

Suffolk County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

Suffolk County Council's Adoption Agency is part of the Corporate Parenting Section of Suffolk's Children and Young People's Directorate. As a Local Authority Adoption Agency it is responsible for undertaking, or making arrangements for, all the statutory adoption responsibilities and duties. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters; the matching and placement of children; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; intermediary services including tracing and reunions and assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements. It undertakes domestic and step parent adoptions and has a service level agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) for anyone wishing to adopt a child from overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The agency provides an outstanding quality of service in all outcome areas. There are excellent arrangements for family finding and recruiting adopters who can meet the needs of the children waiting; this ensures that children are placed in a timely way. Information provided is of an excellent quality as is the preparation of adopters; this means that prospective adopters are very well equipped to parent a child from the care system.

The arrangements for assessing applicants are of a very good quality and are completed in a timely manner. Likewise the matching processes are of an excellent quality and ensure that the right adopters are found for each child in a timely way.

The agency's commitment to ensuring support is provided to those families experiencing difficulties is outstanding. An impressive range of services are provided that ensure that children thrive in safe, stable and secure adoptive placements; these are of an excellent quality.

Children's health and educational needs are identified and met using the range of excellent services available to them.

The wishes and feelings of children are obtained and acted upon where possible. Direct work with children is of an excellent quality and this work ensures that children: understand what is happening to them and why it is happening; are fully involved in their care planning; begin to develop a positive self-view and emotional resilience; understand their background and settle well into their new family.

Contact is promoted in line with children's best interests and all parties are very well supported to meet contact arrangements; adopters are committed to promoting contact and ensure it is of a good quality.

Children's safety is promoted very well through the detailed policies, procedures and practice. Safety is also promoted very well because staff and adopters have a sound understanding about the vulnerability of the child.

Birth parents are encouraged to be involved in the planning for their child. This includes inviting and supporting birth parents to be involved in the panel hearing their child's case. An independent birth parent support service is provided to support birth parents to attend panel and to provide them with counselling; the take up of this service is improving.

Birth parents are encouraged and supported to share information about them and their family with the agency; this is so the child has this information to help them understand their situation. The work with adults affected by adoption include, birth records counselling and intermediary services and is of a good quality.

The arrangements for the approval of adopters, children and matches are robust and the decision-making processes are effective.

This agency is exceptionally well managed and staffed by people who are totally dedicated to improving the lives of children. The agency is very well monitored in all areas of its work and this ensures that a high quality service is maintained. The agency is also committed to developing and improving its service; this ensures that practice evolves over time and meets the many and ever changing needs of people using the service.

One area of shortfall was noted; this does not impact adversely on children. It relates to how some birth parents are notified that their child has been matched with prospective adopters.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection four recommendations were made. These relate to: including months in the recording of protective adopters' employment histories so that any gaps in employment can be explored; making minor improvements to the panel minutes so that it is clear who attended and so that each child has their own set of minutes they can read in the future; improving the quality of children's permanence reports so that they can be used effectively and making improvements in the administration of the letterbox system. These have all been addressed.

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 high standards of practice in this agency, which are underpinned by clear policies and procedures, ensure that children are protected from harm. There are excellent interagency working arrangements. For example, the agency uses the medical advisers for a second opinion when there has been uncertainty about the causes of an injury to a child.

The excellent quality of the preparation for prospective adopters and the support provided to adoptive families ensures that adopters understand their child's needs and vulnerabilities. This means that prospective adopters are well equipped to safeguard their child.

The arrangements for family finding for children are excellent. Children are referred to the adoption team at an early stage. Formal meetings are held during which a plan of work is drawn up; this includes the arrangements for preparing the child for adoption. There is a dedicated team of family finding social workers who focus on finding the right family for each child. When it is unlikely that a Suffolk assessed family has the ability to meet the needs of a child there are excellent arrangements for family finding out of the county. For example, there are robust arrangements for referral of children to the national adoption register. Within these arrangements there is an inbuilt system for tracking children; this means no child experiences unavoidable delay.

