

Northamptonshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC056764
Inspection date	22/03/2013
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rosemary Dancer
Type of inspection	Full

Setting address	Norborough House, Coverack Close, Northampton, Northamptonshire, NN4 8PQ
Telephone number	01604 432550
Email	sorchard@northamptonshire.gov.uk
Registered person	Northamptonshire County Council
Registered manager	Steven Thomas Orchard
Responsible individual	Satinder Gautam
Date of last inspection	01/03/2012

© Crown copyright 2013

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption agency which undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption, including step-parent and inter-country adoption. These duties include: placing children who have adoption as a care plan with suitable adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; providing support to adoptive families both pre and post approval; and providing a service to adopted people and their birth relatives in relation to access to records, intermediary services and birth records counselling. Birth parents are offered counselling and support through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved 39 adoptive families in the year ending March 2012. This figure has increased to 48 in this current year. It has placed 71 children for adoption between 1 April 2012 and this inspection. At the time of this inspection, 61 children were approved and waiting for an adoptive placement. Of these, seven are matched and waiting to be placed, 13 have panel dates booked for matching and a further eight have active links.

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 **inadequate**.

This agency was judged as inadequate when it was inspected in March 2012. Although there is evidence of some improvement in key areas, and examples of good practice, the judgement overall remains as inadequate as improvements are not sufficiently established to show sustained change.

The main area of weakness is the delay in identifying children for whom adoption is the appropriate plan at an early enough stage in their care history. This diminishes children's chances of achieving positive outcomes. There is ineffective early care planning which contributes to delays for children at all stages. A significant number of children (34%) are not placed for adoption within 12 months of the agency decision to find an adoptive family. Family finding has not been effective or rigorous

in preventing delay.

The agency uses innovative ways of family finding and is open to try new approaches to speed up the placement of children with families who can meet their needs. Once an appropriate family is found, the placements are stable and secure, which leads to positive outcomes for those children. The pre-adoption order disruption rate is very low at 1.4% compared to national averages of approximately 10%. This shows that assessments are effective in identifying adoptive parents who are resilient and have the capacity to meet the challenges of adoptive parenting with success. The preparation of adoptive families is good; adopters say it was 'very good' and 'excellent'. They express a lot of positive comments about their social workers: 'Throughout our approval, matching and post-adoption journey our own social worker has been excellent – professional, informative, proactive. We couldn't recommend her highly enough.' However, there is delay in approving adoptive families, with just under half being approved within eight months of application. Families are generally well supported when they are in crisis, and this is an improving picture. There is an impressive range of training available which can be accessed both before and after approval.

The staff are dedicated, committed, enthusiastic and hardworking. Many are well supported but this is not consistent across all the teams. Leaders and managers at senior level have not been sufficiently engaged in driving forward improvements in the service, and this tier of management has been subject to many changes in the last year. A large number of recommendations have been made to improve practice. These relate to: timescales for adopters and children; ascertaining the wishes of children more effectively; support to birth parents; the timeliness and quality of life story books and later life letters; some documentary improvements; more consistent support for staff; and improved monitoring to bring about change.

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 the following timescales are adhered to unless it is not in the child's best interests: the child's need for a permanent home should be addressed and a permanence plan made at the four month review; the adoption panel (now decision maker) should receive all necessary information from the agency within six weeks of the completion of the child's permanence report; and the adoption panel's recommendation (now agency decision) should be made within two months of a review where adoption has been identified as the permanence plan (Adoption Guidance Chapter 2 paragraph 2)
- 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 that the child's wishes and feelings are ascertained regarding: the

possibility of placement with a new family and the adoption; religious and cultural upbringing; and contact with the parent, guardian or other relative. These views should be recorded (Breach of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 regulation 13 (1)(c) (i-iii) and Adoption Guidance Chapter 2, paragraph 20)

- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure that the child's details are referred to the Adoption Register when no locally identified match is being actively 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 that where timescales have not been met, the panel records the reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting (NMS 17.9)
- ensure that birth parents are given access to, and are actively encouraged to use, a support worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The support worker is independent of the child's social worker (NMS 12.3)
- ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: at the latest by the second statutory review of the child's placement with the prospective adopters; and the completed life story book at the latest within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure the prospective adopters receive the later life letter within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.8)
- ensure the life story book is written in a simple and age-appropriate style. The explanation of why the child is adopted should not include explicit or distressing details (Adoption Guidance Chapter 5 paragraph 48)
- ensure the children's guide to adoption includes how they can contact their independent reviewing officer (NMS 18.5)
- ensure that all people working in or for the purposes of the agency, and persons applying to be included on the central list, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking up their duties. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 21.1)
- ensure an effective strategy to recruit and assess prospective adopters who can meet the needs of those children for whom adoption is the plan is implemented. The agency monitors and evaluates the success of the strategy (NMS 10.1)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency (NMS 25.1)
- ensure the manager of the agency has the appropriate amount of relevant and recent experience in adoption (NMS 19.2)
- ensure a written record is kept detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)

- ensure all staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. (NMS 24.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **inadequate**.

Although some children experience adequate and good outcomes, this is not consistently assured for all children, and outcomes for some are therefore inadequate. For many children, their journey to adoption is characterised by delay, due to a less than systematic approach to care planning and decision making. These delays occur at all stages of the adoption journey, thereby diminishing the likelihood of positive outcomes as children continue to experience and be exposed to damage and harm.

The permanence decision is not always made at the time of the second review, and this is further compounded by delays in progressing this decision. There are a number of occasions when many weeks have elapsed before the review decision was put before the adoption panel, and since September the agency decision maker, for consideration. Once the agency decision to place a child for adoption has been made, 66% of children this year were placed within 12 months of that decision. That means that a third of children with adoption as a plan were not placed within 12 months. There are also delays in progressing the match because the adoption panel do not receive the details promptly. A recent match was delayed by four months, and a number of current proposed matches are not being put before the panel until April or May. This is a further unacceptable delay for children who have already been delayed in their permanency plans.

Children's wishes and feelings regarding their adoption plan are not consistently ascertained or recorded in the child permanence report. For example, only the perceived wishes of a five-year-old child were recorded in one instance, rather than the actual wishes.

Children are prepared effectively for their adoptive placements. Children's social workers undertake some good and innovative work to ensure children understand what is happening to them and therefore settle more easily. The recent reorganisation of the children's teams is a positive move towards reducing the delay that previously occurred when the child's case was transferred to another team and therefore another social worker. This resulted in a delay in the child's preparation because the new social worker needed to get to know the child before effective preparation could take place.

Once children are placed with their adoptive families they experience positive outcomes. They settle well, make good relationships with their adopters and make good progress in many areas of their lives. For example, their behaviour improves, their health needs are met, they have good attendance at school, make positive friendships and take part in usual childhood leisure activities, such as swimming and

other sports. They also maintain good contact with siblings if they are not placed with them, and there are many examples of adopters engaging in direct contact with other adoptive families to promote sibling contact. This enables children to maintain and develop their relationships with some members of their birth family and thus have a better understanding of their heritage.

Quality of service

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

The quality of the service is variable. There are examples of good practice with children, adopters and adults involved with the service, including some very positive feedback from those service users about the professionalism of staff. However, an adequate quality of service is currently not assured, and there is evidence of some poor practice and dissatisfaction with the service from adopters, including comments about delays in the assessment of adopters, unanswered emails, and lack of responsiveness in relation to post-adoption support.

When enquirers first contact Northamptonshire, they receive a timely response. They are sent written information and are invited to attend an information session within the appropriate timescales. This part of the process works well and enquirers feel they receive good and helpful information to enable them to decide whether to make an application. However, some applicants experience delay in being invited to preparation training and being allocated a social worker to undertake their assessment. Only a minority of adopters (48%) were approved within eight months of their application this year. Adopters are, however, positive about their experience of preparation and assessment, although not the delay. They comment that the preparation training is particularly useful in helping them understand the needs of the children. The prospective adopters' reports cover all the required aspects, contributing to a comprehensive assessment, although the reports vary in their level of analysis.

