

North Somerset Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

North Somerset 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 and inter-country adopters. The council commissions assessments of inter-country adopters from an independent social worker.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. Post adoption support is provided to children and families, to birth family members and adults and children affected by adoption. The service operates a letter box system, which supports children in maintaining contact with their birth families in a controlled and safe manner.

North Somerset Council commissions some post adoption support services from the South West Adoption Network (SWAN). An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with SWAN. The authority has many links with other statutory and voluntary agencies, which combine to provide assistance to all those affected by adoption in North Somerset.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a full, announced inspection of the service, in which all the relevant national minimum standards were covered. All four outcome areas are rated outstanding.

The service has particular strengths in terms of the quality and availability of specialised therapeutic help for children and their families, both before and after adoption. Practice in this area is highly innovative and well worth disseminating beyond this service.

The service also excels in preparing families and children for adoption. Despite the challenges of residing in a predominantly white area of the country, children from minority ethnic communities have been successfully matched with families who can best meet their needs. Inter-country adopters are welcomed without prejudice and receive the same high standard of service as domestic adopters. Services to birth family members and adults affected by adoption are also of a high standard.

Social work and administrative staff are skilled, experienced and passionate about providing an excellent service for children and families. The adoption team has not been fully staffed recently, but is working hard to meet the challenge of reduced budgets creatively.

An extensive training programme for staff and adopters is tailored to individual needs. The service is guided by strong, effective and reflective leadership. Staff in this resourceful team are valued and supported, whilst the service continues to strive for further improvement.

One recommendation has been made, about additional staff resources for the letter box scheme. This recommendation does not directly impact on young people.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, which was conducted on 22 September 2008, two recommendations were made. The first concerned the timeliness of life story books and later life letters, to help children to understand their heritage and identity. The agency has made enormous progress. It is now rare for life story work and later life letters not to be produced on time.

The second recommendation concerned regular reviews of the disaster recovery plan. There are planned changes to the way in which records are stored, which, when fully implemented, will ensure that they are suitably safeguarded. The disaster recovery plan is regularly reviewed and updated.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that through thorough preparation and ongoing training, adopters have the necessary skills and knowledge to keep children safe from harm. All adopters are well aware of what to do if a child discloses possible abuse. Excellent communication and high levels of trust with their social workers, help to ensure that adopters would seek advice promptly in the event of any difficulty. Adopters' preparation training informs them about how to keep children safe from inappropriate use of the internet and social networking sites.

Children seen during the inspection appear to be confident, secure and happy. Reports and records show that their views are sought frequently and acted upon whenever possible.

Assessing social workers carry out health and safety checks on proposed adopters' households. Homes visited provide a wide variety of homely accommodation, where children are able to take appropriately managed risks in order to further their confidence and development. Adopters confirmed that they had been asked to make

safety adaptations to their homes and that all pets in the home had been risk assessed. The pets which the inspectors met, were cheerful and friendly towards children and visitors.

Prospective adopters know how to ensure that their children's health is promoted through a nutritious diet and plenty of exercise. One adoptive family spoke about how their three children, who used to live in an inner city area, have learned to love country life, jump into puddles and enjoy the family's pets. The children now hardly ever watch television, but instead, they are playing outside all day. Their placement has provided security, strong attachments and a healthy lifestyle for them.

Adopters and the agency medical advisor are all sensitive to the children's wishes and feelings about medical and dental issues. The service provides excellent support from the medical advisor, who is a community paediatrician. She speaks with prospective adopters to advise them about medical conditions and also sees any adopted children who have ongoing medical issues. One adopter said that she could not have received better quality care from her local GP, paediatrician and social worker in terms of her child's special health needs.

The service promotes children's emotional and psychological health through wide ranging, sensitively tailored provision. For example, children and their families may be referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) team, which fully embraces and understands the issues affecting adoptive families. Social workers and adopters also have access to a local service called Consult, which is run by a specialist social worker and a clinical psychologist. The Consult service works closely with adoption social workers and adoptive parents to provide training, consultation and ongoing support. Everyone spoken to during the inspection praised this service for the high level of support offered, expert advice and for giving confidence to the prospective adopters.

The practice manager attends meetings at all levels which help to ensure that children do not 'drift' in the care system. Every effort is being made to find a placement that will meet each child's needs. The adoption team work hard to support their colleagues in other teams to ensure that they produce high quality reports and that the needs of the child are kept paramount throughout the process.

Qualified therapists, including an art and drama therapist, work directly with children to support them. The quality of therapeutic intervention is exceptionally high in this service. This is reinforced by close liaison between the adoption team and all other agencies involved, to provide a 'joined up' approach.