Children's needs are identified and services are provided to ensure these needs are met. The agency pays special attention to assessing the attachments between siblings. These assessments inform the agency about the viability of placing siblings together thus helping to ensure that the needs of each child are met.

There are excellent arrangements for matching children with their prospective adopters. Prospective adopters are fully informed about the needs of the child they are considering. They are fully supported, by the agency, to understand the implications of the child's needs. For example, if there is a health need a medical adviser meets with the prospective adopters to discuss how these may affect the child's development. Additionally child life appreciation days are held for some children and these ensure that adopters have good quality, first-hand information about the child from people who know the child well. The formal matching meetings are chaired by the agency's manager or a senior practitioner. During this meeting the chair ensures that prospective adopters have and understand all of the relevant information about the child, including the child's permanence report; also any areas for support are identified and planned for. The matching processes ensure that children are placed with families who are able to meet their needs throughout childhood and beyond.

The arrangements for placing children in their prospective adoptive home are

excellent; children are placed in a timely way. In the past 12 months 90 percent of children with a plan for adoption have been placed within 12 months of the decision they should be placed for adoption. Children are provided with information about their prospective adopters in a child-friendly way. For example, for younger children a book that records adopters' voices is used with them so that they become familiar with how their prospective adopters' sound before meeting them. Introductions are well planned and reviewed to ensure that the child's needs are being met and that all parties are happy with the progress; prospective adopters are fully involved in developing these plans. They are also very well supported during introductions. For example, where required, they are provided with accommodation and costs to ensure the plan is fulfilled in the least stressful way.

Children live in safe environments that have been thoroughly assessed during the home study process. Adoptive placements are well supported and this ensures that children live with safe, stable and secure families. There is a very low rate of adoptive placements disrupting; disruptions are below the national average. The reasons for disruptions are scrutinised and any shortfalls are used to develop future practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is fully committed to supporting adoptive families through its own resources and via well established interagency working arrangements. There are a range of support services available and these are delivered in a flexible way to meet individual needs.

The arrangements for the preparation of adopters and the matching processes are excellent and mean that prospective adopters fully understand the needs of the child being placed with them. The support plan developed for each placement includes consideration of all of the child's needs and ensures that prospective adopters are very well supported to meet these needs. Regular visits by the adoption and child's social workers and the statutory reviewing systems ensure that any difficulties are identified early and support is provided in a timely way. General support includes: events during which adopters and children can meet up; a newsletter; support groups for adopters and access to a range of training workshops. There is also a service level agreement with a registered support agency that adopters can access for advice and support.

When more in depth work is needed there are excellent arrangements to provide therapeutic support to families. The agency uses connect, a service provided by the children and adolescent mental health service which comprises of a range of specialists. These include: a psychiatrist; a clinical psychologist; art therapists and mental health workers. Alternatively the agency has a well established service level agreement with an adoption support agency that specialises in providing therapeutic support to people affected by adoption and those working with them. The support provided via these arrangements includes: regular consultation meetings; long-term

direct work with adopters; courses and training focusing on attachment and behaviour; weekly drop in sessions that provide opportunities for social workers, teachers and adopters to discuss concerns and seek advice and direct work with children. These services help to ensure that each child has excellent opportunities to develop secure attachments and positive relationships with those around them.

There are excellent joint working arrangements to support the education and attainment of children who have been adopted. These arrangements include direct support for children in the school and support to teaching staff to help them to manage children's disruptive behaviour. This excellent support helps children to stabilise their behaviour and minimises the risk of them being excluded from school. The agency also supports some children to achieve in their education through making significant investments in funding educational placements that best meet their needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children are very well prepared for adoption by enthusiastic and skilful staff. Although one child found the work difficult they did feel they had been treated well and listened to. A second child felt well treated and that the work had helped them; this child did not feel there is anything the agency needs to change. Direct work with children is of a very high quality and ensures their wishes and feelings are obtained and are taken into account when planning for their care. For example, children express their preferences about the sort of family they want to live with; where possible this is achieved. The direct work is carried out in a child-friendly way at the child's pace and this ensures that children understand what is happening to them. For example: children create posters that detail their favourite things and what they like to do; cards are used to record children's wishes and feelings and a transition book is developed with each child before he or she is placed. All of this information is shared with their prospective adopters. This means these useful tools aid the prospective adopters' understanding about the child's likes, dislikes, feelings and wishes. Skilful work is also carried out with children who have communication difficulties; for example through the use of pictures so that they gain a better understanding about what is going to happen to them.

