

Coventry City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Coventry City Council provides a comprehensive adoption and post adoption service to people affected by adoption. This includes children for whom adoption is the plan, birth parents and relatives, prospective and approved adoptive parents and adopted adults.

The social workers carrying out adoption work are based in the centre of Coventry and work closely with each other and with the children's teams to progress adoption plans for children.

The service recruits, prepares, assesses, supports and provides welfare supervision to domestic adoptive families. Inter-country adopters are referred to a specialist agency for their preparation and assessment; they then come back to the adoption service for support should they require this. The family-finding social workers work closely with children's social workers to identify potential matches for looked after children. The assessing and support social workers work closely together to identify adopters who may be able to meet a specific child's needs.

The service provides support and counselling for birth parents, including independent support through a service level agreement with a voluntary organisation, and provides a general adoption support service. The agency also works with adopted adults and birth relatives of adopted adults to provide birth records counselling and an intermediary service. This includes a service provided via service level agreements with adoption support agencies.

The agency made arrangements for 40 children to be adopted in the year 2012-2013. As of 31 March 2013, 96 children had a plan for adoption. There were 84 approved adopters.

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 **adequate**.

This local authority adoption service is providing an adequate service overall. The authority has made improvements in its services to children and adopters in a number of ways over the past year. The implementation of a fundamental service review has led to improvements in the cohesiveness between the children's social workers and adoption social workers and improvements in the identification of children who may require an adoptive placement. This is leading to an improving picture when considering the timescales for children.

The data in a couple of areas, such as the point at which the reviews decide on a plan for adoption, were not always clear. This is an issue that is intended to be addressed through the further development of data reporting, and migrating record keeping into a central system.

Adoptive families are well prepared, assessed and supported to meet the needs of the children placed with them; overall, adopters were complimentary about the social workers. The service is further developing its recruitment strategy to improve the profile of adopters who are currently mainly White.

Direct work with children is carried out so that they understand what is happening to them. Social workers pointed out that, for some, this work has to be carried out very slowly and at the child's pace, and this means a child-centred approach is taken to this work.

The quality of assessment reports in respect of children and adopters are variable, but in the main they provide enough information on which to base recommendations and decisions.

During the period since the last inspection, leaders have recognised that there were emerging issues that were impacting on the work carried out. This, along with intervention by the Department for Education last year, led to an action plan that is being implemented. There was a fundamental service review and this has led to the teams being restructured to provide a team around the child. The leadership team appointed two interim senior managers to oversee the development work planned, and a number of improvements have been made; some developments are yet to be implemented and others need to become embedded over the coming months.

A number of shortfalls have been identified; the majority of these had been identified by the service and plans are in place to address these. They relate to: life story books for children; the system for contact arrangements; the content of the adoption panel minutes; the adoption panel's quality assurance role; the notification system for birth parents; the arrangements for health services; monitoring arrangements in some areas of the work; the content of staff recruitment files; developing a guide for children about support services; developing the adopter recruitment strategy further; and supplying to Ofsted a copy of the most recent Statement of Purpose.

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 life story book is given to the child and prospective adopter 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 ten working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure the agency helps individuals comply with the agreed contact arrangements; with specific reference to ensuring an effective and efficient system is developed (NMS 8.4)
- develop a stronger focus, within the recruitment strategy, on the recruitment of adopters, and target people from a wider range of backgrounds than is currently the case (NMS 10.1)
- ensure where these timescales have not been met in relation to cases, the panel records the reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting (17.9)
- ensure that the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to panel and whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met (NMS 17.2)
- ensure any advice panel gives, for example about the age range of children the prospective adopter should be considered for, is not recorded on the minutes as a recommendation (The Adoption and Children Act Statutory Guidance 2002 Chapter 1, paragraph 1.20)
- ensure the child's birth parents are informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working day (NMS 17.12)
- ensure a guide to adoption support is provided to the child when support is being provided (NMS 18.6)
- ensure a full record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for staff are maintained on staff personnel files; with specific reference to ensuring that the record made during interviews regarding any gaps of employment are transferred to the staff member's file before the record is shredded (NMS 21.3)
- ensure that the arrangements for staff to access specialist advice needed to provide a comprehensive service for children are developed through permanent agreement; this is with specific reference to the arrangements with health services (NMS 24.7)
- ensure that evaluative monitoring of all records kept by the service takes place; with specific reference to: improving the quality of the data for children and adopters' timescales; complaints; reports to panel; the quality and content of children's and other files relating to adoption (NMS 25.2)

- ensure the premises are suitable to enable the agency to meet its Statement of Purpose; with specific reference to ensuring suitable rooms are available for panel attendees to wait in and for social workers to carry out therapeutic work with children (NMS 28)
- ensure Ofsted is notified of any revision of the Statement of Purpose within 28 days. (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 Regulation (4) (a) and (b))

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

The authority performed poorly on the adoption scorecard published by the Department for Education. However, there is evidence of an improving picture recently in most areas of children's timescales. There are clear tracking systems in relation to looked after children and these include children with a plan for adoption. However, the data are not easily collated in terms of monitoring the child's timescales to adoption order and some data is not available; missing or erroneous data impacts on the performance indicators for adopters' and children's timescales. The measure for the timescales for children in relation to the period between the agency decision and date of placement are improved for 2012/2013, with 70.3% meeting this criteria.

