

# Leicestershire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Leicestershire County Council has a joint arrangement with Leicester City Council and Rutland County Council to provide a comprehensive adoption service which covers all three local authorities. Leicester City Council and Leicestershire County Council provide the management and staff and Rutland County Council contributes some financial support for the arrangement. Leicestershire County Council is the lead agency but the adoption team are based in Leicester, in a city centre location.

The adoption service is responsible for 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 include birth relative initiated contact or intermediary services. Anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas is directed to a voluntary adoption agency, with whom there is a service level agreement. The social workers who are responsible for care planning are employed by Leicestershire County Council, which has its own adoption panel and agency decision maker.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was a key, announced inspection. Because of the joint arrangement, an inspection of all three councils was carried out at the same time and much of this report is the same as the report for Leicester City Council and Rutland County Council, except where there are issues which relate specifically to Leicestershire County Council.

The adoption agency provides an outstanding range of support to adoptive families; this includes direct work by the post adoption team but also prompt and appropriate referral to other agencies, all of which assists in the maintenance of permanent families for children.

The agency works well with birth families to involve them in planning for their children and providing information in order to promote their heritage and sense of identity. They are committed to supporting birth parents and relatives in maintaining contact and this is sensitively and effectively implemented. Adopted adults receive a prompt and appropriate service.

The agency recruits suitable adoptive families and prepares, assesses and approves them thoroughly so they can meet the needs of adoptive children. The adoption panel and decision making arrangements are robust although the documentation of

some aspects of this has been poor. However, the agency has not been thorough and robust in ensuring that everyone who works with children is suitably recruited. All the employed staff are recruited appropriately and receive good support and training. Although management arrangements are generally good, this shortfall has had an impact on the judgement for staying safe and organisation, making their overall outcome judgement satisfactory.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

There have been significant improvements since the previous inspection three years ago, when six actions and 12 recommendations were made. All the actions have been addressed although some elements of two of these remain to be further improved and recommendations have been made to this effect. The adoption service has put in place a protocol to follow in relation to notifications to birth parents but this has not been followed consistently; thus not all birth parents are notified following their child's plan for adoption or matching decision, and this impacts on the whether the child's adoption file complies with the regulations. Panel members' files are significantly improved but a small number did not contain full information. However, the children's guide is now suitable for a wider range of children, the safeguarding procedures make reference to children placed for adoption and there have been staffing increases to improve the waiting time for adopted adults in relation to birth records counselling.

The 12 recommendations were wide ranging and have been addressed, with the exception of maintaining a copy of letterbox exchanges. The assessment of adopters is now more thorough and analytical, the matching and introduction of children is more formalised with written guidance and issues relating to documentation have been improved.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has a systematic and effective approach for ensuring the adoption team are aware at an early stage of the diverse needs of the children who may require an adoptive family. This informs the recruitment strategy and enables the team to give appropriate and up to date information to any enquirers; it also facilitates the opportunity to 'fast track' people who are potentially good matches for children waiting. This ensures that children do not wait an unnecessarily long time for a suitable family. Although the agency has many enquirers, they occasionally target particular groups of people to raise awareness, and increase the diversity of potential adopters. They are able to access the skills of a publicity and recruitment officer in

the fostering service to provide expertise with this. Children are placed with adopters who meet their cultural, racial and religious needs wherever possible and serious consideration is given to the benefits or otherwise of placing siblings together. Decisions are based on thorough assessments, informed by current research and ensure the needs of each individual child are fully considered.

The agency demonstrates a thorough and analytical approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. The system for accepting applications is clear and purposeful; a thorough initial visit takes place which is discussed within the team and only then is an application sent to the enquirers if they appear to be suitable potential adopters. Adopters are well prepared; they attend a three day preparation course which they describe as 'detailed and thought provoking' and 'really eye-opening, especially in relation to contact'. Assessments are thorough and staff have a clear and consistent approach in undertaking all the required references and suitability checks. All Criminal Records Bureau checks are updated prior to approval, if they are over a year old. All adopters expressed very positive views about their assessing social workers, describing them as 'brilliant' and 'supportive'. If the agency decides that it does not feel able to progress an application, it discusses this with the applicants; however, their right to request that a brief report be taken to panel is not clearly documented.

Adopters are usually given good and full information about the children, although in one instance, adopters were given more information at a later stage which had been available earlier, and this was subsequently found to be inaccurate. There is a well thought out plan of introductions prior to placement; practice in relation to this has been improved recently, based on learning from disrupted placements.