After placement a life story book is developed with them. The prospective adopters are involved in this work and this means that they are well equipped to help the child develop a clear understanding about his or her life story.

The support to birth parents losing their child to adoption is of a good quality. Social workers, at an early stage in the process, try to engage birth parents in the planning for their child. Birth parents can access support from an agency specialising in supporting birth parents and they are encouraged to use this service. They are also provided with written details about the process of adoption and the support available to them nationally. It is made clear to them that they are entitled to a support service at any time in the future should they wish to access it. The approval process

is inclusive. Birth parents are invited to attend the panel at which their child is being considered for adoption. This is very well managed and birth parents are very well supported to express their views heard. This excellent practice means that birth parents can influence what happens to their child. The agency also supports one off meetings between birth parents and prospective adopters. These meetings benefit birth parents and prospective adopters as they gain valuable first hand information about each other. In the longer term this also benefits children as adopters can talk to them about their birth parents using this first hand knowledge.

The value of contact post adoption for children is recognised by the agency and the adopters. Contact arrangements are very well thought out and very well supported by the agency. All parties are supported very well to ensure that contact is of a good quality for all concerned; one birth family member stated that the support provided: 'was offered, accepted and delivered by the social worker.' This person stated that they felt that there was nothing that the agency could do to improve this area of work. The work put into ensuring contact is safe and of a good quality ensures that children have a strong sense of their heritage and maintain positive links with their birth family.

This agency recognises that adoption is a life-long process and provides a good quality service to people affected by adoption at any stage in their lives. For example, the agency has carried out life story work with children some years after they have been adopted. The agency works with adults affected by adoption with skill and sensitively. This work enables people to understand their background and gain a stronger sense of their identity. There have been some successful reunions achieved and where reunions have not been possible, people have been supported to come to terms with their disappointment.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Equality and diversity is promoted in all of the agency's policies, procedures and permeates through all of the agency's work. Social workers undertake their work with sensitively to the needs of all they work with. Discrimination, in any form, is not tolerated. Great care is taken to ensure that the best outcomes for children and adults using the service are achieved.

The agency is inclusive in its approach to considering adoption as a possible plan for every child needing permanency away from the birth family. This means that some children needing an adoptive placement have very complex needs. Many children with a plan for adoption need parents that have the ability and commitment to deal

with extremely complex, and sometimes distressing situations.

The agency's strategy for recruitment is excellent and an initiative approach is taken to reaching all sections of the community. The quality of the written and verbal information is high and fully informs enquirers about adoption and about the complex needs children can have. This means they are able to make sound a decision about if they could parent a child from the care system. Initial visits, for those people wishing to progress, are carried out. These provide people with a good opportunity to ask further questions, and the agency with an opportunity to assess the viability of accepting an application from them. Applicants are provided with a copy of the report written following an initial visit and this shows that the agency works with people in an open and transparent way. The work carried out to recruit and inform adopters means there are a good pool of prospective adopters who are likely to be able to meet the diverse needs children waiting for an adoptive placement have.

Prospective adopters are very well prepared. A full and interesting range of topics are covered during the preparation sessions. There are an impressive range of speakers at the session; these include professionals and people affected by adoption. This means that applicants develop a clear understanding about the complexities of the adoption task and understand the complex need some children waiting for an adoptive placement have. Adopters are very positive about the quality of this work. One stated: 'We felt that the preparation course was excellent and essential. We initially thought that the length of the course sounded excessive, but on attending it was clear that the amount of time was needed to fully explore and understand all the relevant issues.'

