Nottinghamshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector: Lynn O’Driscoll / Suzanne Young
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Date of last inspection: 21/04/2008
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

This is a large county council adoption service. It's functions include: advice and counselling; recruitment, assessment, approval, training and support of prospective adopters; the matching, introduction and placing of children for whom adoption is the permanent plan; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption including birth records counselling, and intermediary services. This council also has service level agreements in place with other independent adoption support agencies to offer additional support for both adoptive and birth families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This service ensures good matches for children and young people, often with their siblings, which meet most of their unique needs. Consequently they are settled, happy and safe in their adoptive placements and are making good progress. They also benefit from outstanding opportunities to enjoy and achieve and maximise their individual potential.

The staff in the adoption team are suitably qualified and experienced and are supported by a strong senior leadership team. This is strengthened by robust panels and agency decision makers.

The majority of adopters confirm high satisfaction with the preparation, ongoing training and support available to them. They say at every stage in the process they are kept well informed. They describe the staff as, 'Easy to contact and talk to,' 'Conscientious and professional' and, 'Always friendly and helpful.'

However, restructures and staff turnover has affected the development of the service over the last two years. The team is now fully staffed and enthusiastic about the future. The new manager has already driven forward a number of positive developments. This includes the establishment of a home finder post and a team of children's social workers dedicated to, and with expertise in, adoption. The aim is to improve the quality of reports and the time children and young people wait for adoptive placements. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of these initiatives.

Some very good practices are undertaken, including ascertaining children's wishes and feelings, but are not consistently being adequately reflected in the paperwork. Moreover, required processes are not always undertaken in a timely manner to avoid drift.

This inspection has resulted in eight recommendations. Three of these are a breach
of regulation. The children’s guide, staff recruitment and children’s files do not consistently include all the required information. This suggests that the current monitoring systems are not sufficiently robust. Moreover, the use of the electronic recording system is not consistently applied across the service. This is resulting in some key documentation not being updated in a timely manner. Annual appraisals do not include the views of children and young people, a written development plan is not in place and the agency needs to demonstrate an effective strategy is in place to recruit and assess a range of adopters.

**Improvements since the last inspection**

Two actions and three recommendations were raised at the last inspection on 21 April 2008. In response, the executive side of the council now receive written reports on the management, outcome and financial state of the adoption service every six months.

Recruitment and selection processes have also been strengthened to ensure a safe and competent workforce. In particular there is now an effective system in place for initially obtaining, and the timely renewal of, criminal record checks and for verifying references. However, not all staff and panel members files include all the legally required information.

Moreover, the content and quality of children's files remains variable.

**Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

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

The provision is good.

Overall there are good arrangements in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. This includes rigorous screening and assessments of prospective adopters. An effective multi disciplinary approach is also very well established to protect children and young people from all forms of abuse. All staff and adopters are trained to ensure an appropriate response to any disclosures. Thorough investigations are undertaken and independent support provided to the person subject to the allegation. Consequently, children feel safe, secure and loved.

This service actively supports adopters to promote children’s good health. Adopters say they are made fully aware of the holistic health needs of the children prior to placement. This means they continue to attend timely statutory medicals and routine health appointments and receive the specialist services they require.

Specific and complex health needs are very well met as specialist services are
provided in a particularly timely manner. Examples include, direct access to a specialist nurse, paediatrician and services to improve emotional wellbeing. This input has resulted in strong attachments and improved behaviours.

Children and young people enjoy healthy diets and regular and challenging physical activities which promote their continued development. Examples include kayaking, rock climbing and abseiling. One health visitor describes a child, previously underweight and with delayed development as, 'Healthy, thriving and developing at an age appropriate level with her adopters.'

Adopters highlight a robust and efficient matching process as a particular strength of this service. The majority also confirm excellent ongoing support. Consequently, children benefit from stable placements which meet all or most of their assessed needs and unique preferences. This service is also highly successful in placing a significant number of children with their siblings. This gives them all a strong sense of identity and security.

Children are very well prepared for adoption. Adopters confirm comprehensive information about the child prior to placement. The service also enables good, gradual introductions at the individual child's pace. This ensures a genuine feeling of familiarity and trust. Consequently, they settle very quickly. An independent reviewing officer wrote, 'The child is very happy in placement and has formed positive relationships. Her development and communication has significantly improved since being with her adoptive family.'