The adoption panel meets monthly; its operation is governed by written policies and procedures and applicants are invited to attend for their approval and for matching with children. Although this is daunting, adopters said they are made welcome and put at ease, and the agency provides good written information so they know what to expect. The panel is appropriately constituted with a mix of members who have personal and professional experience of adoption. They receive regular training and legal updates to ensure their contribution is effective. The panel is well chaired and all members demonstrate that they are well prepared and ask appropriate questions.

The adoption panel is well organised, regularly convened, members receive the papers in good time to enable them to give them full consideration in advance of the panel and the minutes are full but not always accurate. For example, although siblings are considered separately, the minutes do not reflect this and a joint minute is prepared, recommendations are referred to as decisions and one of the social workers is referred to as an independent member. Decision making is usually timely and thorough; however, there was one instance seen when the process for decision making was very unclear, not recorded appropriately and delayed. The agency decision is not consistently notified to birth parents.

There is a robust and thorough recruitment process for staff employed by the council; all staff undergo appropriate suitability checks and have the necessary

qualifications, but there is no evidence of the telephone verification of references, which the manager confirms takes place. However, the agency are using two services which are not registered adoption support agencies to provide adoption support and have not undertaken the appropriate checks to employ them under their own auspices. This action may leave children vulnerable.

The agency has appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place to safeguard children placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services. Staff undertake regular safeguarding training and understand their roles and responsibilities.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The adoption agency provides an impressive range of support to adoptive families which enables them to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. This support commences during the preparation, assessment and approval process, when clear information about the needs of children are highlighted and discussed, along with strategies to meet these needs. Following approval, the post adoption team provide a day's training which covers issues such as attachment, therapeutic parenting and child development to start to equip adopters with the skills to parent an adoptive child in a therapeutic way. Adopters have access to further high quality training to build on their initial skills, which includes issues such as behaviour management, contact and telling. Adopters described the training as 'excellent'. They also commented that the preparation training had developed their thinking about a child's family of origin and contact. Adopters spoken with demonstrated a very inclusive and positive attitude to, and an awareness of the importance of, the child's birth family to enable a child to develop a positive self-identity.

In addition to training, the post adoption team support adoptive parents to facilitate positive experiences in school, which includes the provision of information booklets and training for schools in the needs of adoptive children. Some impressive work which helped a child make a smooth transition into a new school was seen. The team also run activity workshops for adopted children which focus on building up their self esteem through art and other creative work, a variety of social activities for adopters such as 'play and stay', 'chill and chat' and an annual party, all of which promote positive relationships and support the adoptive family. Adopters said 'we get high quality post adoption support from experienced and knowledgeable staff who understand the complexity of the relationships'. Formal written assessments of requests for adoption support are now in place, which show that families are fully involved in deciding the type and level of the assistance they require.

There are effective links with partner organisations and other services which further support adoptive families, who comment that there is good and quick access to services such as psychological input. There are good working relationships with the primary mental health care team and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

to offer specific interventions, as well as the educational psychological services.

The agency has very few disruptions of adoption placements but there is clear evidence that support is offered to all parties, a disruption meeting is held and that any lessons to be learned are implemented to improve practice.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice in addition to the other specialist services which they use. Both advisers are available for staff to access, as well as the adoption panel. The medical adviser is very knowledgeable and committed to ensuring the health care needs of children being placed for adoption are met and that their adoptive families are aware of any medical implications. There is a commitment to pass written information on to other authorities as swiftly as possible as well as having direct verbal communication with them. The legal advisers are similarly committed and ensure staff and panel members have access to up to date information.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency makes strong efforts to involve birth parents in planning for their child's adoption and contributing information about their family. There is clear evidence that their views are sought and recorded on the child permanence report, or an explanation given if this is not possible. The adoption panel are robust in ensuring appropriate information is available for the child in the future and very clear about the many purposes which a child permanence report fulfils. There is a well established practice of one-off meetings between birth parents and adopters, which enable positive contact to be maintained and first hand information about the child's family to be gained. The agency provide good and long lasting support for birth families and one person said of her support worker: 'she has been an absolute brick; she has been there for me every time.'

Social workers are aware of the importance of a child's life story and are committed to producing the life story book within a reasonable timescale. The independent reviewing officers play a significant role in monitoring this to ensure it is produced in a timely way. Some examples of very good life story books were seen and adopters use them as working tools to help their child understand their history. The adoption team have provided training for children's social workers which is based on current research and thinking about the best way to communicate a child's history in a positive way. Letters for later life are also appropriately and sensitively worded.

There is a strong commitment to maintaining and facilitating contact arrangements; the agency support a large number of direct contacts and these are very sensitively handled. The agency also manages a large letterbox; there are robust arrangements in place to ensure that letters are appropriate and a lot of assistance is offered to facilitate this. The post adoption team use the opportunities which this work brings to obtain more information about the family. However, the agency does not keep copies of the majority of the letters before passing them on. This may result in

letters being lost if they go astray, are destroyed or damaged.

