

Leicester City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Suzanne Young
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Date of last inspection	24/09/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption agency which undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents; the matching and placing of children whose plan is for adoption; and a range of adoption support services. This includes services to birth parents, adoptive families and adopted adults but does not usually include birth relative-initiated contact or intermediary services. Anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas is directed to a voluntary adoption agency, with which there is a service level agreement.

The agency had 34 approved adoptive families in the year ending March 2013. It placed 38 children for adoption in the same year. At the time of the inspection, there were 11 children who had not been linked or matched with an adoptive family.

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 an adoption agency which provides a good and effective service to children, adopters and other service users. Until September 2011, the adoption service was provided through a joint arrangement with two neighbouring local authorities. Therefore, the agency has been developing its own systems and procedures over the last 21 months and has demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment in embracing the challenges which the disaggregation presented.

Outcomes for children are good and they live in safe and secure adoptive placements. Children do not generally experience delay in decision making, planning or placement. Key indicators in the adoption scorecard show Leicester City Council to be either in line with, or above, national comparators in terms of the proportion of children placed for adoption, timeliness and placement stability. For example, over 96% of children were placed within 12 months of the agency decision to place for adoption and there has been only one placement disruption in the last year.

Strengths of the service include well-developed and effective partnership working, both within the authority and with partner agencies. This results in children and families being well supported and having their needs appropriately assessed and met, both before an adoption order is made and afterwards. Leaders and managers demonstrate significant commitment to improving the service and have allocated additional resources to areas where they have identified weaknesses. Social workers demonstrate a good level of knowledge, skills and experience to enable them to deliver an effective service which meets the needs of children, families and adult service users. Those who experience the service express a good level of satisfaction, making comments like, 'my social worker is brilliant; I cannot speak highly enough of her.'

This is a child-focused service which places a strong emphasis on engaging children and young people in their own plans and also the development of the service. There is generally a good quality of work, although areas for development have been identified in relation to the timeliness of life story books, later life letters and the take-up of independent support for birth parents.

Tracking and monitoring are well developed within the authority, but a further area of development is more formal analysis by the adoption panel of the timeliness and quality of work of the agency; and more rigorous recording of the decision-making process. Additionally, the children's guide, although child-friendly and accessible, does not contain all the necessary information.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- encourage birth parents to use the independent support which is available (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopter 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 that the later life letter is given to the prospective adopters within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.8)
- ensure that the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of the reports being presented to panel. This includes whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement (NMS 17.2)

- ensure that the agency decision maker follows the approach outlined in the Statutory Guidance when making a decision (Statutory Guidance paragraph 1.62)
- ensure that the children's guide contains information on how a child can find out their rights, how they can contact their independent reviewing officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted, if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate. (NMS 18.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children experience good outcomes as a result of being placed for adoption. They are well prepared at a level and pace commensurate with their age and understanding, which enables them to settle well and make good progress. Further specialist support to prepare a child to move on can be accessed, if a child requires this due to particular complexities in their situation. This enables the proposed adoptive placement to have every chance of success and provide a stable family for the child. Adopters contribute to the preparation for placement with them by providing family books so that children have a pictorial representation of the family and the home prior to introductions. Children's wishes and feelings are ascertained, recorded and taken into account, although may not always be acted upon if it is in the child's best interests not to do so.

Children are placed for adoption promptly, which also contributes to positive outcomes. Only one child (3.7% of the cohort) was not placed within 12 months of the agency decision to place for adoption. This promptness is not at the expense of appropriate placements, or children not being considered for adoption due to complex needs. The disruption rate is low, with only one placement disrupting in the last year, and none the year before. Likewise, the agency places sibling groups, disabled children and older children where adoption is the right plan for them. Siblings are usually placed together when this is the plan, but if this cannot be achieved, their family links and sense of identity and heritage are maintained through safe and appropriate direct or indirect contact arrangements.

Children make good progress in all aspects of their development, as their needs have been fully assessed. They have been placed with adopters who can meet those needs. Children's social workers commented that children were 'thriving', 'blossoming' and 'coming on in leaps and bounds'. Adopters were also able to identify significant improvements in areas such as speech, reading and reaching milestones which they previously had not met.

Children are safe and secure in their adoptive families and as a result they attach well and develop positive relationships with their adoptive parents and the wider family network. An independent reviewing officer commented that she had observed 'a fabulous interaction between the child and adoptive mum, which demonstrated a very secure attachment'. She also commented that the child was 'happy, active and loved' and was making 'great progress'. Children experience everything which is

expected from family life, such as attending pre-school or school provision, being registered with universal health services, and engaging in leisure activities such as swimming, music and toddler groups, as appropriate.

Young people who are receiving adoption support benefit greatly from this service. They have positive aspirations for themselves and are actively involved in developments to improve outcomes for other children who are being adopted, demonstrating a significant level of maturity, awareness, understanding and sense of responsibility.

