

Adoption Agency of Leicestershire and Rutland

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption agency which undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include: placing children who have adoption as a care plan with suitable adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families; providing support to adoptive families both pre and post approval; support to birth families; and providing a service to adopted people in relation to access to records and birth records counselling. It does not provide intermediary services. Enquirers who wish to adopt from overseas are directed to a voluntary adoption agency which specialises in this work, with whom there is a service level agreement.

Until October 2011 the agency was part of a joint arrangement with two neighbouring local authorities. It now has a service level agreement to provide an adoption service on behalf of Rutland County Council, although these responsibilities do not include care planning and decision making for children from Rutland.

In the year ending March 2013, the agency approved 35 adoptive families. In the same year, 75 children were subject to an adoption plan and 19 children were adopted. At the time of the inspection there were 23 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement, 13 of whom had either an active link or match.

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 is a service with a clear focus on improvement, and one to which leaders and managers are committed to bring about change. Although the quality of service has been judged inadequate, leaders and managers are able to demonstrate that they are fully aware of the shortfalls and have a robust and strategic plan to improve and transform the service. The foundations of improvement have been established through a restructuring of the senior management team, increased resources and a change in culture. It is recognised that this is a lengthy process but improvements can already be seen, and regular rigorous monitoring and challenging timescales are

planned to maintain the pace of change.

Outcomes for children are adequate; once children are placed with their adoptive families they make good progress in all areas of their lives, such as emotional resilience, attachment, speech and language development and educational attainment. All aspects of educational outcomes are very well monitored so the agency can demonstrate significant improvement in those areas. However, delays for some children and lack of robust care planning and decision making in some instances do not assure good outcomes for all.

Leicestershire County Council is in line with national and statistical neighbour comparators in the proportion of children it places for adoption, although it is below this when considering children over the age of five. The timeliness of placing children for adoption from the time they enter care is above the comparators and an improving figure.

Children are safe and secure in their adoptive families. The disruption rate is below the national average, and no child's placement has broken down prior to adoption since 2011. Assessments of adopters are robust and there is a good deal of satisfaction with the service, with adopters saying they would come back to Leicestershire if they wanted to adopt again. The involvement of a birth parent on preparation training is very effective in assisting prospective adopters understand the importance of contact for a child to maintain their sense of identity. Adopters comment positively on the quality of staff; they spoke about 'wonderful support', and, 'sensitive, professional and thorough' social workers. The council works well in partnership with other agencies, both when finding suitable families for children and to enable appropriate support to be available to adoptive families. Other strengths include the work undertaken with birth parents, post adoption support, including assistance with unauthorised contact through social networking, and access to records. The latter service has received a great deal of praise, particularly in relation to social workers' sensitivity, commitment and understanding.

A number of recommendations to improve practice are made as a result of this inspection. Many are in the process of being addressed by the authority but are not fully embedded to demonstrate positive impact. Shortfalls identified include: inconsistencies in care planning; delays for children and adopters; inconsistent recording of children's and birth parents' views; inconsistencies in the quality and timeliness of life story books; and documentary shortfalls in panel minutes, decision making, the children's guide and supervision records.

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 that the child's wishes and feelings are ascertained regarding: the

possibility of placement with a new family and the adoption; religious and cultural upbringing; and contact with the parent, guardian or other relative. These views should be recorded (Breach of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 13 (1)(c) (i-iii) and Adoption Guidance Chapter 2, paragraph 20)

- ensure that placement decisions when placing two or more children from the same family are based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the children's relationship, their individual needs and the likely capacity of the prospective adopter to meet the needs of all the siblings being placed together (Adoption Guidance Chapter 4 paragraph 12)
- ensure that children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision maker that they should be placed for adoption (NMS 13)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure that no significant change of a child's care plan is made except at a child's review (Breach of The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 Regulation 6(2))
- ensure that birth parents are given access to, and are actively encouraged to use, a support worker from the time adoption is identified as the plan for the child. The support worker is independent of the child's social worker (NMS 12.3)
- ensure the wishes and feelings of the child's parent, guardian or others are included in the child permanence report (Adoption Guidance Chapter 2 paragraph 30)
- ensure the medical adviser is consulted immediately once the agency is considering adoption for the child to ensure there is full information for the child, the adoption panel and the prospective adopter (Adoption Guidance Chapter 2 paragraph 50)
- ensure the written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. It should be clear that siblings are considered separately (NMS 17.10)
- ensure the agency decision maker follows the approach outlined in the Statutory Guidance when making a decision (Adoption Guidance Chapter 1 paragraph 62)
- ensure the life story book is given to the child and prospective adopters in stages: 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 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7)
- ensure the life story book is written in a simple and age-appropriate style. The explanation of why the child is adopted should not include explicit or distressing details (Adoption Guidance Chapter 5 paragraph 48)
- ensure the children's guide contains information on how a child can find out their rights, how they can contact their independent reviewing officer, the Children's

