptive placement. Training is provided on the use of the internet and the dangers that can arise from social networking and other social media. The service also works effectively with other professionals, for example, schools, which promotes children's safety.

Children have various written information, which is produced in a child-friendly format. This information gives them details of a variety of people they can talk to if they have any worries or concerns. They receive regular visits from their own social worker and the adoption social worker, who, although there to support the adoptive parents, also has a clear focus on the child's welfare and safety. This ensures there are adults who are accessible and to whom they can talk.

Adoption staff clearly recognise and address any concerns which may develop into a more serious issue by providing support, and they work closely with the child's social worker. Safeguarding is very much at the forefront of their practice and any issues of concern are discussed in supervision. Staff practice is also developed through discussions in team meetings and learning from serious case reviews. This emphasis and commitment to safeguarding ensures staff are up to date with current issues and know how to respond if there are concerns or allegations.

The adoption service also works closely with other parts of the local authority, including safeguarding services and the Local Authority Designated Officer, in situations in which concerns arise or allegations are made. This ensures that the correct action is taken to protect children.

Good work is carried out with adults affected by adoption. Considerable care and thought are given to birth records counselling, and it is provided in a sensitive manner. Adoptees and other adults using the service are supported to understand the potential impact a reunion may have on them, their family and the birth relative being contacted. This ensures that the work is carried out sensitively, with particular regard being given to the safety, welfare and wishes of all involved.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **good**.

Recruitment of adopters is good. It is well planned and reflects local, regional and national trends. The chief officer and the senior management team demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. Considerable work has been done to ensure it is always appropriately considered as one of a range of options for permanency. The co-location of the adoption and childcare teams in a shared building, together with the appointment of a specialist adoption advisor who works with childcare staff, have greatly assisted this process. Consequently, children are being identified at an early stage for adoption and good decision-making processes ensure they are being placed in a timely way. An adoption plan is in place for all children, where it is appropriate.

Over the last year, the authority in contrast to a number of its statistical neighbours has increased the ratio of children who leave care through adoption. It has also reduced the length of time children remain within the 'looked after' system prior to their adoption.

Robust recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, together with the qualitative nature of the matching process, ensure children benefit from a stable home. This is clearly reflected in the service's low disruption rates, which are below the national average.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide give comprehensive and clear information to anyone using the service so they know what to expect. The children's guide is very child-friendly, gives good information and is available in alternative formats so that children of different abilities can also access the information.

The service enjoys good, effective relationships with its partner agencies, including other local authorities in the adoption consortium. These effective working relationships benefit children waiting to be adopted, as they often result in an adoptive placement being found for them. They also ensure that should families experience any difficulties, effective support can be quickly provided.

There are a number of quality assurance processes to improve outcomes for children. For example, the service has recently introduced a tracking tool to monitor the progress of care plans, a process for tracking and accountability, which identifies barriers to progress in terms of permanence plans for children, and a tracking tool to monitor timescales of the prospective adopters' journey to approval and placement. Leaders and managers carefully monitor the performance. The local authority takes its corporate parenting role seriously, with regular informative reports regarding the adoption service being produced and presented to the executive side of the local authority.

Systems are in place for the on-going auditing and monitoring of the service. However, these are not always sufficiently robust, as not all records are accurate; for example, one child's ethnicity was incorrect and in another there was incomplete information regarding a child's behaviour.

The service seeks feedback from adopters, children, adult adoptees and stakeholders. Feedback obtained is used to inform adoption practice.

The service is currently managed by an interim manager who is well qualified and extremely experienced and skilled in adoption. Workers in the adoption team are also well trained, qualified and experienced. The team has developed close working relationships with partner agencies and readily shares or incorporates examples of good practice in the service. The team enjoys close and supportive working relationships, which enhances the effectiveness of their work. Staff have a strong focus on the importance of adoption and are very reflective in their practice. Consequently, the team learns from any problems it encounters in its work as well as from its successes, which helps it to continue to improve its practice further. Administrative staff are knowledgeable, professional and efficient. Good administrative support is provided and contributes to the effectiveness of the adoption service.

The premises are accessible and secure. They are appropriate for the purpose and have rooms available for meetings, training, and staff supervision. Records are stored with appropriate security and accessibility, both electronically and in hard copy. There is a business continuity plan, which addresses the safeguarding and back-up of records, as well as the provision of alternative premises. This ensures that in the event of a crisis, disruption to the service is minimised.

Two recommendations were made following the previous inspection of the service, which related to improving adopters' health and safety checks and the children's guide. These have been appropriately addressed to ensure children have all the necessary information regarding adoption and are kept safe.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.