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

The provision is outstanding.

This service has established excellent multi agency partnership working. Consequently, there are outstanding opportunities for children and young people to enjoy and achieve and thereby realise their full potential. The service hosts an annual event to recognise and celebrate individual efforts and achievements which is very well attended by adopted children.

This service, in close collaboration with the youth service, regularly offers an excellent range of age appropriate, stimulating and constructive leisure activities. These are thoroughly enjoyed by adopted children. At every event they learn new skills which in turn builds up their confidence and self esteem. They also particularly appreciate the opportunity to talk with their peers and to make and sustain new friendships. Comments include, 'I like having someone to talk to who understands,' 'I like doing exciting things and having fu,' and, 'I like learning new things and having a friend.' Adopters say, 'this service is a great release for our daughter and her self esteem has improved greatly' and, 'this is a great service and has made a positive impact on all the household. It has enabled us to get through some desperate times.'

Individual interests and talents are actively encouraged and financially supported. Examples include swimming, dancing and horse riding. This significantly boosts
children's feelings of self worth.

This service actively promotes and supports education. Outstanding individualised packages of specialist support are provided to meet individual needs. This has resulted in 100% school attendance and college for children and young people who had disengaged and markedly improved educational and behavioural progress.

Adopters really valued this input. One said, 'It has given us the confidence in sourcing the right education for our child.' Schools also report a better understanding of adoptive children's needs, particularly around attachment issues.

Adopters are very well prepared, and exceptional ongoing support is available, to appropriately manage a wide range of complex behaviours. Moreover, adopters are empowered to build up their own resilience and confidence to respond positively to challenging situations in the future.

Children are also appropriately helped to develop and maintain positive relationships and trust. Consequently, they are happy, settled and thriving in their placements. They enjoy stable, loving relationships, which have a marked positive effect on their self-esteem and confidence.

Thorough assessments ensure adopters home's have the space to comfortably accommodate all who live there, are free from avoidable hazards and are suitably decorated and furnished.

The majority of adopters are highly satisfied with the excellent level of varied and innovative support available to maintain stable placements. These are provided by specialist and highly experienced workers in the adoption team or by specific external support agencies. Adopters are also reassured in the knowledge that they can access any of this support at any time in the future if required. They say they are regularly kept updated through the newsletter.

**Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

There are good opportunities for children and young people to positively contribute to their daily lives and futures and to the development of the service. This includes: being actively involved in producing the children's pledge; designing a new adoption support booklet; and, representation on the young people's board. As a direct result of these consultations all looked after children now benefit from improved access to social workers. They also have increased choices of appropriate venues for their statutory reviews.

This service particularly benefits from a dedicated family support worker and youth worker. Both are highly skilled in consulting with children and young people on an individual basis and through regular organised events. Another positive outcome of these activities is the development of skills needed for future successful independent
living. Examples include, building emotional resilience, negotiating and compromising, using public transport, budgeting and cooking.

Sensitive life story work enables children and young people to gain a clear and age appropriate understanding of their backgrounds and to develop a positive identity. Constructive contact with birth families in line with any legal directions and personal preferences is actively encouraged and supported. This can include direct contact with birth families if this is beneficial to the child. The letterbox service is very well developed.

The service works hard to engage birth families in adoption planning and their views are valued and respected. Examples include, agreeing ongoing contact arrangements and, ensuring the child is placed with adopters who will promote their preferred faith. Birth families also have access to independent advocacy and good quality counselling to help them explore any concerns they may have. Moreover, appropriate intermediary services are provided to adopted adults and birth parents who wish to make contact to try to ensure this is a positive and beneficial experience.

**Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

**Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The management team are suitably qualified, highly experienced and extremely child focussed. They are very clear about the strengths and weakness of the service and agreed budgets are in place to address the latter and to continue to develop the service. However, there is no written development plan in place.

A more robust performance management system has recently been introduced to ensure the timeliness of processes and thereby avoid unnecessary drift for children. There is also a clear strategy for 2012/13 to recruit and assess sufficient adopters in a timely manner. This is to ensure that the unique needs and specific wishes of children and young people still waiting for placements are met. However, the effectiveness of these new developments are too soon to determine.