The child permanence reports have improved considerably since the previous inspection and are now subject to more rigorous quality assurance to make them fit for purpose. They are still variable in quality and not all these reports reflect the views of the child. This continues to be work in progress, to ensure that these vital documents provide good information for adopters to make an informed matching decision and for the child in the future when they access their records.

Family finding for children is not carried out with sufficient urgency, which contributes to the delay in placing children described earlier. For example, children's names have not been placed on the Adoption Register as early as possible when there is no identified match. There is no named family finder to progress matching, and this results in less accountability and ownership of this process. These shortfalls have been partly recognised and addressed by allocating a named worker to progress the plans for children with more complex needs. The agency uses some innovative ways of finding families. For example, the Parents for Children events are effective in identifying suitable matches, although as some of the matches are made

with people who are not yet approved adopters, they cannot be progressed immediately. Activity days have also been used recently and resulted in matching. This is an area which must be strengthened to improve on the timescales for placing children. Matching considerations are well reflected in the adoption placement reports to show that children's needs have been identified and the adopters' capacity to meet those needs is addressed. This includes birth parents' expressed wishes in relation to religion and culture. Information is shared appropriately and adopters meet with foster carers, the medical adviser and other relevant people in the child's life to give them up-to-date information about the child so they can make an informed decision about their ability to meet the child's needs.

The adoption panel provides an independent additional layer of quality assurance. It provides a good analysis of the work of the agency twice a year. The panel minutes, although thorough, do not report when timescales are not met and the reasons for this, so the children's and adopters' records do not contain a written explanation of any delays experienced. Panel processes are efficient and effective, although there does appear to be some delay in considering matches, some of which may be due to capacity. Decision making is robust and timely and is based on a thorough consideration of all the relevant reports and the adoption panel final minutes.

An area of weakness is the agency's engagement with birth parents. There is a service level agreement with a local voluntary adoption agency to provide counselling and support. However, the take-up of this service is very low and the agency has not pro-actively addressed the reasons for this or sought ways of improving on it. Birth parents who have experienced this service are positive about it, describing the counsellor as 'lovely, really good, and gave good advice'.

Later life letters and life story books were identified as serious shortfalls at the previous inspection. This has improved but still remains an area of weakness. There is still delay in later life letters and life story books being given to children and adopters within timescales, depriving children and adopters of important information so that they can understand their situation. Some life story books are not written in an appropriately child-focused way and contain too much detailed information. Although a team has been recently established to complete life story books, this means that the book is not completed as a result of the life story work undertaken with the child, and is therefore less meaningful.

Support both after placement and after adoption is generally responsive and effective, although there were a number of negative comments about post-adoption support which, in the main, reflected less recent experiences. A number of adopters were extremely positive about their current experiences, describing it as 'brilliant', 'helpful', 'responsive' and 'couldn't do enough'. The agency offers a variety of support services including a number of support groups, an impressive range of training, therapy, nurture groups and direct work with children, all of which are useful tools to support families and prevent breakdowns. There is some delay in access to the child and adolescent mental health service; however, it offers regular consultation sessions to adoptive families, which in part mitigate the delay. The role of the adoption support services adviser (ASSA) has been strengthened since the last

inspection in response to criticisms about shortfalls in accessing support particularly when children are placed out of county. The changes are positive but not fully embedded, and there are plans to strengthen this role further to make it more effective. This includes making the ASSA a known point of contact for adopters and also involved in evaluating the service.

