

Action for Children - Adoption and Foster Care South West

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC051816
Inspection date	21 October 2008
Inspector	Heather Chaplin / Romana Young
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	Action for Children Adoption and Foster Care South West Weir House 93 Whitby Road BRISTOL BS4 4AR
Telephone number	0117 3005360
Email	swaafp@actionforchildren.org.uk
Registered person	Action for Children
Registered manager	Jo Jenkin
Responsible individual	Sue Cotton
Date of last inspection	6 July 2007

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Cripins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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

Action for Children is one of the United Kingdom's largest children's charities. The aim of the charity is to help those children in greatest need. To this end, the organisation provides a wide range of services for children, of which adoption is just one part.

Formerly known as NCH and recently re-branded, Action for Children was founded in 1869 by Dr. Thomas Bowman Stephenson, a Methodist minister. Although the organisation still has strong links with, and receives support from, the Methodist Church, it positively welcomes staff and volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and religions.

Action for Children has been an approved adoption agency since 1926. There are five established adoption projects throughout the country, including the London Black Families Project specifically to meet the needs of black, Asian and dual heritage children.

The South West project works in partnership within the South West Adoption Consortium. It is unique within Action for Children in that it combines a fostering service and an adoption service in one location.

The adoption service objectives include:

- recruiting, preparing and assessing a wide range of prospective adoptive parents who have the necessary qualities to meet the needs of children requiring a placement.
- providing a post-placement social work service to adoptive families through individual, family and group work and training.
- providing independent contracted adoption support and birth family support services to two neighbouring local authorities.

The team consists of one full-time equivalent (FTE) service manager, a 0.8 FTE team manager who works mainly but not exclusively with adoption, and 1.2 FTE team managers who have a similar role focusing mainly on fostering. Both managers share the supervision of the 6.3 FTE social workers, who carry mixed caseloads across the adoption and fostering services. One part-time member of staff is the marketing and recruitment officer, and 2.8 FTE administrative staff support both areas of work. One part-time social worker concentrates on post-adoption support work.

Children referred to Action for Children are likely to be those whom local authorities find more difficult to place. These will include children of all ages from African, African/Caribbean, Asian and mixed heritage backgrounds, brother and sister groups, children with a range of disabilities, and children of school age as well as younger children whose parents have mental health problems or who abuse drugs/alcohol.

Summary

This announced adoption service inspection was very positive, with no actions or recommendations made. Some minor areas were discussed with the service managers during

the feedback meeting, and in most cases these were areas that they themselves had already identified as needing further work.

The overall quality rating is good with some outstanding elements, in particular, the very high quality service provided to birth family members and those in receipt of post-adoption support services.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The first inspection of this service against the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services took place from 6 - 8 July 2004. At that inspection, six requirements (now known as actions) and nine good practice recommendations were made.

On 3 February 2006, Commission for Social Care Inspection inspectors visited to follow up these requirements and recommendations. Most had been satisfactorily addressed and at that inspection, four good practice recommendations were made.

At the present inspection, three of these four recommendations had been addressed in full. The fourth related to the complaints procedure, which still does not inform readers sufficiently about contacting Ofsted, but no recommendation has been made on this occasion, because the leaflet to which the public has access does contain this information, so the work is partially complete.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency has a written recruitment plan and specialises in placing older, disabled or hard to place children who may be from minority ethnic backgrounds. The agency has a good track record in achieving placements for children based on assessment of need, and is used by local authorities around the country. Contact is made by email or phone on a regular and frequent basis by authorities looking for placements.

Evidence was seen that the agency matches children with adopters who can meet their cultural and religious needs, including groups of siblings and children with disabilities. Any decisions made to separate sibling groups, for example, if one placement is disrupted, are clearly recorded. Adopters from the Asian-UK Muslim and African Caribbean-UK communities praised the agency's approach to recruitment and one adopter said that the agency is exceptionally sensitive to issues of equality and diversity.

Initial enquiries receive a prompt response and a pack is sent out containing good quality information. Prospective adopters are invited to a preparation group, which takes place on three and a half days over the course of two weeks. These groups are evaluated regularly.