Overall, children are prepared for adoption effectively as is appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Workers showed a high level of commitment to achieve this to ensure that children understand what is happening to them and know what to expect. The preparation and presentation of life story books to children and adopters remain a shortfall and this means that adopters do not have this useful tool to help children understand their situation in a timely way; however, there are on-going plans to ensure that the backlog is addressed. A child spoken to when asked what she would like to say to social workers about placing children for adoption said: 'Make sure children know what it means to be adopted.' She also said that she would tell other children, 'they should have patience as it can take a long time and can be a strain at times.'

Siblings are placed together wherever possible, and assessments about placing siblings together or separately are well considered. Some children have been fully involved in choosing which sibling they would like to live with when it was not possible, or advisable, to place a large sibling group together. The agency's success in placing siblings together has had an impact on their overall performance timescales.

Children's needs are overall met well within their adoptive families. Adopters are provided with information about the child before placement and are helped to think about if they will be able to meet these needs; these include needs relating to attachment issues, culture, race and religion. In terms of children's health needs, work is carried out with adopters to help them consider the implications any health

needs may have on them or the child. However, capacity issues within the arrangements with health have impacted on the timing of this in some cases. There is an interim plan to address these shortfalls; however, a sustainable plan needs to be established as a matter of urgency.

Due to historical delays in taking children into care, some children who the service is currently working with have significant emotional and mental health needs. These have impacted on all areas of these children's lives including their behaviour, social skills and educational and other abilities. The post adoption team is skilled in working with these children and young people and their families. For some families, work has been successful but for others it has not and a small number of placements have sadly disrupted. Children with less complex needs who have been received into care more recently are progressing well in their behaviour and overall development and are healthy and achieving to the best their ability. Adopters are attuned to their children's needs and advocate on their behalf in, for example, ensuring they get the educational support they need.

Children, for whom it is appropriate, enjoy a level of contact with their birth families. This means that they maintain a sense of their heritage. However, the system for letterbox contact is not efficient. This has meant that, on occasion, adopters or birth family members remind the service that contact is due or should have happened; this needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

Quality of service

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

Prospective adopters who have recently gone through the assessment process feel welcomed and valued by the agency. Some commented that the initial response, when compared to other agencies, was favourable which is why they chose Coventry. An adopter said, 'Staff are all approachable, easy to open up to and know what they are taking about; we got a good vibe from them straight away.'

In terms of timescales for adopters, the data have shortfalls in some areas; this needs addressing to allow for effective monitoring. However, although many survey responses referred to frustrations around delays, the recent unpublished data show an improvement in timescales for application to approval for 2012/2013, with 68% having been approved within the eight-month timescale; this timescale was the expectation up until July 2013 when it was shortened to six months.

Prospective adopters are really positive about the assessment and preparation groups. Preparations groups are described as 'amazing', and, 'well delivered, grounded experience in reality'. It is clear that adopters are well prepared. Independent reviewing officers noted that prospective adopters are more proactive now in researching means to support their children in areas such as attachment issues.

The agency's adoption panel meets on a two weekly basis. It has been recognised,

due to an increase in business, that additional adoption panels are needed and these have been timetabled. The previous recommendation in relation to the adoption panel being provided with updates of cases it has heard has been met. However, the adoption panel is not undertaking its quality assurance role in respect of reporting to the agency on the quality of reports and compliance with the restrictions on writing reports. Also the adoption panel is making recommendations outside of its remit, for example, the numbers and ages of children a prospective adopter is approved for. Panel minutes are lengthy and do not record any reasons for delay. There is a new adoption panel chairperson who has very recently been appointed to the panel. She has the relevant qualifications and is very experienced in adoption work and had already identified these issues for development.

Most assessment reports for prospective adopters enable decisions to be made about their suitability to adopt. While most contain an analysis of the information gathered, some are too descriptive. The quality of the child permanence reports is variable; not all are written in an appropriate format for the child to access in the future. Children's views and those of their parents are not always included within the reports. However, the information contained within most of them enables the adoption panel to gain an at least adequate view about the needs of the child. The quality assurance systems of the above reports and associated papers which the adoption panel needs are not effective in ensuring that the adoption panel has sufficient information on which to base its recommendations; this is reflected in some cases being deferred for further information.

Family finding and matching processes have been strengthened by the recent restructure of the adoption team. Family finding is now commencing at the earliest stage possible and this helps to minimise avoidable delays for children. The arrangements for matching children are robust and ensure that children are placed in the most suitable family possible.

