

# Bath & North East Somerset Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) Council 's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

BANES commissions some post adoption support services and intermediary work from the South West Adoption Network (SWAN). An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with SWAN.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the national minimum standards (NMS) for adoption agencies and services. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption NMS and regulations. The outcome areas of staying safe and organisation were judged as good and enjoying and achieving and making a positive contribution were judged as outstanding.

The service has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. It is an extremely child-focussed service and all policies, procedures and practices are designed to ensure the best outcomes are achieved for children. The agency is extremely good at recruiting adopters. It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and strives to ensure children are kept safe.

Considerable care and thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The matching processes and documentation are of an extremely good standard. However, the child permanence reports are of variable quality.

Adoption support services are based on a person's assessed and holistic needs, with

services effectively designed to meet them. Adoptive families are provided with the necessary support to maximise successful adoption placements. Good matching and highly qualitative support to adoptive families ensures that the service has a low disruption rate.

The authority is committed to obtaining information about children's backgrounds and works hard to encourage birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a high standard. Contractual arrangements are in place for independent support to birth families. Adopters are encouraged and supported, wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and children, when it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available

The service makes real efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process and encourages them to provide information about their child's background and contribute to the child's heritage. This greatly assists in ensuring children have a well-recorded background. Life work and life story books are completed in a timely way. There is a robust and well-managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process, which is clearly demonstrated in agency practice. There are good contractual arrangements in place for independent support to birth families. The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters promote equality and diversity and this is clearly reflected in the service's practice.

The managerial team have considerable child care and adoption experience. It is a well-managed service, with good, administrative systems to support their work. Both the adoption management team and staff work co-operatively with their colleagues in the child care teams to achieve good outcomes for children and young people. Case records are generally of a good standard, however, a small percentage of records are not accurate and breach confidentiality. The recruitment and selection process is robust and safeguards children.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last full inspection was carried out in August 2008 and resulted in four recommendations being made. These related to three of the key outcome areas, staying safe, positive contribution and organisation.

The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, which has resulted in an improved health and safety checklist. It has also ensured life work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way. Robust quality assurance systems are now implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service. However, whilst case files are regularly audited, the recommendation relating to breaches of confidentiality relating to agency records is again identified.

## **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 adoption service's recruitment strategy is extremely successful and as a result there is a steady flow of prospective adopters wishing to be assessed and approved. The service has a system in place to prioritise applicants, who are most likely to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive families. Since Banes is a small local authority geographically, the majority of children are placed outside the area. However, positive and effective working relationships exist between the adoption service, their neighbouring authorities and the local adoption consortium. This greatly increases the service's ability to match children with adopters. The service is child focussed and in situations where it is necessary to meet children's needs outside the region, arrangements are in place to effectively secure funding. The National Adoption Register (NAR) is used and the service also takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

Children are matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs and every effort is made to ensure siblings are placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate. Adoption placements are made in a timely way and the service has been successful in placing older children, children with disabilities and sibling groups. Children's views are taken into account wherever possible when family finding. Introductions and placements are well managed and mid-point reviews take place. Adopters are fully involved in the matching process and their views are included in adoption placement reports. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with the children talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information. The agency has only had one disruption in the past eight years which demonstrates a successful approach to the matching process.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the child permanence reports and staff have been provided with relevant training. However, although there has been significant improvement in the reports, there is still some variability in their quality. For example, some provide limited information regarding the birth parents and siblings.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and applications from domestic adopters which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Inter-country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which BANES has commissioned to provide this specialist service. Adopters confirm that they have received prompt and helpful information regarding the adoption process.

BANES has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. Preparation training is held on a regular basis and is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters. In addition, there are arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency for inter-country adopters to attend training that is specific to their needs.

Prospective adopters undergo a thorough assessment of their suitability, which is clearly focused on their ability to parent children who may have complex backgrounds and challenging circumstances. Staff have a good understanding and are skilled at analysing applicants. Assessment reports are well presented, detailed and thorough. They provide an analysis of applicants' backgrounds and an awareness of adopting a child, with its associated life-long commitment and responsibility.

Adopters are positive about the assessment process. Staff were said to carry out their work in a professional, knowledgeable, skilled and sensitive manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to going to the adoption panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report was accurate, portrayed them realistically and given them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the NAR. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

The agency decision maker (ADM) ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are personally signed by the ADM and sent out within the necessary timescales.

Staff recruitment practices ensure children are effectively protected. The manager and staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified and have experience, knowledge and skills in childcare and adoption work. Staff in the children's services value the expertise of their adoption colleagues and use them on a consultative basis.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which complies with the national minimum standards and regulations. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. Those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Adopters prepare information about themselves in a variety of ways, for example through books, Digital video discs and these are used to prepare children for adoption. There is a written system in place for notifying the authority in the event of a serious illness or the death of an adopted child.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function and operation. These documents fully meet the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel and good preparatory work is undertaken with them, prior to their attendance.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, with reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations recorded.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for adoption support are outstanding. The service has an excellent understanding of adoption as a holistic process. At the centre of this is a clear focus on children's needs and recognition of the life-long implications for all those affected by adoption. Support is therefore recognised as being of vital importance and is clearly focused on the needs of people, regardless of the particular stage that they may be at in the adoption process.

