

Inspection report

West Lothian Council - Adoption Service Adoption Service

Children and Families Resource Team
Lomond House
Beveridge Square
Dedridge
Livingston EH54 6QF

Inspected by: Suzanne Beard
(Care Commission Officer)

Type of inspection: Announced

Inspection completed on: 21 January 2008

Service Number

CS2004083333

Service name

West Lothian Council - Adoption Service

Service address

Children and Families Resource Team
Lomond House
Beveridge Square
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Provider Number

SP2003002601

Provider Name

West Lothian Council

Inspected By

Suzanne Beard
Care Commission Officer

Inspection Type

Announced

Inspection Completed

21 January 2008

Period since last inspection

14 months

Local Office Address

Stuart House
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EH21 7PB.

Introduction

West Lothian Council Adoption Service provides an adoption service for children and young people aged 0 – 18 years and their families who are assessed as in need of this service and who live in or have connections with West Lothian. The agency recruits a small number of adoptive parents to provide families for those children who cannot live with their birth parents or extended family members. Most of their adoption work is contracted to two local voluntary organisations with whom West Lothian Council has a service level agreement. The children's needs have been assessed and subsequently approved by the agency decision maker as best met in an adoptive family that will meet the child's needs throughout their childhood and beyond.

The service is delivered by the Resource Team and is based within social work offices in Livingston. The Resource Team is managed by a Resource Team Manager, who has responsibility for one team manager, ten social workers and three administrative staff.

At the time of the inspection, there were 12 adoptive families looking after 13 children receiving support from the Resource Team. There were four children registered as in need of an adoptive family awaiting a placement. There were no assessments in progress of prospective adopters.

The service was registered in November 2005.

The aims and objectives of the service are to provide a suitable placement through adoption for those children registered as in need of this resource.

The inspection was undertaken by Suzanne Beard and Isobel Reilly, Care Commission Officers between 21 January 2008 and 8 February 2008.

Basis of Report

Before the Inspection

The Annual Return

The service submitted a completed Annual Return as requested by the Care Commission.

The Self-Evaluation Form

The service submitted a self-evaluation form as requested by the Care Commission.

Views of service users

It was not possible or appropriate to discuss adoption with any of the children placed for adoption.

Regulation Support Assessment

This service was inspected after a Regulation Support Assessment (RSA) was carried out to determine the intensity of inspection necessary. The RSA is an assessment undertaken by the Care Commission Officer (CCO) which considers: complaints activity, changes in the provision of the service, nature of notifications made to the Care Commission by the service (such as absence of a manager) and action taken upon requirements. The CCO will also have considered how the service responded to situations and issues as part of the RSA.

This assessment resulted in this service receiving a low RSA score and so a low intensity

inspection was required as a result. The inspection was then based upon the relevant inspection focus area(s) and follow up on any recommendations and requirements from previous inspections, complaints or other regulatory activity. All adoption agencies will be inspected against the National Care Standards Adoption Agencies in 2007/2008 as these services are relatively new to regulation.

During the inspection process

Staff at inspection

The Resource Team Manager, team manager and two social workers were interviewed. Two social workers of children were interviewed.

Evidence

A sample of two adoptive parents were interviewed in their homes in accordance with the Care Commission guidance for this size of service. The adoptive parent's records were examined as were those of the children placed with them. Both adoptive families had previously looked after the children on a fostering basis. One other file was examined where an adoption placement had broken down.

The following policies, procedures and guidance were seen:

Information pack for prospective adopters

Referral to adoption panel procedures

Pre-permanency review process

Disruption process

Linking meeting process

Matching procedures

Procedure for co-ordinators of placement by adoption panel

Annual team plan

Library materials

Newsletters

West Lothian Council- Children and Families Resource Team web-site.

Inspection Focus Area, Child Protection and the following National Care Standards for 2007/08, Adoption Agencies were inspected:

Standard 1: Choosing adoptive parents

Standard 2: Your adoption plan

Standard 3: Getting your views across

Standard 4: Being sure of what's happening

Standard 5: Choosing your new family

Standard 6: Moving in

Standard 7: Keeping in touch

Standard 8: After you move in

Standard 9: Getting help

Standard 32: Providing a good quality service.