The service is dedicated to ensuring that children and adopters are appropriately matched. For example, some excellent work has taken place to find two families for children of Asian background, one of whom has a disability. The children could not be placed in one family, so in order to avoid delay, two families were identified. The family members are of different ethnicities, but because they are prepared to keep in touch, they can between them provide both children with support in respect of their cultural identity.

Consult also work with social workers to achieve the best possible match between children's needs and prospective adopters. This provision helps to increase the chances that placements will be stable and secure for children. Once matched, children receive information about the proposed adoption household in well-formatted written material. Adopters confirm that when a sibling group is involved, that they produce one book about their family for each of the children, according to their age and understanding.

Introductions take place in a carefully planned manner. There are several meetings with adopters and visits to their home. Adopters praised the degree of support they received from their social workers at this sensitive time. Inter-country adopters receive the same high quality preparation and training as their domestic counterparts.

The agency has a full range of corporate policies and procedures which are intended to safeguard children and vulnerable adults. All social workers and prospective adopters are aware of the policies and receive ongoing, high quality training in child protection and safeguarding.

Adopters confirm that social workers supervise placements effectively prior to adoption taking place. They ensure that children are seen alone, which enables them to raise any concerns and share their worries. If any children wishes to make a complaint, the service helps them to do so.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service achieves high standards of support for adopters and adults affected by adoption. Adopters receive excellent training during and after their preparation period, to prepare them for the effects of trauma, attachment and loss on their children's behaviour. The agency provides a comprehensive range of post adoption support, including access to clinical psychological support through CAMHS and Consult, a sitting service and relationship counselling services. Adoption social workers remain allocated to adopters throughout the assessment process and into the post adoption period, which ensures continuity. One adopter said: 'we have had issues with both our children and have always been supported and helped as much as possible'.

Adopters are given a year's free membership of an adoption support agency called Adoption UK, which provides a forum for mutual support and advice. The service provides monthly drop-in support sessions for adopters and activity days for adopted young people. A regular newsletter keeps families informed about service developments. Adopters are also put in touch with other local adoption support services, including SWAN, Our Place and Catchpoint, to provide choice and a range of services which may be able to help support the adoptive placement.

Adopters spoke about the wide range of activities on offer to their children. These range from the simple enjoyment of outdoor life, to gymnastics, music, the Springboard project (for children with special needs), surfing, judo and football. One adoptive parent said 'at the moment, we just want them to enjoy being children'.

Children are very well supported in their educational attainment. The practice leader explained that head teachers of the authority's 'virtual school' are closely involved with the selection of appropriate schools for those children moving into a pre-adoptive placement. The 'virtual' head teachers prepare the school and help staff to understand the complex issues that each child may have. Adopters are involved in this work and some excellent relationships have developed, as the school and the adopters work jointly to develop strategies to promote positive outcomes for the children.

The practice leader, referring to an inter-country adoption placement, said: 'we offered a significant liaison with school, both to support the child and to allow her to contribute the benefits of her own rich cultural heritage and experiences to other pupils. We helped the adopters and teaching staff appreciate the enormous shift in culture the child had experienced alongside the inevitable attachment difficulties'.

Children adopted through this service live in attractive, good quality homes which vary considerably in location and style to help meet a range of needs. Adaptations to homes take place where necessary, to provide a high quality, suitable and secure environment.

Adults and children affected by adoption receive a full assessment of their needs from appropriately skilled and qualified staff. Those adults who wish to continue with birth records counselling are referred to the South West Adoption Network (SWAN), an adoption support agency based in Bristol.

SWAN provide an independent specialist adoption support service to adults and children, on a service level agreement. This agency operates its own system of consultation and feedback, but the commissioning agency has also consulted those in receipt of adoption support services, in order to inform future service developments.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children's wishes and feelings are sought throughout the adoption journey. Existing children in prospective adoptive families are consulted about another child joining the family. Looked after children in pre-adoptive placements are consulted throughout by direct work and as part of the independent review process.

Children receive the children's guide to adoption and advice on how to seek independent advocacy through SWAN, as well as how to contact the office of the Children's Rights Director. For children with non-verbal communication skills, an interpreter from the children with disabilities team can assist in ascertaining their

wishes. Interpreters are also available for children whose first language is not English.

Since the last inspection, the adoption team has worked hard to support colleagues in the looked after children case-holding teams, to complete high quality life story work in a timely manner. Although competing priorities such as Court and child protection work sometimes intervene and delay life story work, there has been a noticeable culture change. There is now universal recognition throughout the service of the importance of life story and other work which helps young people to understand their heritage.