The service's strong commitment to support has resulted in pro-active, multi-agency, integrated adoption support services being developed. The range of support services provided is extensive and includes support from staff during the matching, introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages include, for example, settling in grants, adoption allowances, a newsletter, a peer support scheme, a support group and social events. Internal and external training is also available.

The excellent relationships that exist between the adoption service and other services within the council enables adoptive families to access a variety of other specialist services to meet their needs, for example, the provision of additional educational support to a child.

Excellent relationships also exist with the Primary Care Trust, which has resulted in an extremely good service being provided by the panel's medical adviser. Adopters are able to meet with her prior to matching, as well as before and after the adoption order has been made to discuss any medical issues relating to the child. In addition, adopters are offered the opportunity to bring their child for three further medical appointments, which are arranged at different stages of their development. The medical adviser also holds a monthly adoption clinic.

A good relationship exists with the child and adolescent mental health team (CAHMS). Adopters and children can currently access a clinical psychologist from the service, who can offer consultation, specific packages of support and direct work with a child. Adoptive families can also access a service directly from the CAHMS service, if required. The service will, if necessary, commission specialist individual therapy for an adoptive family.

The family placement section, where the adoption service is located, has a dedicated out of hours service. Staff have a good understanding of adoption and as a



consequence are more able to effectively meet adoptive families' needs. In addition to these support services, BANES has commissioned services from an adoption support agency. This service provides a helpline, counselling, support groups and is available to all adopters and their children, who live in the area.

Adopters are made aware of the support services at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption care plans are well written. Adoption support plans are of a good standard and reviewed, wherever necessary. Requests for support are responded to promptly and services provided in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

The adoption service's practice is very child focussed. This practice, together with the excellent support given to adoptive placements and the qualitative matching of children with adopters, has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

The service's efforts to involve and support birth parents and their families in arrangements for the adoption of their child and the maintenance of a child's heritage are outstanding. This is achieved through commitment to ensuring that children are, at all times, central to the service's planning and operational practice.

There is a clear, strategy in place in relation to work with birth parents and their families. The service is extremely committed to working with them and at all stages encourages birth parents and families to express their wishes and involve themselves in planning for their child's future. The views of birth parents are recorded in child permanence reports and are acted upon, if they are appropriate to a child's needs. In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views the reasons for this are generally recorded.

The service has a contract with an adoption support agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided at various stages of the adoption process. Considerable efforts are made to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time and work is carried out in an extremely thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is closely monitored so that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The service has a clear understanding that to enable children and their adoptive families to look forward optimistically, considerable effort has to be placed on making sense of what has gone before. This gives children a context whereby they can learn to understand their place in the world. It therefore has a clear understanding of the relevance and importance of ensuring children's backgrounds and histories are obtained. This is then shared with the child and their adoptive parents so that their

future well-being is safeguarded and promoted. This is achieved through sophisticated direct life work, which is undertaken prior to and during placement. It is incorporated into their life-story book, which is completed to a high standard and provided in a timely way.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. It is evident that adopters are well prepared for one-off meetings with birth parents. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust system, which is managed in an effective and efficient manner. Adopters understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. The agency provides a birth records counselling service, experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice. The service commissions an adoption support agency to provide an intermediary service.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that the promotion of equality and diversity is reflected in their policies and practice. Prospective adopters' assessments address the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture, both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works hard to find appropriately matched placements for children, taking into account their background or specific needs and provides extremely effective adoption support for children with complex needs. Respect for birth parents and their families is clearly demonstrated in their work and every effort is made to involve them in planning for their children's future.

The agency's operations, aims and objectives are clearly laid out in the Statement of Purpose, a well-written document, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency. The service has two children's guides, which can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They are attractively presented, written in a child-friendly form and contain all the required information.

The information pack, which is provided to prospective applicants is comprehensive. This literature is welcoming, attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's practice. It contains all required information to assist people at the start of their adoption journey and it is sent in a timely way. A system is in place

to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The managers of the agency have a wide experience, knowledge and understanding of social work with children and adoption. They are suitably qualified, and demonstrate management competence and expertise at both strategic and operational level. The managers are supported by a committed and enthusiastic cabinet office that monitors the work of the service very well.

The organisational arrangements for managing staff, their allocation of work and workload monitoring are of a good standard. Workers have a varied caseload and are allocated duties depending on capacity, expertise and interest. Supervision is regular and supportive, providing workers with an encouraging and developmental environment. This supportive infrastructure is evident throughout the agency with an overall enabling culture being the approach of the authority as a whole.

The service places a high priority on training. All workers have access to a range of training and development opportunities and all take advantage of this. Relevant training and the opportunity to gain Post Qualifying Awards has enhanced the skill and knowledge base of the agency.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contained full and up-to-date information, though not all records are accurate, for example, panel dates. Some case records also breach confidentiality, as they contain information relating to other children, for example, siblings. However all decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are regularly audited.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff, and any allegations or complaints that are made. These records are well maintained and securely stored.

Personnel and panel members files are well ordered, securely stored and contain all the required information.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located, suitably resourced and provide comfortable accommodation for the workforce. All necessary security and back-up safeguards are 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):

- develop a more consistent approach to the writing of Child Permanence Reports (NMS 5.2)
- ensure all agency records are accurate (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in case records (NMS 26.2).