Quality of service

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

Adopters, children and adult service users are generally very positive about the service and express a good level of satisfaction. For example, adopters have commented about their social worker being 'brilliant' and another that 'she could not have been more supportive'. Young people are also positive about the social workers they have contact with in the post adoption service, and adult service users are effusive in their praise.

There is a formalised and effective approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. The council's website gives a significant amount of very useful information for anyone wishing to know more about adoption, which is further enhanced by regular information evenings and initial visits. The initial part of this information-giving process is generally carried out in a timely way. The preparation training, which has increased in frequency as a response to delay, is thorough and adopters view it positively, finding it informative and useful. The assessments are thorough and result in adopters who are equipped with the necessary understanding and skills to be successful adoptive parents. The majority of prospective adopters are approved within eight months of their application; however, in almost all of the situations where this has not been the case, the reasons are adopter-led, such as health issues or areas which have come to light where further exploration is necessary. The agency has also addressed delay in approval through commissioning an external agency to undertake some assessments.

The adoption panel is diverse and comprises members with a range of personal and professional experience of adoption. Panel members have access to a wide range of good training to further enhance their skills and knowledge. It meets regularly and has increased the frequency to meet the increasing demands due to more children being placed and more adopters being approved. It provides an effective quality assurance function when assessing individual cases but the six-monthly reports to the agency are not analytical or thorough in identifying trends, thereby diminishing their effectiveness as a way for the agency to monitor the general quality and timeliness of its work. Decision making, although well considered and timely, is not recorded in sufficient detail to demonstrate the basis and rationale for the decision.

The agency engages with birth parents where possible and their views are clearly

recorded in the child permanence reports. Birth parents give a presentation to applicants on the preparation course, which is very effective in helping adopters appreciate the importance of the child's birth family and engage with contact arrangements positively. There is a service to provide support to birth parents which is independent of the child's social worker. Where this has been used, it has been very effective in helping birth parents understand what is happening and enabling them to provide a very positive contribution to their child's heritage through giving information and memorabilia. However, the take-up of this service is very low and more active encouragement to use the service is recommended, as it does have very positive outcomes when it is accessed.

Family finding and matching are well considered and timely. Most children are placed with in-house adopters, although the agency uses a variety of means to find adopters from elsewhere if it cannot find appropriate families within its own resources. For example, it advertises children nationally in appropriate publications, it uses activity days, and children's names are always placed on the National Adoption Register. Child permanence reports provide the basis for the information needed for good matching. These are variable in quality but are subject to rigorous quality assurance mechanisms to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Adopters are given full information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they can meet the needs of the children for whom they are being considered. Children's needs, including those relating to race, religion and culture, are assessed well and fully considered in the matching process. Where there are identified gaps in the proposed adopters' capacities, these are met in other ways. Introductions are well planned, and where additional time or resources are needed due to a child's more complex situation they are undertaken in an individualised way and at the child's pace. This results in placements which last.

The quality of life story books has improved due to regular training, which is provided by the post adoption team. There are examples of good life story books and later life letters which can be readily accessed by the workers preparing these important documents so they have an appropriate baseline from which to operate. However, adopters do not always receive later life letters or life story books in a timely way. Although this is improving, it remains an area for development.

Adoption support is a strength of the service, both before and after the adoption order is made. It is generally prompt and effective and the agency has also shown flexibility in not ending support when it is legally not obliged to carry on. There is a range of support available. This includes regular social events for adopters with younger children to provide a forum for informal discussion, contact with the service and an opportunity for adopted children to meet and play together. There is good access to therapeutic parenting training and other resources, a bi-annual informative newsletter and an annual social event. There are excellent examples of very effective direct work with children, and training for schools in understanding the implications of adoption for the children they teach. A recent development is the young people's forum for adopted young people over the age of 13. In addition to providing a social forum the young people are also engaged in developing a leaflet and DVD to further

inform the work of the agency based on their experiences and areas which they feel can be improved to benefit children in the future.

In addition to the post adoption workers, the team has access to the multidisciplinary children and families support team who can provide specific therapeutic approaches and groups to address specific issues such as identity or self-harm. There is excellent joint working between the two teams if both are involved, to ensure the work is carried out consistently. Adopters who have used the service comment that workers go 'above and beyond', and feel it has been instrumental in enabling them to carry on at times.

There are good arrangements for contact, both indirect and direct. The letterbox has been improved by ensuring all the exchanges are now scanned so there is a separate record in case any letters are destroyed or lost. There is a proactive reminder system for adopters, and birth parents are offered help with letter writing if they need it. This ensures that contact is sustained and positive, and children maintain a good sense of their heritage. The letterbox has recently been reviewed to ensure it continues to meet children's needs.