The inspection also took into account the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001, Scottish Statutory Instrument 2002/114, the Adoption (Scotland) Act 1978, and the Adoption Agencies (Scotland) Regulations 1996.

Action taken on requirements in last Inspection Reports

There were three requirements made at the last inspection.

1. The organisation must employ a system to record in staff personnel files that the applicant's skills, experience and qualifications have been checked.

This is in order to comply with: SSI 2002/114 Regulation 9 (2) (a) Records.
SSSC Codes of Practice - Employer.

Timescales for implementation: 3 months from the publication of this report.

This requirement had been met.

2. The organisation must develop a recording system to record that the employer has checked professional registers.

This is in order to comply with: SSI 2002/114 Regulation 9 (2) (c) Fitness of Employees & Regulation 19 (2) (d) Check criminal records and relevant registers.
SSSC Codes of Practice - Employer.

Timescales for implementation: 3 months from the publication of this report.

This had not been met and is carried forward and referred to under Standard 32 of this report.

3. The service must ensure that it has evidence that all social work students have a suitable Disclosure Scotland clearance and appropriate written references prior to the start of their placement.

This is in order to comply with SSI 2002/114 Regulation (9) (2) (a) - Fitness of Employees.
Timescales for implementation: 3 months from the publication of this report.

This requirement had been met.

Comment on Self-Evaluation

The service provided a self evaluation form which included information with regards to aspects of the National Care Standards being inspected. Strengths and areas for development were identified.

View of Service Users

Due to the age and stage of the children placed for adoption, it was not possible or appropriate to speak with them.

View of Carers

Two adoptive families were interviewed in person. Both had previously looked after the children on a fostering basis. Their feedback is incorporated in the relevant standards in this report.

Regulations / Principles

Regulation :

Strengths

Areas for Development

National Care Standards

National Care Standard Number 1: Adoption Agencies - Choosing Adoptive Parents

Strengths

The adoption work undertaken by the Resource Team was in the main related to step-parent adoption and the assessment of foster carers who had expressed a wish to adopt an existing foster child in their care. Both of the adoptive families seen had adopted a child who they had looked after on a fostering basis. Most of the statutory adoption work was contracted to two voluntary adoption agencies with whom the agency had service level agreements. These agreements were reviewed on an annual basis by the manager of the service. The manager of the service also met regularly with these agencies to monitor the work undertaken.

The service had procedures in place for the assessment of prospective adopters including the assessment of foster carers who wished to be considered as adopters for children currently placed with them. The service used standard documentation devised by a nationally recognised organisation. There was evidence that necessary checks had been undertaken including medical checks, Enhanced Disclosure Scotland checks and references. Appropriate adoption panel procedures were in place for the consideration of the assessments. The service had recently appointed a second experienced adopter on to the panel.

Areas for Development

The service was currently maintaining good standards.

National Care Standard Number 2: Adoption Agencies - Your Adoption Plan

Strengths

Examination of relevant documentation, including the child's Pre-Permanency panel report and minute, where the recommendation to proceed to permanency or adoption was made, demonstrated the report on the child was considered at the adoption panel within 12 weeks of the review in most cases. The manager of the service advised that extraordinary panels would be arranged to ensure that there were no delays in progressing plans for children. This was monitored by the manager of the service and the adoption panel and there was evidence of such panels having taken place.

The service had comprehensive procedures in place for the linking, matching and introduction process for all children identified as in need of adoption placements. A coordinator was identified following the matching meeting ensuring the planning process for children moving to adopters was as smooth as possible. Where appropriate, the agency used a recognised publication where children's needs for an adoptive family were advertised nationally.

The service had a system in place for ensuring that identifying a suitable adoptive family for a child was undertaken without delay. The manager of the service met regularly with the two voluntary organisations with whom West Lothian Council had service level agreements to discuss the needs of the children waiting for an adoptive family.

The service had a representative member on a national forum which met on a quarterly basis to discuss and share issues relating to adoption. The manager of the service was a member of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Scottish Committee.

Areas for Development

The service was currently maintaining good standards.