Rights Director, Ofsted, if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 18.5)

- ensure a written record is kept detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

Children are effectively prepared for their adoptive placements. There is evidence of some good direct work with children, and social workers comment that their access to resources has been improved to facilitate this. For example, last year they were provided with training and toolboxes for direct work that include feelings cards, puppets, books and many other resources. Children's wishes and feelings are generally established and some examples of good practice were seen; however, these are not well documented in the child permanence report to demonstrate that this has been undertaken in all cases.

Siblings are usually placed together unless there is a good reason not to do this. Robust contact arrangements between siblings are put in place if they are not placed together, which include direct contact arranged between the adoptive parents. There are some examples of well-considered assessment and decision making to separate siblings, good planning to bring siblings separately placed in foster care together in an adoptive family, and early placement of very young children with their adopted siblings. However, this is not universally the case. One example of separating siblings demonstrated a less than child-focused approach, lack of robust case management, and ineffective challenge by the systems put in place to monitor these decisions.

A large majority of children are placed within 12 months of the agency decision that they should be placed for adoption. However, there has been unnecessary delay for some children, and as a result, they have not benefited from being in a stable adoptive placement for as long as they should have been. Once children are placed with their adoptive families their outcomes are good. They settle well and develop positive attachments with their adoptive parents. Independent reviewing officers commented that they were impressed with how well children settle in placement. Their educational outcomes also improve. For those children placed for adoption who are of school age, there are good systems to monitor and track educational progress and clear evidence that attendance, attainment, and behaviour improve.

Children benefit from being placed in safe and secure families. The pre-order disruption rate is low, the last disruption being in 2011. Children and families are supported well, both following the placement and once the adoption order is made. For example, post adoption social workers go into schools to develop the staff's awareness of the impact of a young person's previous experiences on their behaviour in school. As a result, the school staff are more able to respond appropriately and instances of exclusion decrease. Young people are positive about the support they

receive and feel it meets their needs.

Quality of service

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

The quality of service is inconsistent. There is evidence of good practice but there are also areas of significant weakness which lead to this area being judged as inadequate. The feedback from those who use the service is positive. One service user commented in relation to a social worker: 'Without her expertise, care and support I would not have got there; she has totally changed my life.' Assessing social workers are described by adopters as 'professional', 'sensitive', and 'thorough'. Those receiving adoption support consider the workers to be, 'really supportive', and, 'a big help'.

The arrangements for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters are thorough and well considered, resulting in adoptive families who have the capacity to meet the needs of children placed with them. Recent improvements in practice have resulted in the agency becoming more welcoming and accessible to enquirers, and the number of adopters approved has doubled in the last year. A birth parent is involved in the preparation training, which has a real impact on adopters' attitudes and commitment to contact, which benefits children as it means their heritage is sustained and they have a positive understanding of their identity. However, only a minority of adopter assessments are approved within the recommended eight months. The agency has been addressing its working practices in relation to the new expectations for timescales in adopter approval which are applicable from July 2013.

The direct work with children is of a reasonable and improving quality. However, the child permanence reports do not consistently reflect the work which has been done with children or their wishes and feelings. Similarly, birth parents' views are not always recorded in the child permanence reports, which means the information for the child, the adoption panel and adopters is more limited. There are occasions when these reports have not been updated in a timely way, resulting in delays in matching and subsequent placement.

There are also occasions when significant decisions about children's plans, including changes to these plans such as the separation of siblings, are made in legal planning meetings which independent reviewing officers do not routinely attend. The Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations 2010 make it very clear that the responsible authority must not make any significant change to a child's care plan unless the proposed change has first been considered at a review of the child's case, unless this is not reasonably practicable. This means the independent reviewing officer who has oversight of the case has not been afforded the opportunity to comment on the appropriateness of the change of plan, or challenge this in a timely way. As their primary focus is to quality assure the care planning process for each child, and to ensure that the child's current wishes and feelings are given full consideration, this aspect of their role is diminished in helping children express their wishes and feelings and understand the implications of any changes.

