

East Riding of Yorkshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith / Sue Winson
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Responsible individual	Pamela Allen
Date of last inspection	15/09/2011

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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 before and after approval. A service to adopted people to assist and support them to access records and birth records counselling and support for birth parents are provided through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved 7 adoptive families in the year preceding this inspection. It placed 6 children for adoption in the same year. At the time of the inspection, there were 21 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement. However, eight of these children were about to be matched and four had been approved for adoption only a few weeks prior to the inspection.

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 **good**.

This is a good adoption service which produces good outcomes for children through adoption.

The adoption process is generally timely. Plans for adoption are not usually developed early enough and the agency decision that a child should be placed for adoption is also not always made as soon as it should be. This introduces some delay at the early stages of the adoption process. However, once the decision is made children are now placed in a timely manner.

Children are placed with prospective adopters who are very well assessed, prepared and trained. Matching is carried out in a very careful manner. Outstanding levels of support are provided to children and their adoptive families. This means that very few prospective adoptive placements disrupt and children live in stable, well

supported families who are able to meet their needs well. The adoption service's practice of holding life appreciation days for every child is excellent. The quality of these days and the reports produced are of an extremely high standard. The entire authority and its partner agencies demonstrate a genuine commitment to these events. Children's reports from these days provide an excellent source of information by which children can be helped to understand their past.

Support provided to birth parents is positive and proactive and arrangements to provide post adoption support are good. Children's contact with their birth families is positively promoted wherever this is appropriate.

The completion of life story books does not always take place soon enough to support children through the adoption process or to help them settle into their new families. Similarly, arrangements for updating child permanence reports are not consistent which means that current information is not always identifiable. Additionally, some elements of the agency's recording and the way information is managed is not always good enough to protect the confidentiality of the information.

A notable feature of this local authority is its strong commitment to adoption for all children who need this. In practice this means that it is highly successful in finding adoptive families for older children, those from large sibling groups and those with very complex needs.

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 children have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background (NMS 2)
- develop a permanence plan at the four month review and make a decision for adoption within two months of a review where adoption has been identified as the permanence plan (Adoption and Children Act 2002, statutory guidance first revision 2011, chapter 2,2)
- clarify the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the agency's files, on the child's and prospective adopter's case records. (NMS 27.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children are generally well prepared for their adoptions. The authority places a number of older children with adoptive families. It works well with the children and their foster carers to help them prepare. For example pictures and audiobooks are used with children to help them recognise their adopters when they first meet. Foster

carers keep memory boxes for children and these feed in to the process of developing their life story books. These books are not always ready in time to help prepare children for their move or to help them understand their situation when they have moved into their new families. For example, one young person said that they had to wait three years to receive the life story book. Children highly value these books when they receive them. The same young person said that they 'loved' the book when it was received.

The authority's process for updating child permanence reports between the time the decision is made that a child should be placed for adoption and the matching panel are not consistent. This means it is not always possible to identify clearly whether information has been updated or not. This could hamper decision making. Additionally, children reading their reports in the future may not be helped to fully understand what happened to them and how they changed and developed during the adoption process.

However, direct work undertaken with children is good and the adoption service is creative in the way it provides or seeks support for children using partner agencies and commissioned services where necessary. The contribution of life appreciation days and the excellent children's reports from these days provide a good source of information and support for children. Children receive profiles of prospective adopters and, where they are able, are helped to choose, with guidance, the right family for them.

The adoption team's support workers are closely involved with children and their adoptive families for as long as is required. Social events are organised and children meet with each other at adoption support events. Recently, adopted children's participation groups have been developed and more are planned.

Historically, statistics show that children being placed for adoption by the authority have experienced some delay throughout the process. This led to some children waiting a long time in care for an adoptive family. However, the authority successfully places a high proportion of older children, siblings and those with complex needs with adoptive families. This takes longer than it does for younger children with less pronounced needs. The authority has worked hard to address this situation and now places children in a much more timely manner. For example, the majority of children placed with prospective adopters in the last year were placed within 12 months of the agency decision that they should be adopted and the majority of children in this group were older or had complex needs. This commitment by the authority to seek permanence for children through adoption despite their age or complex needs is commendable. It demonstrates a genuine commitment to equality for disadvantaged children. There is still some delay for children at the early stages of planning and decision making which if addressed would reduce delay further.

Family finding, linking and matching is done with a high degree of care and rigour. The agency uses its connections, within the consortium and more widely, very effectively to find families for children it cannot place with its own adopters. It works

very hard to try and place children in the same family as their older siblings if at all possible. Adoption social workers start to work with children as soon as adoption plans are made and use this knowledge to assist the matching process. Matches are made very carefully and are fully supported by excellent information sharing. The practice of holding life appreciation days for all children being matched with prospective adopters is fully embedded and all parties demonstrate an impressive commitment to this. Information shared during these days helps to support prospective adopters' decision making as well as providing excellent information for later life reference. This very careful matching is supported by the effective preparation of adopters and excellent levels of adoption support. It leads to good outcomes for children who experience very high levels of stability within adoptive families and very infrequent disruptions.

Children adopted through this local authority are kept safe and secure and make good progress. Assessments of prospective adopters and their homes check their suitability. On-going support and monitoring ensures that children are safe and well cared for. The adoption service's careful and thorough preparation, training and support for adopters means they are well equipped to promote children's development. Strong work with partner agencies and other local authorities helps ensure that children receive very good support. For example, there is a strong commitment from the authority to promoting children's learning and development. Adoption support workers work closely with adopters and children's schools to promote children's education and the adoption service ensures that suitable education and health support is in place before children are placed with their prospective adopters. Health advice and guidance for the adoption service and its prospective adopters is excellent. The medical adviser is extremely committed to the adoption service and provides very good advice to support the matching process. Adopters meet with the medical adviser when placements are being considered and support continues after children are in place to ensure their health needs are fully addressed.