Feedback from adopted adults and their birth families is positive. The waiting list is reducing and they report that they receive a sensitive and supportive service. One service user commented: 'I cannot fault it, really supportive, really good.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children feel safe and are safe with their adoptive families. Adopters are thoroughly assessed to ensure that they are not only suitable people to care for children but understand and have the resilience and capacity to meet the additional needs of adoptive children. There is a clear focus on enabling applicants to understand how children's previous experiences of neglect and abuse can impact on their future behaviour. Adopters were very positive about this aspect of their preparation training and demonstrated a good awareness of these issues. They are further supported by additional training and accessible information on issues such as cyber-bullying and e-safety so they can protect their children from those risks.

Children's well-being and safety are further assured by regular visits from their own social worker and their adoptive parents' social worker. They have written information in the children's guide about how to access various avenues of support, although it does not currently include how to access their independent reviewing officer, who provides an additional independent oversight.

Staff and members of the central list, are recruited appropriately, and although telephone verification of references is made, this is not recorded. This does not provide a robust audit trail of evidence that this has been completed in all cases to fully assure someone's suitability. Staff have access to policies, procedures and training to ensure they know how to respond appropriately to any safeguarding allegations. Additionally, social workers who work with adults demonstrate a thorough understanding of the issues of historical abuse and how these may impact on children, and the importance of safeguarding the welfare of all adults when renewed contact is made through intermediary services.

Leadership and management

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

A significant weakness is the delay in identifying children who will benefit from an adoptive placement. There is delay in identifying a permanence plan within appropriate timescales, which is further compounded by delays in decision making

once it has been identified as the appropriate plan. Ineffective parallel planning further contributes to delays. The agency is starting to look at concurrency and fostering to adopt to improve on this, but this is in the very early stages of consideration.

The proportion of looked after children who leave care through adoption is comparable, at 12%, with national figures and statistical neighbours. However, in the last year, very few disabled children have been part of this group. Only one disabled child was part of the cohort of 71 children who were adopted, suggesting that adoption is not consistently considered for all children regardless of their individual characteristics.

There is a written recruitment strategy designed to ensure enough adopters are approved for the children waiting. However, this is not sufficiently detailed and does not comprehensively address the groups which are being targeted. Despite this, the agency has increased the numbers of adopter approvals in the last year by 40%, although there are still a large number of children waiting for an adoptive family.

The agency has a number of quality assurance processes. The agency keeps the executive side of the council informed about its work through a detailed and factual report which is written every six months. Adopters and children are asked for feedback at some stages of their involvement but not all. Case file audits and supervision also feed into quality assurance. However, these mechanisms for monitoring and controlling the work of the agency have not been systematic, strategic or effective in minimising delays and improving outcomes.

The last inspection identified a number of areas of weakness. Most of the recommendations from that inspection have been either met or are in the process of being addressed, although some are still work in progress and not fully embedded to be able to evaluate the effectiveness in improving outcomes for children. As a result, some have been repeated in this inspection. These relate to timescales, life story books, later life letters and the recruitment strategy.

Social workers are dedicated, committed and hardworking. The social workers in the adoption and post-adoption teams are appropriately skilled, qualified, knowledgeable and experienced. However, the nominated manager does not have the required amount of direct experience in adoption work, although the team managers do have this level of experience. Social workers in the adoption team benefit from good managerial support, regular supervision and access to training so they keep up to date with developments. However, the supervision records do not reflect the time and length of the supervision and are not consistently signed by both parties. Support, supervision and training are less consistent for social workers in the children's teams. As some of these social workers are undertaking roles and responsibilities which are relatively new to them due to the reorganisation of the service, this is of particular concern in assuring their levels of competence. However, the children's social workers are very positive about the support they receive from the adoption team social workers and managers, who are described as 'approachable, helpful and very knowledgeable'.

The agency has seen a number of changes at senior management level during the past year. No-one at senior management level appears to have taken responsibility for effective monitoring, driving the adoption service forward and bringing about any significant improvement, particularly in relation to timescales for children. A new senior management team is now in place, all of whom are very recently appointed. Senior managers express a desire to bring about change and improve outcomes for children.

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 the inspection of local authority adoption agencies.