National Care Standard Number 3: Adoption Agencies - Getting Your Views Across

Strengths

Resource Team staff and managers advised that children's views would be elicited by the placing social worker, in conjunction with the foster carers and recorded in the assessment form presented to the adoption panel. There was some evidence that direct work had been undertaken by placing social workers to obtain a child's views of adoption. This included where children had some communication difficulties. Foster carers, with their link worker, had worked with children to help them understand adoption and used appropriate resources to help with this.

Examination of documentation presented to the adoption panel for assessing the needs of children evidenced that the social worker's recommendation was clear as to why adoption was deemed to be in the child's best interest. Alternatives to adoption were discussed as were contact arrangements. There was evidence that social workers had obtained legal advice and this was recorded in the adoption panel minutes.

There was some evidence of birth parents wishes being taken into account with regards to the adoption plans.

There was evidence that consideration was given to contact with siblings.

West Lothian Council operated a number of "Having Your Say" groups for children and young people who are looked after by the Local Authority. These groups provide children and young people with an independent voice. Consideration was being given to integrating children with disabilities into the existing "Having Your Say" groups. This would provide children and young people who had a level of communication difficulties and who were to be adopted with some opportunities to express their views.

Areas for Development

In discussion with placing social workers it was clear that they made efforts to obtain the views of children with regards to adoption and help the child understand what adoption meant. This work was often in partnership with foster carers. Clearly obtaining the views of children who had a level of communication difficulties may have posed extra challenges to social workers. However, despite a range of tools and skills training for placing social workers, such as, raising their awareness of interactive communication methods and training in signing, not all staff spoken with felt they were provided with sufficient tools and resources to ensure that children with disabilities had an understanding of adoption and their views of the plans for adoption were obtained. It was not always clear in adoption reports to the adoption panel and in adoption panel minutes that full consideration had been given to how children with disabilities views were obtained.
(See Recommendation 1)

National Care Standard Number 4: Adoption Agencies - Being Sure of What's Happening

Strengths

Resource Team staff stated that both they and foster carers worked directly with children to explain the adoption process. Placing social workers confirmed that this was the case.

Resource Team staff confirmed that children were provided with information about their new family as part of the preparation for the move to their adoptive parents. Adopters were expected to provide photos and written information about themselves, their family and home to assist in this process.

The service was in the process of piloting a baby memory box for children where the long term plan was unclear. This information, which included photographs, cards from birth parents and written information regarding the child's development, would be available for either birth parents or alternative carers/adopters depending on the planning outcomes. One adoptive parent who was piloting the memory box stated: "I think it is great. It is a really nice box to keep all the things in and keep them safe for the child in the future".

There was evidence in one case of adopters being instrumental in obtaining photographs of a child's birth parent and half sibling.

There was evidence of life story work taking place and where possible, birth families were involved in gathering relevant information and photographs and mementos for the child. The service had a wide range of books including BAAF "Managing Contact" which included helpful information on keeping memories and histories alive.

The manager of the service advised that the adoption panel had been considering the best way to obtain children's views and on one occasion had met with a child outwith the adoption panel setting.

Areas for Development

There was some evidence in the assessments of the needs of children that the views and feelings of children were obtained. However, this should be more detailed.

(See Recommendation 1)

National Care Standard Number 5: Adoption Agencies - Choosing your new family

Strengths

A nationally recognised framework to assess prospective adoptive families was used by the agency. Information regarding the children who were referred for adoption was collated and presented using a nationally recognised form.

Information regarding the children's history was found to be satisfactory in most cases other than those referred to below.

As both adopters interviewed had looked after the children on a fostering basis and they knew the child's situation well, they were of the view that they had been provided with all relevant information regarding the child and they were able to make a decision to proceed with the adoption.

There was evidence that health assessments were undertaken by appropriate specialists and this information was given consideration in the matching process. Adopters were able to meet with medical specialists to discuss specific issues in relation to the child. Additional equipment needs were also confirmed by the panel as were adoption allowances. There was evidence of this in adoption panel minutes.

The Looked After Children (LAC) nurse was able to support prospective adopters and give advice and guidance where necessary.