Birth records counselling and access to information for adopted adults are services which are appreciated by the recipients, who express a high level of satisfaction. The service is carried out with sensitivity and there is currently no waiting list. For example, one person commented, 'I have nothing but praise for the whole thing', and another said, 'the social worker was lovely, caring, easy to talk to, efficient, and very thoughtful.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are safe and secure in their adoptive families. This is assured in a number of ways, for example, through the robust preparation and assessment of adopters which includes all the necessary checks on their suitability and a strong focus on safeguarding, including internet safety. Likewise, the procedures for the recruitment and vetting of staff are robust. Staff are appropriately qualified and checks on their suitability are carried out in line with the most up-to-date guidance.

Adopters demonstrate a strong awareness of the impact of abuse and neglect on children's behaviour so they are equipped with the necessary and appropriate strategies to parent adoptive children. This is underpinned by additional training on attachment provided by a renowned expert in this field.

Children are further protected by regular visits from their social worker, the adoption social worker and the statutory reviews of their placements which occur in a timely way. These provide an additional layer of independent scrutiny on the progress of the placement, to ensure children's needs are being well met and they are happy and safe.

There have been no allegations but staff demonstrate a good knowledge and understanding of safeguarding procedures and what to do if they have concerns about a child's safety. Comprehensive written procedures which also address historical abuse are readily available to ensure staff can access the relevant guidance to support their practice.

The staff who work with adults are similarly confident and competent in their knowledge and awareness of safeguarding, both for adults and children. Birth records counselling and access to information are carried out with sensitivity and with due regard to any safety or welfare issues relating to all parties.

Leadership and management

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

Adoption is embedded well into the authority's care planning arrangements for children and is considered for all, regardless of any complexities which may make them harder to place. The proportion of older children adopted is higher than the average for England, and the agency has also placed a number of disabled children for adoption. The proportion of children leaving care through adoption is in line with national comparators at 12% for the preceding three years, but increasing.

The timeliness for identifying children who will benefit from an adoptive placement is good. There is effective parallel planning, which includes early referral to the adoption team to commence work on that plan, even when it has not been confirmed as the final plan, to prevent delay. Most children have an agency decision within eight weeks of the review decision, and for those who do not, the delay is not significant and does not impact on the overall timescales as the time between entry to care to adoption is in line with national comparators and an improving figure. There are good tracking systems to ensure that children do not drift. The disruption rate is lower than the national average, having only one placement breakdown in the last year, which contributes significantly to placement stability and good outcomes.

Recruitment of adopters is targeted to meet the needs of the children waiting. Adopters are matched promptly to children, and children are mainly placed with in-house adopters and in a timely way, indicating the right adopters are being approved. There is a clear strategy which is regularly reviewed for its effectiveness. Most recruitment is carried out alongside recruitment of foster carers and includes targeting community and faith groups. The adoption team is very clear about the needs of the children it needs to place when talking to those enquiring about adoption.

The agency is keen to improve and develop its service. It has positively addressed the recommendations arising for the previous inspection to provide a more robust service. It can also demonstrate that it learns from complaints and disruptions. For example, it has provided further training on complaints to the social workers when it identified this was an area for improvement. It also seeks feedback from adopters and uses that positively. Of particular note is the development of the young people's

forum which was a result of the adoption team acknowledging this was a shortfall and an area which could be improved. It proactively canvassed young people to see if they would be interested and this has resulted in a small but vibrant group of adopted young people who are enthusiastic about contributing to the development of the service.

There are good relationships with partner agencies, such as education and the child and adolescent mental health service to promote children's development and well-being. There is also excellent co-working with other parts of the authority such as the children and families support team.

Leaders and managers are committed to the adoption service and ambitious for its improvement. There is regular reporting to the executive so it is fully informed about all aspects of its operation. As a result of identifying some shortfalls, additional staffing resources have been allocated to the service.

The adoption team is very positive, committed and has embraced the significant changes which occurred when the joint arrangement with two neighbouring authorities came to an end in September 2011. It is a strong team and staff are well supported by the managers and each other to provide an effective service. Staff are appropriately qualified and experienced and have regular training to further their skills and knowledge. They are supported through regular and effective supervision which enables them to reflect on and develop their practice. Managers are described as approachable, well informed and knowledgeable which is instrumental in enhancing staff confidence and effectiveness for the benefit of people who use the service.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are useful and accurate documents which are available for anyone to access through the website, should they wish to know what they can expect from the service. These can be translated into other languages, as Leicester is a particularly diverse city. However, although the children's guide is very child friendly and helpful, it does not contain all the required information to enable a child to contact people independent of the service. As children receive this information in other ways when they become looked after, it does not impact negatively on them, but it is more helpful for it to be in one, easily accessible document.

The records are clear and easily accessible and will contribute to a child's understanding of their history, should they choose to access them at a later date.

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.