Applications are accepted from all groups within the community, including same sex couples, single people and all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There are no 'blanket bans' on any group,

and equality is a driver right through the initial information, application and assessment process, with all applicants considered on the basis of their capacity to look after children. The agency does not work with families seeking to adopt from overseas.

All relevant checks are completed and evidence of this was seen on all files examined. Occasionally if there is a medical issue, medical advice is sought early in the process to avoid the prospective adopters going through a longer period of assessment if they are likely to be refused. An example of this would be a heavy smoker or someone with a potentially life limiting illness, although each situation is taken into account individually. The agency medical advisor will sometimes speak with applicants to obtain more information or give advice. If any applicants are considered not ready to proceed, the team managers visit them to counsel them regarding their situation.

Prospective adopters say that the assessment and approval process is very clear, transparent and even enjoyable, and that they are kept informed throughout. Although some people find the process arduous and intrusive, they recognise that it would be so whichever agency conducted the assessment. No delays were apparent or reported in this process, and the team say that they have an internal target of six months from application to panel presentation, which is usually met, and was met in every case examined on this inspection.

The agency has access to medical and psychological advice regarding applicants and children awaiting placement. Adopters say that they have considerable faith in their social workers and felt able to leave matching to them, whilst others prefer to be more involved. Everyone spoken to felt well informed and involved. Once a match has been made, prospective adopters receive full written information about the child. The agency strives to ensure that social workers read the child's file, as past experience has shown that children's needs are not always accurately described by their own placing social workers. On the rare occasions when difficulties with introductions occur, the agency works hard to try to resolve the issues. The rate of placement disruption is low, which is testament to the very careful preparation and level of support throughout the process.

There are clear written policies and procedures governing the practice of the adoption panel, which include the roles and responsibilities of panel members. Members sign a copy of these on appointment. Adopters receive information about panel members and the process, and are invited to attend panel by means of a friendly letter. Adopters confirmed that they were welcomed to panel and that the process was not too gruelling. Prospective adopters are treated with respect and are well supported at panel.

One adopter commented to the agency that, at the time of her first visit to panel, the adoption panel lacked ethnic diversity. This was addressed by proactive recruitment of two minority ethnic professional members, so the adopter's second experience of panel was far more positive. This person commented on the agency's response to the need to increase diversity.

A panel meeting observed was business-like and effectively managed, with sensitivity shown to prospective adopters. Social workers say that panel is strict, with close and careful questioning of their reports and assessments, but they value this because it is good preparation for the many other panel meetings around the country that they must attend. There was a quorum at the meeting observed, and questions to the social workers and adopters were carefully

constructed. Panel members receive regular updates on all approved families and the children in placement until the granting of the Adoption Order.

The adoption panel is constituted as required in terms of personnel, and includes two social workers and two members with a personal experience of adoption. All new panel members have a full induction, and the opportunity to observe panel on at least two occasions, and there was a new panel member observing at the same time as the inspector. New panel members receive a copy of the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) publication 'Effective Panels', and are kept up-to-date with changes in legislation and regulation by attending training days, with at least one joint training event per year with the staff team.

Inspectors were told by two different sources that all panel members undergo a formal recruitment process including Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, and that they receive an annual appraisal.

The adoption panel is well supported by efficient administrative staff. Panel members receive all the necessary papers in a timely manner, with papers sent out a week ahead of the meeting. Minutes are completed to a high standard, and are usually sent to the chair the following day. The Agency Decision Maker said that if he should need any clarification from the minutes, he raises this with the team manager, as well as any practice points for the future, so the panel and the Decision Maker play an important part on the monitoring of practice standards.

All staff working for the agency have been subject to all the necessary recruitment checks as part of a sound recruitment strategy. All have current CRB certificates at enhanced level. They are all qualified and highly experienced staff who are moving towards further levels of qualification through the Child Care Award, although currently no one has yet attained the Award. This is already under consideration by the staff group and their managers. Training is generally of a high standard and has been discussed in more detail under 'Organisation'.