Engagement of birth parents in counselling services is low. It is difficult for parents to engage with services and many may not be ready to engage while care proceedings are on-going. However, the agency intends to use the recent increase in capacity of a voluntary adoption agency to try a more proactive approach to engaging birth parents. A birth parent spoken to commented that they have 'done the best they can to help me to come to terms with the situation'. The approach to ensuring that birth parents are informed about decisions made by the agency decision maker are not robust enough; not all parents have been provided with a letter informing them of decisions made about their children. For the majority of them, the reason for this has been because their current addresses are not known; the agency could be more proactive about finding their whereabouts so that they are kept up to date with the situation for their child.

The arrangements for supporting families provide a flexible service that can be tailored to meet needs. Adopters have reported that while the service they have received thus far has been invaluable it has not addressed all their needs. One stated, 'support is good as far as it has gone but it has not gone far enough.' Social workers with expertise in therapeutic work have been retained on the team but

various factors last year impacted on their capacity to carry out this important work.

People coming to receive a service in relation to their adoption are satisfied with the service they have received as it has helped them understand their background and make contact with birth family members.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The arrangements for the recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopters have a strong focus on the needs and safety of the child. Adopters are well prepared, knowledgeable and supported in dealing with the potential and actual impact of abuse and neglect and associated behaviours that their children may display. Adopters know how to help children overcome their past experiences. Training provided has helped to ensure that adopters are confident in supporting their children to develop secure attachments and learn how to use the internet safely.

Children live in adoptive families who keep them safe from harm, and when they are unable to do this, due to emotional or behavioural issues for example, they are confident in asking for help and assistance; adopters spoken to were confident that support would be forthcoming. Children spoken to know who they can talk to if they are worried about something. Social workers visit children placed for adoption to ensure that they are safe, happy and well and these visits are within statutory timescales. At times, more frequent visits are carried out if needs dictate this is required.

The arrangements for the recruitment of staff are satisfactory. However, information on personnel files is incomplete because not all have details of the reasons for any gaps in employment histories; this is because this information is shredded.

Work with adults is underpinned by systems that check people's identity to ensure that they are entitled to receive information.

Any concerns or allegations are dealt with in a timely and consistent way to ensure the safety of young people and Coventry works with other local authorities, for example, in strategy meetings.

Leadership and management

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

Coventry's percentage of children placed for adoption from care, 7% in 2012, was higher than the national average of 4%.

There is a joint recruitment strategy for adoption and fostering. This needs further development to ensure sufficient focus is on adoption, the needs of children coming

through the system and targeting people who can meet children's more diverse needs.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that outlines the aims and objectives and this is reviewed. The statement has not been provided to HMCI as required by regulations. There has been good investment in producing child-friendly children's guides that support children's understanding about what adoption may mean for them; however, there is not a guide for children to inform them about the support services they can expect to receive.

Monitoring children's timescales in respect of their looked after journey has been insufficiently robust historically; however, recently this is an improving picture. Evaluative monitoring of complaints, reports to panel, and the quality and content children's and other files relating to adoption is not robust enough.

Most recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. This has meant that practice has improved in some areas; however, life story books for children are not being provided to them in a timely way and some shortfalls remain in some staff recruitment files.

The adoption service has been through a disruptive and challenging period. The recent new interim management arrangements have provided staff and the service with a sense of enthusiasm and staff's anxiety levels have significantly decreased. There have been a number of developments at strategic and practice levels and further developments are planned. Although improvements have not had time to become embedded thus far, much has been achieved in a very short timeframe. Staff hold some anxieties about the proposed length of tenure of the interim arrangements but report that there has been a positive change in the culture of the agency which has led to them feeling more valued than they did previously.

Generally there is good engagement now with partner agencies that helps to ensure a more focused approach is taken to developing a team around the child. However, the funding arrangements between health and the local authority recently introduced are interim arrangements; these need to be agreed and finalised to prevent delays for adoptive children.

Staff are very clearly committed and passionate about their roles. Adopters are very positive about the social workers, calling them professional, caring and pleasant. One adopter said, 'Staff are very clearly skilled in their respective roles.' Another said: 'The worker was fantastic; she engaged with the other children in the family and made them feel at ease and happy to see her because they felt part of the process.' Staff receive regular supervision from their respective managers and report that managers are always available.

The premises the service operates from are overall fit for purpose. However, there are issues in relation to the arrangements for the waiting area for panel attendees and the suitability of rooms for social workers to carry out therapeutic work with children.

Children's and adopters' files overall provide a comprehensive picture of the work carried out, and children's files will be useful to them in the future in helping them understand their situation. Files are subject to periodic audit but this system has failed to pick up, for example, when documents are not signed or dated or when documents that are marked as a draft have not been updated.

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.