Staff report manageable workloads and feel well supported and equipped to undertake their respective roles. Following a period of significant change and uncertainty they are now enthusiastic about the future. They have regular team meetings with open and honest debates. They also benefit from good quality individual supervision and relevant ongoing training opportunities to enhance their own personal development. Moreover, they have established excellent multi agency working. These colleagues describe the team as, 'Passionate advocates for young people' and, 'a credit to the agency.' An effective system is in place to ensure timely
annual appraisals. However, they do not currently include the views of children and young people.

An up-to-date Statement of Purpose is in place which accurately describes the aims, policies and practices of the service. A user-friendly children's guide is also in place. However, currently it is only in one format. This does not meet all the diverse needs of the children and young people accessing the adoption service. Moreover, the contact details of Ofsted and the national Children's Rights Director is out of date. This means young people may not know how to directly access these services should they wish to raise any concerns.

Most adopters confirm high satisfaction with the initial enquiry stage and the information received explaining the process. Comments include, 'It was very detailed and made us aware of all the implications' and, 'We were well informed. It was realistic about the challenges we may face.' They also confirm a thorough assessment process undertaken by 'Extremely supportive and professional social workers who handled issues with sensitivity and respect.' The preparation groups are described as, 'Excellent. A thought provoking course delivered in an interesting and varied way.' Many adopters particularly highlighted the benefits of the life appreciation days. This enables them to gain relevant information about the child from a wide variety of sources.

However, although recent improvements are evident, a number of adopters report delays in the process. This means currently not all applications are completed within eight months. This shortfall is recognised by the service and a new process has been put in place to address this. This includes allocating workers for home studies prior to preparation groups.

This service actively strives to ensure children are placed within twelve months of the decision that they should be placed for adoption. However, there are still some delays and the deputy director is in continued discussions with the courts to try to address this.

Not all staff and panel members’ recruitment files evidence a stringent process as detailed in the improvement section of this report. Adoption support plans and child permanency reports are also of variable quality. In particular the latter do not all adequately reflect children's wishes and feelings. These shortfalls suggest that the current monitoring systems are not sufficiently robust.

The electronic recording system is not consistently used across the service. This means some legal documents are not uploaded in a timely manner.

Particular strengths of this service come from the robust and well constituted panels. Members provide good safeguards for children as they stringently exercise their quality assurance function. This includes deferring reports if they are not to the required standard. The introduction of a third panel has also reduced delays in making recommendations about adoption. Panel papers are produced in a timely manner to enable them to be carefully scrutinised and to ensure relevant questions
are asked and any remaining issues are fully explored. The independent chairs are highly experienced and ensure good participation by all members. Individuals confirm that, 'The chair is very competent at managing and facilitating panel processes and personalities' and, 'We benefit from an excellent chair who enables the panel to work well. She ensures all members contribute and their contributions are valued.'

The agency decision makers are well qualified, suitably experienced, knowledgeable and competent for the role. They scrutinise all documentation thoroughly, taking into account, but not always following, the recommendation of the adoption panel. This ensures that children are well matched to adopters and their diverse and individual needs are met.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children and young people, adopters and birth families are treated and respected as individuals in their own right. They are actively enabled to receive a very good range of specialist services to best meet their diverse and complex needs at any stage. A member of the team also has specific responsibility for ensuring equality issues remain high on everyone's agenda.

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 children's adoption files contain all the information required by regulation (Breach of Regulation 12, Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)
- ensure that files on staff and panel members include all the legally required information (Breach of Regulation 11, Schedule 4, The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure the children's guide includes all the legally required information and is produced in a range of formats suited to the needs of the children and young people accessing the adoption service (Breach of Regulation 3, The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure a written development plan is in place which is reviewed annually (NMS 20.2)
- demonstrate an effective strategy to recruit and assess a range of adopters who can meet most of the needs of those children waiting for a placement for whom adoption is the plan (NMS 10.1)
- demonstrate that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the adoption service to ensure compliance and immediate action is taken to address any shortfalls (NMS 25.2)
- implement a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the agency's files and the child's and adopters case records (NMS 27.1)
ensure annual appraisals take into account the views of the children and young people the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)