Children and their birth families benefit from the adoption service's strong and creative commitment to contact. As well as managing indirect contact through letterbox, the agency supports and monitors some very complex sibling contact arrangements. This helps children to maintain a link with their families and their heritage and to understand things that may have happened to them.

Quality of service

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

The adoption service has good arrangements to assess, prepare and approve prospective adopters for its children. Information evenings provide enquirers with information which is of high quality. This includes presentations from previous adopters and people adopted as children. Enquirers are invited to apply based on their own characteristics and the adoption service's knowledge of the needs of children requiring families or who may do so in the future.

Assessments and the reports produced from these are good. They are thorough and evaluative and consider attitudes, competence to adopt as well as suitability to care for children. Preparation training is good and supported by further training opportunities. Assessments are carried out in a timely manner that is sensitive to families' needs and situations and prepares people well to adopt. For example one prospective adopter said, 'We were really well prepared by the whole process.' Arrangements to consider applications to adopt at the authority's panel and to make decisions based on the panel's recommendation are suitable.

Outstanding levels of adoption support are provided to children and their adoptive families. This helps support families to provide a stable, positive and loving home to their adopted children. A great deal of on-going support is provided through training, support events and social activities. For example, adoptive families have undertaken nurturing training provided over ten sessions. A regular group, known as 'Care Bears', for adoptive parents and their young children takes place. There is also a 'Parents of Teenagers' group as well as annual events such as family days and Christmas events. Where more specific and specialised support is required the adoption service is creative in the way this is provided. A real focus is placed on supporting children and their families; this is not time limited and is provided directly, through partner agencies or is individually commissioned where necessary. Where the authority's children are placed with adopters in other parts of the country the authority makes effective partnerships to ensure the needs of children are met. This extremely high level of support is a key factor in keeping adoptive families together and preventing breakdowns or disruptions. For example one adopter said, 'We would have disrupted if it had not been for the support given to us.'

The adoption service works hard to seek information from birth parents to gain their views and reflect these in planning documentation and children's information. Children's life story books contain information about birth families and the agency works positively to encourage contact between adopted children and their birth parents where this is appropriate. The authority's letterbox is reviewed frequently to ensure that details are up to date and direct contact is well and creatively supported where it occurs. The authority commissions independent support for birth parents from an independent agency. Support is proactively offered to birth parents on a number of occasions. Consequently, the take up of this support is high.

The adoption service has effective arrangements for providing birth records counselling and intermediary services. This is also commissioned from an adoption support agency. This contract is well managed and monitored to ensure it meets people's needs and is delivered promptly.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The working practices of this adoption service help promote children's safety and wellbeing. The recruitment of people working for the adoption service and of prospective adopters is thorough and careful in checking their suitability. This helps

protect children. The homes of applicants to adopt are assessed to ensure they provide physical safety. Prospective adopters are well prepared to understand the potential impact of abuse in children and young people and they receive excellent support to deal with any issues this may cause. Training for adopters covers matters such as bullying, discrimination and equality and diversity matters. Strong and proactive support from the adoption team also helps them deal with problems their adopted children may face.

The adoption service works closely with other parts of the local authority, including safeguarding services and the Local Authority Designated Officer, in situations in which concerns arise or allegations are made. This ensures that the correct action is taken to protect children.

Children and young people have access to support and advice throughout the adoption process and while receiving adoption support. Information about how to access independent people is included in the children's guide to adoption and adoption support. Adoption social workers and support workers know children and young people well and help them express their needs.

Leadership and management

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

The local authority has closely examined its adoption processes to ensure that it provides an appropriate service. Children are placed for adoption with prospective adopters who are well trained, prepared and supported and very well matched to their needs. However, this is not always done in a sufficiently timely manner. The authority has a strong commitment to equal opportunities for its children and works hard to find adoptive families for children often regarded as 'hard to place'. This can mean that it takes longer to find placements for these children. The authority has significantly reduced the length of time children remain within the 'looked after' system prior to their adoption over the last 12 to 18 months.

However, plans for children's permanence are not developed early enough. In less than one third of cases plans for adoption are considered at the child's four month review. This means that time is lost straight away in many cases which the authority is not always able to recover later on in the process. Additionally, the decision that a child should be placed for adoption is not considered within two months of the adoption plan being developed in around half of cases. Improvements in the timeliness in these situations would help make the entire adoption process more timely and reduce the length of time children spend in care before they are adopted.

The adoption team do not have the capacity to recruit and assess all the prospective families it needs for the authority's children. However, the service works very effectively with the local consortium, other local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to locate the right adopters for the authority's children. This means that adopters are found for all the authority's children although there may be some

additional delay for children with more complex needs. The local authority has recognised this and is taking action to increase the number of adopters it approves by using independent assessors on a commissioned basis.

The authority works effectively with other agencies with which it works or from which it commissions services. The authority has clear commissioning and monitoring procedures and is working to develop a framework that will allow the prompt commissioning of individualised support arrangements including therapeutic support.

Workers in the adoption team are well trained, qualified and experienced. The team is settled which has allowed it to develop close working relationships with partner agencies. The team has a strong focus on the importance of adoption and is very reflective in its practice. Consequently the team learns from any problems it encounters in its work as well as from its successes, which helps it to continue to improve its practice further.

Senior managers and the local authority's elected members maintain a close oversight of the activities of the adoption service and understand its significance for the overall operation of children's services. Within the adoption team quality monitoring arrangements are generally sound but some records do not evidence that this is fully successful. For example, information retained at times means that confidentiality could be breached and information is not always clearly or identifiably updated.

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 local authority adoption agencies.