The service to adopted adults is much improved; the waiting list for schedule two counselling is significantly reduced and manageable, due to the agency's commitment to providing more staff for this service. Enquirers are given appropriate written information to enable them to have a choice of who to contact, particularly if the agency cannot assist them directly. The agency does not offer a service to birth relatives seeking contact at the present time, which is not a statutory duty.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency has updated its Statement of Purpose, which provides comprehensive information for anyone wishing to use the service. It has also developed its children's guide, to make the information more accessible to a more diverse group of children. A number of resources are used to assist children understand the adoption process and what it means for them.

The agency provides good written information for enquirers to enable them to know more about what adoption will mean for them and what the agency's position is. This is supplemented by regular information evenings, which offer enquirers the opportunity to meet with adoptive parents and social workers to find out more. Adopters described these as 'very informative' and said: 'I came away really buzzing'.

All the managers in the service are appropriately knowledgeable, skilled and experienced; there are clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities which are understood by all the staff. However, the joint arrangement allows for flexibility and staff can go to any of the managers for advice, not just the managers employed by their particular local authority. There are clear channels of communication including regular team meetings and senior management meetings to evaluate the joint arrangement.

Staff are organised and managed effectively and are well supported through regular, planned and recorded supervision in addition to informal arrangements. Children's social workers are very positive about the support and advice they receive from the adoption team, who are said to be approachable, knowledgeable and clear about their roles. The administrative support is good and children's social workers are particularly appreciative of the panel administrators who are 'very helpful' and track the progress of children's cases. These arrangements ensure that children's plans are progressed swiftly and suitable placements are made.

Staff, particularly in the adoption team, access a very good level of training, including external training of a high quality. Children's social workers commented that they share this knowledge with them and this impacts very positively on the advice and support that they are able to give them, as it is based on up to date research.

The agency has a sufficient number of suitably qualified and experienced staff to undertake the work and no deficits in service were noted. Staff feel that Leicestershire County Council is a reasonable employer and all enjoy their work.

The portfolio holder demonstrates a strong awareness of the issues facing the adoption service and has a number of avenues, both formal and informal, for keeping himself informed. These include regular written reports, briefings by senior officers and meetings with the councillor on the adoption panel, all of which ensure that the executive are aware of the work of the agency and can monitor outcomes for children. There are some shortfalls in the monitoring of the work of the agency by the manager however, which relates to the use of an unregistered person for adoption support, as detailed earlier.

Records in relation to adopters are well structured, information is easy to access and they contain closure summaries where appropriate. The children's adoption files are significantly improved; they now have a contents list which enables staff to know what they should contain and there is an expectation that managers check that the contents comply before the file is sent for audit. Other than missing notifications to birth parents, which the agency is not sending out consistently, those files inspected contained all the relevant information. There is also evidence of file audit and case decisions made in supervision on the files.

The files on staff contain all the required information and show evidence of robust recruitment systems. The files on panel members have improved; however not all gave details of home addresses and one panel member had one reference, rather than the requisite two.

The adoption team are based in a city centre location which is accessible and very convenient for anyone who wishes to call in. The premises are secure, with appropriate storage and security for records and IT systems.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The individual needs of children are promoted and children are placed in families which meet their religious and cultural needs wherever possible. The agency has an inclusive attitude towards the recruitment of a diverse range of adoptive families and provides appropriate training for staff and panel members to ensure they are aware of equality and diversity issues. Translation and interpreting services are available to ensure that anyone using the service has a good understanding of what is happening.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that applicants are aware of their right to have a brief report presented to the adoption panel (breach of regulation 25 (7)Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure that adopters are given accurate, up to date and full written information about the child (National Minimum Standard 5.2)
- ensure the adoption panel minutes are an accurate reflection of the meeting (National Minimum Standard 12.3)
- ensure the agency decision in relation to the child's suitability for adoption and the match with adopters is notified to birth parents (breach of regulation 19(3) and 33 (3)(b)Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure that the process for decision making is timely, recorded accurately and reflects the statutory guidance (National Minimum Standard 13)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (National Minimum Standard 19.3)
- ensure that anyone providing adoption support services comply with regulation 5 of the Adoption Support Service Regulations 2005, unless they are employed by the local authority for that purpose (breach of regulation 5 of the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005)
- consider the arrangements for enabling birth families to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage with particular reference to keeping copies of letterbox exchanges (National Minimum Standard 8)
- maintain a comprehensive personnel file for each member of the adoption panel which contains all the information required under schedule 3 and 4 (breach of regulation 11 and 15, The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2005).