

Essex County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Michael McCleave / Fiona Parker
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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

Essex County Council's adoption service is part of the Schools, Children and Families Directorate and is managed by the Service Manager (Adoption). It undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These include the recruitment, preparation assessment and approval of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees and others and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency provides a service for people wanting to adopt from another country. Preparation in these circumstances is carried out by a registered agency which specialises in this work and assessment and approval is carried out by the adoption service. Support to domestic and inter-country adoption placements is provided by the adoption service and through service level agreements with external agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good adoption service with some strengths. There is a clear focus on providing good outcomes for children through adoption. It is a well managed service both strategically and operationally and has made significant developments and improvements to its practice since the last inspection. It has robust management information systems to plan and direct adoption work. These enable managers to monitor the progress of every child and prospective adopter throughout the adoption journey. These also help to ensure that children with a plan for adoption are placed with suitable, well prepared and supported adopters in a timely manner. There are however, some situations where timescales have not been met. When any delays are evident these are identified early and action is taken to remedy the situation. Every attempt is made to prevent drift in the adoption process. The service undertakes good assessments of prospective adopters that prepare them well to look after children. Assessments of applicants' suitability are sound and this is reflected in the very good quality of prospective adopters' reports. The safety of children placed with adopters is a high priority and appropriate safety checks are carried out on all adults associated with the adoption process. Records are well maintained and contain accurate information about children when adoption plans are being considered. This helps ensure children are placed with closely matched families. The adoption panel carefully scrutinises assessments and plans for children. It makes very clear recommendations along with the reasons for these. This supports the very rigorous decision-making process.

The service provides excellent post adoption support to children and adults affected by adoption. It engages creatively with children, birth parents and adopters to

provide flexible, individualised, proactive and effective support wherever this is needed. Needs are well assessed and careful monitoring ensures that the services provided are effective. Birth parents are offered sensitive support and their views are sought to assist the adoption process. Significant efforts are made to ensure that children are helped to understand their life story; while there are delays in carrying out some of this work managers monitor the work and ensure delays are addressed. The work in this area is of a high quality undertaken by staff who engage with children, adopters and birth families with care and sensitivity. The family finding service works creatively to identify suitable adopters who can meet the individual needs of children. Adopters commented positively about the support received, 'I wish we had been offered this years ago' and 'our child has finally found a way of expressing and controlling the huge emotional cycles and roller coasters he used to be on.'

This service carries out its responsibilities effectively through staff who are passionate about their work on behalf of those children who need safe caring adoptive homes. There is good communication between all involved in the adoption process; this ensures that all are able to contribute their ideas for developing practice and improving the service. It is a service that recognises its shortfalls and demonstrates a commitment to improvement.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection there was one requirement and ten recommendations made. The service was asked to ensure: improvements to the management of child protection concerns are made; panel minutes are appropriately compiled and presented to the agency decision maker; all staff are subject to rigorous checks prior to employment; protocols are developed for specialist advisers; life story work is completed on time; individual work with birth families is reviewed; the letterbox systems are improved; the executive of the council receive periodic reports on the service; all case files contain necessary information and ensure that references for panel members are verified appropriately. The manager of the adoption service has taken appropriate steps to comply with requirement and recommendations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service operates within the local authority's safeguarding procedures. Children report that they feel safe and secure in their adoptive families. Robust checks ensure that children are cared for by adults who meet their needs effectively. This is reflected in the low level of disruptions to adoptive placements. Children feel

confident and as such feel able to express any concerns they may have to appropriate professionals.

Adopters understand their responsibilities to promote healthy lifestyles for their children. The service provides specialist advice and guidance through the medical adviser in any health matters. This support is in addition to that available from health service resources. Adopters are well prepared through the preparation training to recognise any symptoms or concerns of a safeguarding nature. The service has produced very informative leaflets for children informing them about how to protect themselves when using social networking sites. Additionally adopters are provided with appropriate advice and guidance in this area. This promotes a better understanding of social networking sites and the dangers these can pose.

Recruitment checks are thorough and ensure only those who are suitable to work in the adoption service are appointed. The managers and staff of the service are experienced in adoption work and they are appropriately qualified. Adoption staff understand the adoption process well. They clearly focus on promoting the well-being of children. The authority's recruitment procedures are rigorous. These ensure that staff and panel members who work for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable people with the appropriate qualifications to carry out their roles. Prospective adopters also undergo a detailed assessment process. The robust checking processes are aimed at promoting the safety and well-being of the children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children who have been adopted enjoy living in stable caring homes that encourage and support them to lead normal happy lives. Children placed for adoption and their adoptive families are well prepared by staff who demonstrate a passion for their work. The service provides clear information about the support available to prospective adopters both before and after their approval. Introductions of children to their new families are very well managed with care and sensitivity.