Birth parents have access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker, and when this support is accessed it is effective in helping birth parents engage with contact in a positive way and understand their own situation. Birth parents have made comments such as, 'I really trust her.' The take-up of the service is very low.

Family finding has been recently strengthened by the development of a specialist family finding team which allows assessing social workers to concentrate on improving the timeliness and volume of adopter assessments. The team is using some creative practice to find families for all children, and forging links with other agencies to improve the timeliness of placements. Family finders were described as, 'Enthusiastic and flexible in getting things moving.' Matching considerations are reasonably well documented in the adoption placement reports to show that children's needs have been identified and the adopters' capacity to meet those needs has been assessed. However, there are occasions when matching considerations have been more focused on process and adopter-led. Additionally, matches have been delayed because medical information has not been available in a timely enough way, to enable the adopters to make an informed decision about whether they can meet the needs of the child, and the adoption panel to make a considered recommendation about the match. Although this is in the process of being addressed, it is currently not resolved.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted and comprises members with a range of personal and professional experience to enable it to make a recommendation. The agency has recognised that the workload of the panel has significantly increased, with more adopter assessments and matches being heard. An additional panel is being formed so that cases are not delayed, and a separate agency adviser to the panel has been appointed to provide more objectivity and independence to this role. There has been an occasion recently when the adoption panel was not robust in its challenge to the agency when a case decision about a match was not convincingly explained. This means its role in independent scrutiny and quality assurance is not as effective as it should be. At present, the twice yearly report which the panel produces on the quality and timeliness of the agency's work is completed by the agency adviser, which again limits the independent quality assurance role and value of this feedback to the agency.

The panel minutes are variable in quality and do not always give an accurate record of the full discussion of the meeting. They also show that siblings are considered jointly rather than separately, and the minutes are not always signed and dated. This is not helpful for an adopted child who may access their records as an adult, as it does not give them a full understanding about how recommendations were reached or that their individual needs were properly considered. This was a recommendation made at the previous inspection which has not been addressed.

Decision making is timely but the current recording of how the decision is reached is not in line with statutory guidance. Accurate recording is important so that an adopted person is able to have a full understanding of the basis on which these

significant decisions are made.

The agency has provided training for social workers on life story books and there is guidance available; some good examples of life story books were seen but they were not all consistently written in appropriate and child-friendly language. Children do not consistently receive their life story books in a timely way. As a result, children do not always have the best information to help them understand their past or their current situation.

There is a range of adoption support available to families. This includes support groups, children and young people's activity groups, social events, and training. Individual work is also carried out by either the post adoption workers (post adoption order), the strengthening families teams or a local adoption support agency which is commissioned by the authority to undertake this work. Once a child is placed with adopters, they receive a visit from a post adoption worker, who explains their role and the services available. This is good practice and an effective way of enabling adopters to understand that they may require support in the future. Adopters spoke of receiving a prompt and helpful response to their requests for support. Contact is also well supported and when issues arise, these are responded to promptly and effectively to keep children safe.

Access to birth records and counselling are carried out by trained social workers who provide a very sensitive, safe and skilled service. Service users have commented that they had, 'an excellent experience', and described the social worker as 'fantastic', and, 'one of the most incredible people I have ever known.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children feel safe and are safe with their adoptive families. The assessment of prospective adoptive parents is thorough to ensure that they are suitable people to care for children. Additionally, the preparation training and home study provide a clear focus on enabling applicants to understand how children's previous experiences of trauma, neglect and abuse can impact on their future behaviour. This helps adopters understand and demonstrate their resilience and capacity to meet the additional needs and challenges which adoptive children may bring. Adopters demonstrated a sound understanding of attachment and how they can promote this to help children settle and feel secure and safe. Preparation training and input from post adoption support workers address the challenges that social networking sites bring, and there were examples of how this information had been used to good effect to promote the well-being of children and young people.

