

Norfolk County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White
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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

Norfolk County Council's adoption service is managed by the Head of Adoption and Fostering, Corporate Parenting Sector, based in the Children's Services Department. The Adoption and Family Finding Unit, known as AFFU, consists of three social work teams, each with a team manager. These teams provide services to children, adopters and adoption support. The agency undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted. It also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step-parent adoptions.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This is an agency that takes the well-being of children extremely seriously and which has designed its services to this effect. The focus on children's needs, through direct work and planning, matching and placement ensures a particularly effective foundation for much of the work undertaken in the service.

There is a highly developed, rigour brought to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. This is achieved through creative, strong management, highly skilled workers and deep commitment to excellent and improving practice.

Support to people affected by adoption is particularly strong, innovative and directly aimed at meeting individual needs. This is the case across the board, which includes ensuring placements are strong and optimistic, providing adopted adults with bespoke services and delivering sophisticated support packages in complex, challenging circumstances.

The importance of children's backgrounds and histories, and the relevance of these to an adopted child's understanding their place in the world is fully understood. Detailed work is undertaken to ensure that children are prepared for their futures through life-story work and other direct work that illuminates their circumstances. Birth parents are encouraged to be as involved as possible throughout the planning and preparation process.

The agency is managed to a particularly high standard across the board. The service

is efficient, strategically and operationally sophisticated, and is recognised as a crucially important aspect of children's services throughout the authority.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has taken a diligent approach to improving services and subsequently made arrangements to address all the issues raised as recommendations following the last inspection. There is now greater scrutiny of records, a more detailed health and safety checklist, better training and decision-making is undertaken in a timely way.

It is clear that this is an agency that takes seriously its commitment to continuous improvement.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements that the agency makes to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the range of needs of children requiring placement are keenly focused and based on a clearly thought through recruitment strategy. Innovative ways of reaching potential applicants are employed and there is a clear aim to achieve as diverse a group of prospective adopters as possible. This is a child-centred strategy that is clearly aimed at meeting children's complex needs and understanding their backgrounds.

Matches are achieved through rigorous analysis of the qualities and strengths of adopters and how they are best suited to understand the child's needs and meet them. Adopters are provided with all available information when considering children and life-appreciation days are routinely arranged in every case. This enables families to be fully informed about children's backgrounds and circumstances, and prepares them for providing suitable strategies and routines that can meet their needs.

There is a significant and detailed approach to working with children in preparation for their adoption. This is a highly developed commitment to preparing children for their futures and adds considerably to the matching process. This sophisticated and focused approach to examining children's needs is a particularly strong aspect of the agency's work and is threaded through every aspect of its responsibilities and undertakings.

Applicants to adopt undergo a thorough, rigorous assessment of their suitability that is clearly focused on their ability to be parents to children who may have complex backgrounds and challenging circumstances. Agency workers have considerable skill

and insight into understanding and analysing applicants. Their assessment reports are detailed and thorough and provide a clear analysis of people's antecedents and awareness of adopting a child, with its associated life-long commitment and responsibility.

The adoption panel brings further rigour and value to the process. They are well managed, efficiently administered and organised, and undertake their deliberations conscientiously and with clear regard for the well-being of children. Minutes of proceedings are of a particularly high standard. Quality assurance issues are given due scrutiny and there have been considerable improvements as a result of this. Decisions are made conscientiously and in a timely way after consideration of all available information.

The managers and staff are suitably experienced and qualified and are subject to rigorous recruitment and selection procedures. The skills and professionalism of social workers are clearly of a very high standard and they demonstrate a level of ability and knowledge that is above the norm in comparative services. The motivation and enthusiasm for meeting children's needs through adoption is outstanding.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for adoption support are outstanding. The agency has a particularly clear understanding of adoption as a holistic process and integrates the component parts into a coherent continuum. At the centre of this is a clear focus on children's needs in the first instance and the life-long implications of adoption for all those affected thereafter. Support services are arranged and deployed effectively and are clearly focused on the needs of people wherever they may be on this continuum.

Support is provided as a bespoke service following an assessment of need and people are fully involved with and agree to the services put in place. This ensures that the particular circumstances and challenges of people affected by adoption are clearly identified from the outset and individual packages arranged.

There are excellent examples of the agency's focused approach to meeting individual needs, including specific support for people with disabilities, complex backgrounds and difficult circumstances. The lengths the service goes to in order to meet people's needs is impressive.

The agency has access to a wide range of specialist services that can be utilised to enrich the substantial skills and expertise that are in-house and, which includes excellent medical and legal advice. The agency also, through training and professional development, enhances continually the skills and expertise of social workers in specific, specialist areas.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

As outlined in other outcome areas, the agency's approach to the adoption continuum is through a clear focus on the needs and future welfare of children. This is achieved through a pervading commitment to ensuring that children are, at all times, at the centre of the service's planning and operational practice.

There is a clear understanding of the relevance of children's backgrounds and histories to their futures. To enable children and their adoptive families to look forward optimistically considerable effort is placed upon making sense of what has gone before. This gives children a context whereby they can learn to understand their place in the world. This is achieved through sophisticated direct work prior to and during placement, and the modelling of this into life-story work and books.

Birth families are encouraged at all stages to be as involved as they wish in planning for their child's adoption and are enabled at all stages to express their wishes and feelings; these are acted upon wherever possible if it is in the child's best interests. There are arrangements in place to provide facilities for independent support and counselling for birth parents, although there is a growing commitment in the service to work directly with them in an inclusive, non-judgemental way. This adds further value to well-established and administered indirect contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

This is an outstanding service that is managed, at all levels, in a highly professional way. The agency's work and responsibilities are informed by a well-presented, informative Statement of Purpose that is supported by a range of up-to-date policies and procedures. The children's guide, as is the case with most of the agency's work, is firmly aimed at working with children, is excellent in presentation and acts as an important tool in providing them with the opportunity to understand their circumstances. All the publications produced by the agency are of a similar high quality; this provides applicants and others with well-presented, informative material.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The approach of the agency, in all its activities, is always to ensure that the individual circumstances of people affected by adoption, irrespective of background and circumstance, determines the focus of any service provided.

The management systems and style are impressive in that they have created a service that is seamless in operation, despite the very different aspects and components of its work and responsibilities. There are clear lines of responsibility and accountability and both managers and staff understood the structure of the wider children's service and the importance of their contribution to it. Managers, at all levels in the agency, demonstrate highly developed knowledge, skills and understanding of the complexities of adoption. There is a strong motivation and commitment to developing service activity to improved levels in all decision making, which includes the efficacy of the service and its outcomes. The executive of the agency is kept well-informed of the service's activities and there is a clear commitment to adoption being an integral part of the authority's responsibilities for children.

Workers are supported and encouraged to work to the best of their abilities. Allocation and workload management are organised in the best interests of the service and levels of responsibility are equitable. All workers are encouraged and welcomed to contribute to the overall efficiency of the service. Although this is a busy service, there are sufficient staff to meet the demands of its responsibilities.

There is a strong commitment to the development of worker's skills, expertise and knowledge through training and other professional resources. This continually enhances and improves the foundations of the agency's qualities and abilities and demonstrates a particularly conscientious approach to continuous service development and improvement.

The administration of the service is highly efficient with clear systems in place to organise and manage all aspects of the agency's work. Record-keeping is organised and maintained to a high standard; this includes all case recording, staff files and general administrative practices.

The premises, located in the outskirts of the city centre, are accessible, suitably resourced and provide comfortable accommodation for the workforce. All necessary security and back-up safeguards are in place.