The agency has a sound complaints procedure. This has been reviewed in line with recommendations from the last inspection, but still does not in itself offer sufficiently clear information about contacting Ofsted for any services provided by Action For Children outside Early Years. However, a leaflet to parents and prospective adopters does make it very clear that they may contact Ofsted, and so no recommendation has been made.

No complaints have been received in the last 12 months. Adopters confirmed that the agency had given them information about how to make a complaint, but said that they had not needed to access this because they are very satisfied with the service.

The agency has an effective safeguarding policy that follows Local Safeguarding Children Board guidelines and also makes provision for responding to allegations of historical abuse. Staff at all levels receive ongoing child safeguarding training to ensure that they are up-to-date with current practice, and adopters are also trained in child protection.

There have been no allegations relating to the adoption service in the sample period inspected, but any allegations would be recorded and carefully monitored. The agency is constantly seeking ways to improve its practice, and has identified that some changes to practice in relation to the need always to see placing authority's children's files, which would help to ensure that the agency has been sent accurate information about the child's needs.

A sound health and safety checklist also used for the fostering services is in place to assist in risk assessment of prospective adopters' homes. This is a detailed list, and did ask whether there were any hazards in the home, but the lack of specific reference to blind-cords or any weapons within the home environment was discussed with the managers. The inspectors were advised that this had already been addressed as the result of the inspection of another branch.

Dogs in the household are carefully risk assessed and evidence of detailed checks made with the applicants' veterinary surgeon was seen. Detailed checks are made on all applicants and Criminal Records Bureau checks were seen on all files sampled. Identity is checked and interviews conducted with all family members.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adoptive parents confirm that they receive considerable help to provide stability for children joining their family. They are constantly contacted with details of courses, talks and social events. One adopter gave an example of a difficult issue that arose during introductions to their child. Their social worker proved to be extremely supportive and helped resolve the matter.

Adopters are full of praise about thorough preparation, level of post-adoption support and ongoing training on offer. Training includes managing challenging behaviour and helping children who are struggling with a history of sexual or other abuse. The adoption team provides a duty telephone system every weekday, and an out of hours emergency contact number, which is staffed by team members on a rota basis. Specialist advice is available to families to help them to respond to specific parenting issues.

Adopters are encouraged to attend the monthly support group, and a variety of social events are arranged to provide opportunities for them to meet each other and, in particular, for adopted children to meet. This includes an annual barbecue and Christmas party. As parents, they are well aware of the sensitive issues around their children's heritage and personal history. They know that any material provided by birth family members and placing social workers to their children must be safely kept for future reference. Those adopters from minority backgrounds are well able to help and support children through the discrimination that they may face from time to time.

One social worker is designated as the adoption support worker and she manages a wide range of activities under this remit.

This social worker also runs an activity based young person's group which meets two or three times per year. She is currently re-forming this group to include fostered and adopted children and young people. In addition, she visits families who are experiencing problems with their adoptive children to provide social work support. Evaluation forms seen by the inspectors showed that service users are extremely positive about the services provided. Because of the thorough assessment, preparation and extensive support of adoptive parents, there have been very few placement disruptions.

The agency has a permanent medical advisor to the adoption panel who is very proactive in seeking better health outcomes for children and their families. She will speak with prospective adopters and advise on lifestyles and also on genetic issues that may become apparent in

children who may be considered for matching with the adopters. Panel also has access to a legal advisor, although this person does not routinely sit on panel.

Clinical psychological support is available to the agency and this service is currently under review. All professionals who support the agency's work have recognised qualifications in their own fields.

The adoption support worker assists those who were adopted as children through the agency who are requesting information about their history. She obtains the file from head office and audits the file for third party information. She then arranges for a summary of the information contained in the file to be made available. This worker assesses the original language used and will warn the person if the file contains any comments that would now be regarded as inappropriate or discriminatory.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

This agency operates two independent services for birth family members living in Somerset and Gloucestershire, on service level agreements with those local authorities. In doing so, the agency is achieving excellent outcomes for children and birth family members.