Children's well-being and safety are further assured because they are visited regularly by their own social worker and their adoptive parents' social worker. Statutory reviews take place on time to provide further independent scrutiny of the appropriateness and safety of the placement. Advocacy services are available although not currently used by any of the children in adoptive placements. Children

have written information, in a very well-designed and child-friendly children's guide, about how to access various organisations if they have any concerns or worries. The guide does not, however, include how to access their independent reviewing officer, or the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted who may provide additional avenues of support.

Staff and members of the central list are recruited appropriately. Staff, including those who work with adults, have access to written guidance and training to ensure they know how to respond appropriately to any safeguarding allegations. Staff also demonstrate a strong understanding of the importance of safeguarding the welfare of all adults when making contact with relatives and ensure that support is available to everyone involved.

Leadership and management

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

Leaders and managers demonstrate strategic vision, commitment and passion to improve the adoption service and outcomes for children. They have developed a strategic improvement plan to address the weaknesses identified, and are monitoring this on a regular basis to ensure agreed targets are being met. The plan includes organisational and cultural changes, some of which have already been implemented. These include the creation of one strategic senior manager with responsibility for both locality children's social care and the adoption service, and a dedicated adoption service manager to concentrate on driving improvements in that specific area of service. Training for the newly approved permanence strategy is planned over the next three months. Thus the foundations for transforming the service have already been established.

The proportion of looked after children who left care through adoption is marginally below national figures, being 11% for 2011-12 compared with 13% nationally. However, this figure was substantially lower in 2009-11, showing the authority to be improving in this indicator. It should be noted, however, that very few children over the age of five are subject to an adoption plan. Between 2009-2012 only 2% of children adopted were over five years old, compared to 4% in England and 5% in the statistical neighbour group.

Issues in data collection, which the authority is addressing in October 2013, make it difficult to assess the timeliness of early decision making, but the overall timeliness of children entering care to moving in with adopters is above the threshold target, at an average of 549 days compared to statistical neighbours (621) and England (623), and an improving figure. Once children are subject to an adoption decision, their progress towards this plan is tracked through regular meetings. However, parallel planning is not currently well developed as children are only allocated to a family finder once they have an agency decision for adoption, which may contribute towards delay. The authority acknowledges this and is addressing both ambition for all children and timeliness in its permanence strategy.

The authority has a good analysis of the recruitment needs of the service, including research-based evidence on promoting the use of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adopters. It uses a range of methods to target enquirers. This has resulted in an increase in applications; the authority has doubled the number of adopters approved in the last year, so that it can better meet the needs of children who require an adoptive placement.

The Statement of Purpose is clear and accessible to anyone who wants to know about the service. The Adopters' Charter, along with other helpful information, is also on the website, so that service users know what they can expect from Leicestershire County Council.

There is good engagement with a number of partner organisations such as health, education, and other adoption and adoption support agencies. This ensures that adoptive families can access appropriate support and guidance which the authority may not be able to provide directly out of its own resources.

Currently there is very regular reporting and monitoring in relation to the adoption service, both to the executive and senior managers as it is subject to a radical programme of change. There is a clear recognition of the shortfalls, and although the strategic plan is still in the early stages of implementation to demonstrate significant impact on outcomes for children, there has been change in the structure and ethos to underpin further changes and drive the service forward. Changes include additional posts and a restructuring of the adoption team to provide a dedicated family finding function and release assessing social workers to concentrate on adoption approvals. This has resulted in a more creative approach to family finding and an increase in the number of families approved to adopt.

Nine recommendations were made in the previous inspection, of which two were breaches of regulation. Both breaches have been fully addressed, and all but one of the recommendations for good practice have been met to improve the service for adopters, birth parents and children.

Staff are very committed and passionate about adoption. They receive a good level of relevant training so they are up to date with the most recent developments in adoption, particularly in relation to attachment. They also feel well supported by regular supervision, team meetings and team days which enable them to reflect on their practice and provide a competent and effective service to adoptive families. The record of supervision does not, however, record the time or length, or provide an accurate reflection of the meeting as it is basic in content. Staff speak highly of managerial support, including the increased visibility of more senior managers, and demonstrate a strong awareness of, and commitment to bring about, the necessary changes in practice to improve the service. They feel they have been well supported through the changes to enable them to continue to provide an effective service. There are good links between the adoption team and children's locality teams to promote the sharing of expertise and good communication.

Record keeping is generally satisfactory and secure, although minor shortfalls in content were highlighted for the managers to address, such as not recording information about other siblings on a sibling's case record.

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.