The work of the family finding and post adoption support teams is excellent. Both children and adopters receive high quality support thereby enabling them to come to terms with emotional and behavioural issues that could adversely affect a placement. A creative range of support and therapeutic resources are available to children and adopters. The expertise of the staff working in these specialised areas is a strong feature of the adoption service. Some children commented, 'they really helped me with coming to terms about my natural parents' and 'it really helps to speak to other adopted children who have been through the same issues as me.' Direct therapeutic and psychological support is provided individually when needed including Theraplay, attachment work and support within school settings. The post adoption team have developed strong professional links with the educational psychology service to ensure that any specialist educational needs are met. A service level contract is in place with an adoption support agency to provide counselling services. Adopters commented positively about the post adoption support, 'they are fantastic our adoption was

saved by their intervention' and 'they were there when we needed them, we are very thankful.' Support to people affected by adoption, including tracing, birth records counselling, intermediary work and birth parent support is provided by the service. The letterbox arrangements for maintaining contact between adopted children and their birth families are managed effectively despite the growing number of contacts handled through the letterbox system. Intermediary work is also managed well. Demand for this work and the increasing numbers of contacts managed through the letter box are placing a pressure on the service. A new computer based system currently being installed is intended to improve the way this resource is provided.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The views and opinions of those who are involved with the adoption service are valued and actively sought by the managers. There is an open culture within the service that welcomes comments that are both positive and critical; these are used by managers to shape the various services that support the adoption processes. The involvement of adopters, children and birth parents is actively encouraged. For example, adopters and their children play a key role in the production of the adoption newsletter. Children are consulted, where appropriate, during the family finding process for their views about the kind of family they would like to be part of. Staff work sensitively to capture the views of birth parents about adoption and to seek information for inclusion in child permanence reports and life story work. Where English is not the first language of adopters the service ensures that an interpreter is provided. This open culture is embedded within the adoption service and is a good demonstration of its commitment to the promotion of equality and diversity.

The service has improved the timeliness of the work carried on life story books since the last inspection. However, there remain some delays in keeping to timescales and this is being addressed by managers. The quality of work in the production of life story books is high and these books provide children with an insight into their past. Staff work creatively on life story work, with children, to help prepare them for adoption and to support them when they are living with their new families.

When contact between the child and their birth parents is agreed, staff carry out the arrangements with care and sensitivity. When appropriate the wishes and feelings of children about contact are sought as are the views of birth parents; these feelings are carefully considered. There is a recognition by the service of the need to ensure the needs of the child is the primary focus.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Not Judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service actively recruits adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the different needs of children who need permanent families. Assessments of prospective adopters consider their commitment to promoting equality and diversity. The service works positively to ensure that children are matched with adopters who are able to meet their needs. Wherever possible adopters are sought who reflect the cultural heritage of the children; however, this is not an overriding requirement. The adoption service aims to identify the most appropriate family for each individual child whether these are from within the authority or elsewhere. Inter-country adoption is catered for through an experienced social worker in partnership with a national agency specialising in this area of adoption.

The adoption service is well managed at a strategic and operational level. The organisation's senior management executive and the elected members value the work of the adoption service. This is reflected in the way that the budget has been maintained despite the financial challenges facing the local authority as a whole. The managers within the adoption service are experienced professionals and they preside over teams of staff who share a passion for their work on behalf of the children. Adoption processes are well monitored and managed and this ensures that children with a plan for adoption are found suitable and well-prepared families who can meet their needs. The service has been experiencing an increase in applications from adults who wish to adopt children. There has been a 50% increase in approvals compared to the previous financial year. Staff numbers have remained the same throughout this period. Timescales for approving prospective adopters and for placing children have not always been met. However, a robust management monitoring system is now in operation. This system provides clear up-to-date intelligence on the timescales for each adopter and child as they progress through the adoption journey. Where any delays are identified these are highlighted and reasons given for these. This has enabled managers to make operational changes, as required, in order to ensure that timescales are improved. Some delays are out of the control of the service due to personal circumstances of prospective adopters.

The quality of records maintained about children and adopters is good. Effective arrangements exist to ensure that records relating to children's adoptions are maintained in a safe and secure environment. This ensures that confidentiality is maintained to a high level. All records are monitored by managers who provide the staff with effective leadership and supervision. Processes are similarly well monitored and managed to ensure that the service operates efficiently and with minimum delay. Adoption staff and their managers are committed to their roles and work to a high standard. Professional working relationships between the adoption service and children's social workers are good and this helps to ensure that there is effective planning for children. The service provides its staff with very good opportunities for professional development. The service operates from suitable premises with appropriate storage arrangements and information systems in place.

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 adoption panels make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopters formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure the adoption panel makes a considered recommendation on the proposed placement of a child with particular prospective adopters within six months of the adoption agency's decision-maker deciding that the child should be placed for adoption (NMS 17.8)
- ensure that 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 ten working days of the adoption ceremony. (NMS 2.7)