Action for Children has been delivering Somerset County Council's service to birth family members since July 2005. After 18 months, the service had succeeded in working with a very high percentage of birth family members referred. These include birth mothers, fathers, siblings and grandparents. The great strengths of this service are its flexibility and independence, which, together with a strong commitment to confidentiality, enable the support workers to engage families who can be very mistrustful of social services following contested Care Proceedings.

The project assists with constructive and responsible contact between birth relatives and adopted children, helps with letter writing, runs groups for birth mothers and also therapeutic sessions with a social element, for example, 'pampering days' for mothers and siblings of adopted children. The group looks at loss and bereavement, relaxation, making memory boxes and learning how to manage anniversaries.

Amongst the many positive outcomes are improved quality of contact between birth relatives and adopted children, and the fact that some parents have gone on to have further children and have been able to engage more constructively with the local authority's own social workers to enable them to care for them and keep them.

This service has been so successful that a second scheme has started in Gloucestershire, drawing on the same model. Service users from both services spoken to were highly complimentary and said that this input had made a massive difference to the quality of their lives and those of their children.

Staff involved in the services are highly skilled and come from a variety of professional backgrounds. They receive regular supervision and support from the adoption team manager, and have good administrative back up, although they say that more staff time at all levels would be welcome. They are also involved in training other staff and disseminating knowledge and good practice more widely, although they have limited hours in which to achieve all that they want to achieve.

The adoption agency provides an excellent service to all those service users who come within its stated remit. There are clear procedures for assessing the need for services, referral of adults affected by adoption, and good links with other agencies who may be able to assist when a service user's need falls outside the area of work covered by Action For Children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency listens to service users, works positively to recruit minority ethnic staff and adopters, and reflects on its own practice constantly to improve services to children.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose that is written in straightforward language, accurately describes the services provided, and contains all the information required in Schedule 1 of the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003. The Statement of Purpose is reviewed at least annually, and as changes to the service occur.

There is a comprehensive Children's Guide, informed by consultation with children and young people, which is easy to understand for any child with basic language and literacy skills. The agency also addresses the needs of children whose first language is not English and those with special communication needs. The Children's Guide portrays positive images of children and professionals from different ethnic backgrounds, and contains information to enable young people to contact organisations that can help them, including the Office of the Children's Rights Director.

Adopters confirm that they receive good quality comprehensive information about the adoption process from the outset of their contact with this agency. Examples of this are retained on the file records. Adopters praise the agency for its inclusive approach, effective and prompt communication and quality of support. They value the small size of the agency and the fact that they know who everyone is, up to and including the level of service manager.

There are no 'blanket bans' on any group in terms of eligibility to apply to become adoptive parents, and examples were seen of gay and lesbian, single and minority ethnic applicants being considered equally and approved as adopters. However, the agency is honest with prospective adopters about the types of children it will be seeking to place. For example, there are very few, if any, very young white children available for adoption, unless they have disabilities or are part of a sibling group. Children from certain ethnic groups rarely become available for adoption, for example, Sikh children.

The agency's managers are all professionally qualified social workers with many years' experience in adoption practice. The adoption agency and branch service managers both have appropriate management qualifications. The adoption team manager does not yet have a management qualification, although she has many years' experience in management and has completed a significant amount of management training. There are systems in place to ensure the effective management of the service when the team manager is absent.

All staff commented on the level of professionalism and leadership shown, and said that the agency truly valued their work. All staff including the managers have job descriptions and are clear about their role. The National Provider Scheme report of 5 February 2008 states that 'the organisation is demonstrably keen to support and involve its staff recognising the important role they play in the care of children...all policies indicated that staff and service users should feel free to question such policies within the organisation. This is very positive and indicates an organisation that is willing to learn from other experiences.' All staff interviewed confirmed that they feel that they are listened to.

The adoption agency is part of the extensive work of a very long established and effective national charity. The agency is ultimately accountable to the charity's Trustees through a well-defined line management structure. The inspectors were told that the agency is financially sound, and a robust business plan was seen. Every aspect of the agency inspected appears to be run in an efficient manner, with statistical information kept for evaluation and target monitoring. As a charity, the agency is acutely aware of the necessity for public support for its work and continuing funding to enable children's needs to be met.