Although there may have been some issues historically, the current quality of the life story work seen is very high. Adopters confirm that they value this process and contribute to it by keeping 'safe boxes'. One adopter has conserved so much material, that she now has two safe boxes for each of her children.

Children and adopters understand the importance of arrangements for contact with their birth families. Contact arrangements may be face-to-face, or via the letterbox system. The latter is flexible enough to allow for young people over the age of 18 years to choose to maintain letterbox contact up to the age of 25. This can be very supportive to young people at a difficult transition stage in their lives. All adopters interviewed and most who completed questionnaires, reported that the arrangements work well.

The authority's letterbox scheme is administered by two very committed staff; an experienced social worker and the team's administrator. There are robust systems in place to ensure that effective and comprehensive agreements are administered precisely. There are currently 177 agreements in place, involving 92 children, with more arrangements under way.

The agency works hard to ensure that birth family members keep adopters updated about important issues in their lives. The service produces an excellent leaflet which explains to birth family members what they can and cannot say in a letter, or send to the adopters through the letterbox scheme. There is a similar leaflet for birth family members.

Some letter box arrangements are becoming increasingly complex; for example, different contact agreements between 10 siblings. The letter box team have a good understanding of the risks of making mistakes with this level of complexity. Because of the need for absolute concentration, they have established the letter box scheme in a quiet, secure room outside the main team room.

There are some signs that with this increasing complexity and the number of arrangements now in place, that despite very hard work and dedication, staff time devoted to the letterbox service may be too thinly stretched. For example, administrative resources are not currently available to make it possible to send out routine reminder letters. When adopters and birth family members do not receive their letters on time, most contact the service and this is followed up promptly. The

service has identified this as an issue for further consideration, but there is not yet a plan in place to address it.

The agency has a clear policy for working with birth family members and values their contribution to the adoption process. All birth family members are referred to SWAN for independent support, unless they actively wish to opt out. SWAN staff write to birth family members to offer a service.

The service provides some birth records counselling for adults affected by adoption, through an initial appointment for assessment and information-gathering. During this appointment, the service user is asked to confirm their identity in order to safeguard all parties. The two staff who mainly carry out this work are highly experienced and well able to ensure that service users and others are protected from potentially harmful contacts. Adults affected by adoption are then referred on to SWAN for further support and intermediary work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service operates within the council's corporate equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice policies. There is excellent training for staff and adopters to ensure that children benefit from high standards of practice in equality and diversity. Commitment to these values is woven through every aspect of the service's work.

All adopters said that they were received and welcomed without prejudice. Strenuous efforts have been made to recruit male and minority ethnic members for the adoption panel, with some success. The service has also welcomed a same sex couple, who are currently embarking on their assessment. The service is linked with a voluntary organisation which supports same sex partners in the adoption process and plans to develop in this area in the future.

The adoption service works exceptionally hard to ensure that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are placed with families whose culture reflects that of the child. For example, social workers advertise outside the area and use contacts in neighbouring agencies to seek a suitable family. If no exact match is possible, plans are revisited regularly in order to avoid delays and ensure that every child has the opportunity to find a family.

The service also shows total commitment to identifying and supporting placements for young people with disabilities. The majority of adopters with disabled children

praised the quality of the social work and medical support received for their child, irrespective of the area from which the child has originated. The agency actively recruits applicants from a rich mix of backgrounds to provide high quality placements. The aim is to meet a wide range of children's needs.

Information packs are sent out promptly to ensure that prospective applicants feel valued and well informed. A member of the adoption team interviews all potential applicants at home. This social worker provides them with all the necessary information and completes a preliminary assessment. The in-depth initial meeting helps those who may have had limited understanding of the issues, to reach an informed decision about whether to proceed. This in turn helps to reduce the number of applicants who have to be counselled out and impacts positively on the number of children affected by disrupted placements.

The preparation training is detailed and covers all the required areas to help ensure that prospective adopters are fully aware of issues likely to affect any children placed. The majority of adopters say that there were no delays in this process and one couple described the preparation as 'brilliant'. Second-time adopters say that they do not have to repeat the whole course, but they meet with a clinical psychologist and specialist social worker from the Consult service, to receive updated information about attachment issues. This ensures that children benefit from the most up to date information about these issues.

The agency is responsive to difficulties such as staff sickness absence, and adopters appreciate the agency's prompt appointment of highly experienced and skilled staff to cover medium- and long-term absences. This helps to ensure that services to prospective adopters and children continue without undue disruption.