The agency has recently introduced a one day workshop for second time adopters. The workshop focuses on the needs of the adopted child already in the family. This excellent practice means that prospective adopters can support their child in adjusting to living with a sibling. It also means that this child's wishes and feelings are taken into account.

The home study assessments are of a very good quality and are completed in a timely way. The checks carried out in relation to applicants are robust and ensure that only suitable people are approved as adopters. The assessments are analytical and a sound conclusion about the applicants' parenting capacity is reached. The social workers carrying out assessments are very skilled in this work and are trained in and use, where it is felt necessary, attachment style assessment techniques; this allows a clear view to be formed about the potential impact the attachment style of the applicants may have on their parenting style. Another agency's professional said, 'We have always been impressed by the quality of the adopters we have met who have been approved by Suffolk.'

The approval processes are robustly undertaken. The adoption panel is made up of a diverse membership and is well-managed and administered. Adopters are invited to attend so that their views can be heard. Adopters say that even though it is a daunting experience they value the opportunity to put their views across. One of the

strengths of the panel process is the unusual, but very well-established practice of inviting birth parents to attend. This is very skilfully managed and birth parents are fully supported to make a meaningful contribution. The decision making process is sound and undertaken in a timely way with due consideration taken of all available information. However, although birth parents are always informed of the decision this is not always in writing.

There is a clear and detailed Statement of Purpose that clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the agency and is available to all interested parties. The high quality of the work carried out demonstrates that the agency operates in line with its Statement of Purpose.

Children are informed about adoption via the work carried out with them and via written guides to adoption; these are child-friendly and useful tools to aid children's understanding about adoption. These guides have been developed following consultation with children and an adoptive parent to ensure that they are user and child-friendly.

This is an exceptionally well-managed agency. The managers, at all levels, are of a high calibre and provide strong leadership to the staff. They, and their staff, are suitably qualified, experienced and skilled people who are knowledgeable about adoption issues. All staff are recruited following safe recruitment processes that ensure they are suitable people to work with children. They are fully focused on ensuring children are placed in safe, stable, secure well-supported adoptive placements. There are very strong links between the adoption service and other teams such as the fostering team and children's teams. This ensures that children coming up for adoption are known about at an early stage and that children's transitions between teams and between placements are managed in a structured way.

There is a very strong focus on continued improvement. The arrangements for monitoring all of the work of the agency are excellent and help to drive improvement. The executive are committed to supporting the work of the agency and they ensure that the agency is well-resourced.

Staff, who are of a high calibre, are very well supported by the managers and by the administrative staff. There are excellent arrangements for staff supervision; this includes clinical supervision and consultation. A staff member said that this agency provides the 'best supervision I have ever had.' Training opportunities in this agency are also excellent. A social worker said that training is 'overwhelmingly fantastic'. The agency invests in developing the skills and knowledge of the staff to ensure that the service is of the highest quality possible.

Staff are clear about the lines of accountability and although there are three teams with discrete functions there is a real sense that they are one service. They have team meetings together and there is good communication between them. They also work together well, for example, joint working when complex issues arise such as concerns about adults or children's attachments. An adopter summed up their

experience of working with the agency by saying, 'From start to finish the agency has performed outstandingly well and communicated exceptionally well. They are clearly child-focused but sensitive to our needs at all times.'

Records are well maintained and ordered and contain a comprehensive account of the work carried out. These ensure that adoptees who wish to access their files in the future have a good account of their adoption that will help them to understand their situation.

The premises the agency operates from are accessible and suitable for their purpose. The three adoption teams are currently located in two premises but are shortly to be moved into one; this will provide opportunities for even closer working relationships to be forged. There is a detailed business continuity plan for the adoption service so that services are able to continue in the event of an emergency. The storage and archive arrangements ensure that important records relating to a person's adoption are securely stored and protected adequately from damage by fire and water.

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 written confirmation of the decision relating to a match is sent to birth parents within five days of the decision being made. (NMS 17.12)