The agency has positive links with the Adoption Register for England and Wales. Representatives from the Register sometimes attend team meetings to make the adoption team aware of children that are proving hard to place.

The adoption agency has systems in place to ensure that workloads are monitored and that the two team managers are able to deputise for each other in their shared supervision of social work and other professional staff. All social workers and birth family support staff receive professional supervision of their work every three to four weeks, and an annual appraisal. Managers receive suitable training and support to fulfil this role.

Administrative support to the social work staff is good. Administration staff say that they are very well supported by strong management and regular group supervision, and that they are invited as a group to participate in social work team meetings, particularly when issues such as recording are discussed. There is often a member of the administration team present at other social work team meetings. They value the training they have received, and say they have been supported in their aims to gain qualifications such as a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at level 3 in Business Administration.

There are sufficient staff from a variety of ethnic backgrounds to ensure that children's needs are met as quickly as possible commensurate with strong assessments and well-evidenced decision making. The social work team is currently fully staffed, although new appointments had recently been made to fill specific vacancies, in particular, in birth family support services, and those members of staff had not yet started in post. Examples were given of situations where it had become clear that more administration time was required, and an additional administration post was created to meet this need. There is only one male member of staff, but this is typical at a national level in this area of work, and is no reflection on the agency.

All staff say that training provided by the agency and access to external training, whilst of necessity budget dependent, is generally very good. All staff have received training in safeguarding children, including the administration staff. More expensive external training courses may be attended by one person and the knowledge cascaded to other staff, but team managers give training for all staff a very high priority. All social work qualified staff are General

Social Care Council (GSCC) registered. No staff yet hold the Child Care Award, but one has Post Qualifying Award Level 1 (PQ1) and another has started this award. Several staff are interested in doing the Child Care Award, so this is 'work in progress'.

All case records seen are very detailed and well recorded. Children's and adopters files are well organised and not over-full. Files are divided into relevant sections for ease of reference. Where siblings are placed together, they each have a separate file, which is good practice. Files for three adoptive couples or single carers were case-tracked, including adoption files for a total of six children. All statutory checks on prospective adopters, including CRB checks, are recorded and retained on file. Files show evidence of management auditing, and supervisors' comments are included where applicable to the case. All files seen on this inspection meet the requirements of the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003.

There is a confidential and secure system for storing records and the offices provide a safe place for personal data to be kept in locking filing cabinets. There is a door entry system to the building, an effective visitor signing in system, and the likelihood of an intruder gaining access to records is small.

Staff files inspected showed that there is a sound system in place for recruitment and checking of staff and panel members, and that this system is adhered to very effectively to ensure safe recruitment and safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults.

Panel members' files could not be inspected on this occasion, but the inspector was told that similar safeguarding processes are in place as with staff, and this was confirmed by panel members themselves.

All staff files seen contained job descriptions, contracts, and where the staff member had been in post for some months or more, appraisals were also on file. Previous inspection comments had been addressed, for example, a second reference had been obtained for one member of staff who previously only had one at the time of the last inspection. There was evidence of referees being telephoned to check written information given, which is good practice.

Identity, CRB and photographic information is on the files, together with qualification and GSCC registration certificates. One file out of four seen had some historical gaps in employment history dating back many years, predating the National Minimum Standards, and the agency had made every effort to obtain information retrospectively about these gaps. Because previous employers had not kept records, this information is no longer available, so this is beyond the agency's control. Full employment history is recorded on the other three files. Staff and panel members confirm that they have undergone a robust recruitment process.

The agency has suitable premises at Weir House in Bristol, to which the public have access. There is good provision for office space, secure storage for records, and a large meeting room that has recently been acquired for agency use as a training and meeting room. It was in this room that the adoption panel met when observed as part of this inspection. The agency has a central archive in Horsham, which has been inspected as part of the branch inspection of Adoption Action For Children South East. The inspectors were told that the agency had commissioned an archivist to assess the archives and that recommendations have been followed up.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
----------	--------	----------

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):