The service employs a very skilled and experienced independent social worker to conduct the assessments of inter-country adopters. This person also delivers preparation training for proposed inter-country adopters and provides subsequent placements with ongoing support. She is very well supervised by the registered manager of the service. One inter-country adopter described the support they received from the social worker as 'brilliant, I could not have done it without them'.

The agency has an effective and appropriately constituted adoption panel, which meets regularly to provide a carefully considered service to children and prospective adopters. The panel is drawn from a central list of approved and properly inducted persons, all of whom have received appropriate safe recruitment checks.

Good quality panel papers are produced in time for members to give each case due consideration. The majority of adopters confirmed that they had been able to attend panel and present their views.

The panel is very aware of the recent changes to the national minimum standards and the obligation to approve minutes promptly. Panel minutes are of good quality and are presented to the agency decision maker in time for them to make their decision within seven working days of their receipt. Adopters confirm that they

receive decisions very promptly, orally and in writing. This helps to reduce anxieties and avoid undue delays in the process.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which sets out what can be expected of the service. It contains contact details for Ofsted to enable service users to report any concerns if they wish to do so. Children's guides to adoption and adoption support are available in formats appropriate to children's ages and needs. The guides contain contact information which enables children to seek independent advocacy through SWAN and also through the office of the Children's Rights Director. This helps to ensure that children can access independent support.

The adoption practice leader, who manages this service, is a well-qualified, registered social worker. She has managed adoption services for more than 20 years. The manager holds a university level certificate in managing care. This helps to ensure that the service is well organised and that social workers receive high quality guidance and support, to help them work effectively with children and other service users.

Social workers, psychologists, the medical and legal advisors and other professionals are appropriately qualified for the work. All have many years of relevant experience to help them meet children's needs. Approved adopters, foster carers and social workers identify their training needs regularly and have equal access to a high quality training and development programme.

The service is creative in funding training needs. The learning and development officer is passionate about equal opportunities for training. She has developed courses which can be marketed outside the authority in order to fund the adoption service's external training requirements.

Training courses provide equal access for people with disabilities and a positive approach is taken to ensure that anyone with a hearing impairment or specific learning need is able to participate without embarrassment or disadvantage. Excellent and innovative training provision enables staff and adopters to understand children's special requirements and better meet their needs.

Staff confirm that they are very well supported through in-depth, analytical monthly supervision from the practice leader. Supervision sessions are recorded and team meetings are held regularly to provide peer support as well as additional learning.

There is a clear line management structure which provides professional accountability and support for all staff up to departmental leadership level. North Somerset is widely regarded as a fair and competent employer, which helps to support and empower staff to work more effectively with children.

The service is very well managed and monitored, to ensure excellent outcomes for children and other service users. Regular meetings take place throughout the adoption service structure, to ensure that there is joined-up and timely decision-making about children's needs. The service reports annually to the Executive, but

there are additional reports from the adoption panel and a children's champion group which taken together, provide a high level of monitoring. The adoption panel was observed performing a very useful service in terms of quality assurance of reports and practice. The adoption team social workers are a valued resource, who help and support colleagues from other teams during the adoption process.

Any complaints are responded to in a timely manner. Every effort is made to ensure that members of the public are listened to and given an opportunity, where appropriate, to discuss and resolve the issues. The authority has an effective and transparent complaints procedure, outlined in clearly written leaflets. Most adopters and birth family members confirmed that they are able to access this service if they wish to do so.

The local authority has effective policies on recording and records management, which reflect the need for data protection and confidentiality. File records seen for both adopters and children are comprehensive, well-ordered and up to date. Records clearly distinguish fact from opinion and supervisors' comments are recorded. Confidentiality agreements are made with panel members and any visitors to the service, including inspectors, which helps to ensure that personal information is safeguarded.

Some staff expressed concern about the integrated children's system computerised recording structure, but the outcomes for children remain very good, despite the challenges said to be posed by the information technology system. All reports seen are of high quality. Reports contain appropriate information for young people who have been adopted, who may wish to read it at some time in the future.

The service has an effective business continuity plan. There is a disaster recovery plan in place which provides for emergency conservation of records in the event of fire or flood. The authority's archive does not yet provide sufficient security or fire and flood protection for adoption service records. This was discussed with the service's managers, but no recommendation has been made on this occasion, because managers have already identified the problem and are addressing it. There is a plan to move the adoption service records to more appropriate and secure specialist provision in the near future.

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):

- review the staff time allocated to support the letter box system to reflect the increasing complexity of arrangements. In particular, ensure that sufficient time is allocated to remind individuals about the need to comply with the agreed plan. (NMS 8.4)