The service had appropriate procedures in place for the matching of children's needs to families and social workers interviewed within the Resource Team presented as skilled and experienced in this area of work.

The agency had an extensive library of literature and leaflets with regards to adoption. Placing social workers confirmed that they were able to access this material. Adoptive families were also able to use this material, for example BAAF "Preparing Children for Permanency".

There was evidence that a "letter for life" had been prepared for a child who was adopted. Adopters would be able to share this with the child as they got older thus ensuring that she/he had information regarding her/his journey to adoption and have some understanding of the circumstances of the adoption.

Areas for Development

Examination of case files found that in one situation there had been a gap in the assessment of a child's needs which resulted in the likelihood that the prospective adoptive family did not have comprehensive information with regards to the child.

(See Recommendation 2)

National Care Standard Number 6: Adoption Agencies - Moving In

Strengths

The agency had clear procedures in place for arranging introductions and the child's move to a family. Coordination meetings were required to take place as soon after the matching panel as possible. Records examined confirmed that all key people attended the coordination meetings including the child's foster carer. Coordination meeting minutes detailed that issues of the child's health, education and contact were discussed. There was evidence in case files examined of a number of coordination meetings held to ensure plans progressed smoothly.

The manager of the service advised that there were no unnecessary delays in the court processes. There had been occasions when Resource team staff had accompanied prospective adopters to the court to support them. The Resource team manager advised that there was a "buddy" system whereby adopters who had experienced the court process could support adopters about to go through the court process.

Areas for Development

In one situation examined, the introductory period had proved to be difficult for both the foster carer and the prospective adoptive family. While a programme of introductions had been agreed by all parties, there had not been sufficient detail agreed with the foster carers. (See Recommendation 3)

National Care Standard Number 7: Adoption Agencies - Keeping in Touch

Strengths

There was evidence in the files examined that the matching and coordination processes identified and agreed contact issues. Staff in the Resource Team advised that, where possible, adopters were encouraged to meet with birth families. The manager of the service advised that in most situations, letter-box contact arrangements were undertaken by one of the local voluntary organisations with whom West Lothian Council had a service level agreement. There were situations where staff in the Resource Team managed letter-box contact arrangements.

The self evaluation form highlighted that recent training for panel members had focussed on contact issues drawing on current research to inform discussions.

There was evidence that consideration was given to contact with siblings and half siblings in the future.

Areas for Development

The manager of the service advised that discussion and debate had taken place with the adoption panel regarding who was to have responsibility for direct and indirect contact for children who had been adopted and that procedures would be amended accordingly. This will be monitored at the next inspection.

The self evaluation form highlighted that West Lothian Council was giving consideration to extending ways to support post-adoption contact. Plans were in place for Resource Team staff to attend workshops in relation to this. Progress in relation to this will be monitored at the next inspection.

National Care Standard Number 8: Adoption Agencies - After you move in

Strengths

Appropriate and relevant ongoing support to children and young people was provided by the agency. There was evidence that an independent consultant had been made available to support an adoptive family. The service was also able to access the support, advice and guidance of an educational psychologist if required. One adopter commented that they received excellent support from their link worker and commented: "She/He is great and always there to listen to me and help".

The agency's adoption policy and procedures referred in general to post adoption support and that this should be made available should adoptive families require the service.

Areas for Development

There were situations where children's birth family situation changed and consideration was given to how best to explain this to a child with a level of communication difficulties.
(See Recommendation 1)

The service did not provide adopters with written information with regards to post adoption support available or relevant contact details for when post agency support had ceased.
(See Recommendation 4)

National Care Standard Number 9: Adoption Agencies - Getting Help

Strengths

West Lothian Council had provided a wide range of services to children and their adoptive families. There was evidence that the service had accessed an independent consultant to work directly with families on the quality of a child's attachment. Discussion with adopters and Resource Team staff and the examination of records confirmed that adoption allowances were considered.

West Lothian Council's service level agreement with two local voluntary organisations included their provision of post adoption counselling to all service users.

The service had clear procedures in place for when any adoption placement disrupted. Disruption meetings took place within three months of the placement ending. One file was examined where an adoption placement had broken down and there was evidence that appropriate action had been taken.

Resource Team staff and other West Lothian Council employees had been provided with the opportunity to hear about the new adoption legislation.

Areas for Development

The service was currently maintaining good standards

National Care Standard Number 32: Adoption Agencies - Providing a Good Quality

Service

Strengths

Only the elements of this standard which relate to previous requirements and recommendations at the last inspection and to the parts of the standard in relation to the inspection focus area as well as quality assurance systems have been inspected.

Staff interviewed confirmed that they received regular supervision. Further, that supervision was relevant to the work staff undertook and that supervision time was protected. Staff commented positively on the opportunities afforded for informal supervision by the senior staff with an "open door" policy. All staff had individual Personal Development Plans which were reviewed on an annual basis. The staff team had regular team development sessions and an annual team plan was produced.

The service had an appropriate child protection policy and procedures in place and staff were aware of these. The service had copies of the local area child protection guidelines.

Foster carer preparation included an input on child protection. Post approval training in child protection issues and working with children who had been sexually abused was provided by a recognised national organisation.

There was evidence that files were checked by senior staff.

Areas for Development

The service had two requirements and one recommendation from the Care Commission's safer recruitment audit of inspection year 2006/2007.

A follow up safer recruitment audit was completed on 20 March 2008.

One requirement, relating to the checking and recording of skills, experience and qualifications of applicants, and the recommendation, relating to the need to undertake all necessary checks on employees who transfer from a temporary to a permanent post within the organisation, have been satisfied.

One requirement relating to the need to record that professional registers have been checked has not been satisfied and is carried forward.

(See Requirement 1)

One new requirement has been made regarding the need to obtain two satisfactory references.

(See Requirement 2)

Enforcement

There has been no enforcement action against this service since the last inspection.

Other Information

There were three recommendations made at the last inspection.

1. Information leaflets for prospective adopters should include details regarding the range of needs of children who are waiting for adoptive families across the U.K. In addition, reference to support that may be available in relation to legal expenses should be included.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies. Standard 18: and 18:6 Getting Information.

Information for prospective adopters examined confirmed that this recommendation had been met.

2. Information provided to prospective adopters should be further developed to: Ensure that applicants are made aware that they can self refer to the voluntary adoption agencies and the differences between adoption and permanent foster care is clear.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies. Standard 19:1 Getting a Response.

Information for prospective adopters examined confirmed that this recommendation had been met.

3. The organisation should, in line with their policies and procedures, consistently carry out all relevant checks on employees who transfer from a temporary post to a permanent post within the organisation.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies. Standard 32:1 Providing a Good Quality Service.

This recommendation had been met.

Requirements

1. The organisation must develop a recording system to record that the employer has checked professional registers.

This is in order to comply with: SSI 2002/114 Regulation 9 (2) (c) Fitness of Employees & Regulation 19 (2) (d) Check criminal records and relevant registers.

SSSC Codes of Practice - 1.2 Employer.

2. The recruitment records should evidence that two satisfactory references were sought for each person employed.

This is in order to comply with: SSI 2002/114 Regulation 9 (1) Fitness of employees.

SSSC Codes of Practice - Employer.

In making these requirements the following National Care Standards have been taken into account. National Care Standards Adoption Agencies Standard 32:1 Providing a Good Quality Service.

Timescales for implementation: 3 months from the publication of this report.

Recommendations

1. The service provider should ensure the views of all children are obtained with regards to

the plan for adoption. These views should clearly be recorded in detail in the report to the adoption panel and there should be evidence that these views have been discussed at the adoption panel.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies Standard 3: 2, 3. Getting your views across.

2. The service provider should ensure that a comprehensive assessment of a child's needs and behaviours is undertaken and the information presented in full to prospective adopters.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies. Standard 5:1 Choosing your new family.

3. The service provider should ensure that detailed consideration is given in the introductory stage to how best to support foster carers in the task of enabling a child to move on from their care to an adoptive family.

National Care Standards- Adoption Agencies. Standard 6:1 Moving In.

4. The service provider should develop written information on their post-adoption services for all users: children and young people adopted adults, adoptive families and birth parents.

National Care Standards - Adoption Agencies. Standard 8:3

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