

Plymouth City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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

Plymouth City Council Adoption and Permanence Service is a local authority adoption service that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters, the support of adoption placements and post adoption support to those affected by adoption, including birth records counselling. The service operates and maintains a letterbox system, which supports the exchange of information between adopted children and their birth families. The service is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium who engage in collaborative work to secure appropriately matched adoption placements.

The service makes arrangements with a registered voluntary agency in respect of those wishing to adopt a child from overseas. The Adoption and Permanence Service provides support and supervision to inter-country adopters after approval.

The service also has a contract with an adoption support agency to provide independent support to birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The adoption service of the City of Plymouth provides an outstanding level of service. This has been achieved by the promotion of strong links between the different areas of social work provision contained within the children's services department. Also, the adoption service works jointly with health and education department professionals to provide support for adopters and the best possible outcomes for adopted children. Social workers are well trained and supported by a strong management team. The service must reduce the time taken to assess prospective adopters before they attend the adoption panel.

Improvements since the last inspection

No person is allowed to begin work for the adoption service until an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check has been received. The agency now has a service level agreement with a adoption support agency to provide support services to birth parents whose children have been adopted and this service is appropriately reviewed by the adoption service.

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.

Children who are unable to remain with their birth families are kept safe through a permanency plan for adoption. Potential adopters are recruited, vetted, assessed, trained and supported to give children the best possible opportunity to live in a family setting where they feel safe and nurtured. This is achieved through the effective matching of children and adopters and a well planned period of introduction. Social workers in the adoption team link with placing social workers to help find the best match. In collaboration with social workers, adopters produce a suitably formatted information document for children which gives a profile of themselves and their household. The records of the past 12 months of the service's operation show that the service has had a comparatively higher number than the national average, of potential adopters who apply and are assessed and seen by the adoption panel outside of the recommended eight month period. This is due, in part, to local delays in Criminal Records Bureau checks being completed. The service requires these checks to be in place before potential adopters can attend a preparation group since, in the agency view, this might prevent the possibility of unsuitable people having access to vulnerable children. There are excellent links between looked after children's team social workers and social workers in the adoption team and a link is made when a child is identified as requiring an adoption place. These excellent links help to ensure that effective matching takes place between children and adopters and results in a very low number of adoption breakdowns compared to the national average. The service has reduced the numbers of children who are without an adoption placement after 12 months, of the decision of the agency decision maker, that they should be placed for adoption.

Children's ongoing physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted by the effective training and preparation of adopters, the ongoing support of specialist social workers within the adoption team, and the provision of effective professional support systems, including links with the local child and adolescent mental health services team and the looked after children's nurse. Emotional and psychological health is further promoted by the early presentation of life story books and later life letters by suitably trained practitioners. These help to promote children's sense of identity.

Social workers make rigorous health and safety checks of potential adopters households according to national guidance. Potential applicants to adopt must agree to stop smoking and are not allowed to apply to adopt for a period of 12 months after they have stopped smoking. This policy helps to keep children safe from the harmful effects of living in a household where people smoke. Social workers are

familiar with the policies and procedures of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and receive training in this regard. Adopters receive appropriate training in safeguarding children also. Placing social workers visit adoption households within the early stages of the placements on a weekly basis and always see the child alone to ensure that children are happy with the adoption arrangements and that they feel safe. Children are given appropriate information materials about adoption including those which advise them how to make complaints or raise concerns about their care. The recruitment of social work staff is subject to appropriate vetting procedures and managers are trained in safer recruitment practices. All staff and management receive Criminal Records Bureau checks and these are updated every three years. The agency has systems to notify appropriate agencies of all significant events relating to the protection of children. These systems help to ensure that children are kept safe from all forms of abuse including the potential for abuse from professionals.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

For children for whom the plan is adoption, there are appropriate assessments made of their ongoing needs and how these will be met. These are contained in their child permanency report. The service ensures that children and adopters are appropriately matched through properly formatted judgement systems and the early linking of placing social workers with a member of the adoption team. Comprehensive information about each party is exchanged before proceeding with introductory arrangements which are themselves well planned and are conducted at an appropriate pace. Birth parents are consulted as far as the welfare of children allows, about their feelings about proposed matches and will meet with proposed adopters if this does not compromise the welfare of the child. Prospective adopters are given as full information about a child's social, educational and health history as is known and will meet with foster carers and other professionals who have been involved with the child to gain an understanding of children's likes and dislikes and other relevant matters. Before an adoption order is made children placed are seen alone by a visiting social worker who will ascertain their wishes and feelings about the placement. Children complete a suitably formatted written review of their adoption experience. This ensures that children are properly consulted about their care.

Adopted children's educational progress is supported by the service. The council have a team of educationalists known as a virtual teaching team who support looked after children and who will support those children making the transition to being adopted. This support includes direct work with children and liaison with schools and adoptive parents. All children for whom the plan is adoption have a personal education plan in place which is appropriately reviewed. There is a member of the adoption panel who is an educational psychologist and who will assess and comment on the educational and emotional needs of children whose plan is adoption.

Prospective adopters households are properly assessed by social workers to ensure that children will benefit from adequate space and will live in homes of a suitable

standard. Prospective adopters receive information during their preparation training about promoting children's healthy lifestyles and engaging them in activities that promote good health. Pre Adopted Order children living within Plymouth are given free passes to local leisure facilities and the service arranges regular activities for adopted children including a youth club and treasure hunts. The adoption support team monitor this and will provide ongoing support to adopters after the adoption order is made. This can include financial assistance, facilitating access to any necessary health or educational resources, and in supporting any agreed contact arrangements with birth families. There are monthly meetings arranged for adopters where they receive support and can air any views about the support they receive collectively. Foster carers who go on to adopt a child placed with them retain their fostering allowance for two years. Providing ongoing support for adoptive families reduces the likelihood of adoption disruption and gives children better outcomes for stability.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children are well informed about what they should expect from the adoption service, how their views will be taken into account, how they will maintain links with their birth families and what they can do if they are unhappy about their care. This is achieved by the provision of excellent written children's guides about adoption, the inclusion of birth parents and children's views about permanency planning and the adherence to the necessary monitoring frequencies by social workers during the early stages of the adoption placement when children are always seen alone. The children's guide gives them information about how and to whom they may make complaints about their care, including the contact details of the Children's Rights Director at Ofsted.

Social workers produce high quality life story work and later life letters which ensure that children are provided with a clear knowledge and understanding of their background. This is supported by effective social work practice both before and after an adoption order is made which provides adopted children with a strong sense of identity.

The council have a service level agreement with an adoption support agency to provide support and counselling for birth families whose children have been adopted. This agency report a high take up of this service by birth parents who very much appreciate this outstanding service.

The service ensures that agreements for the contact arrangements between children and their families are in place and supported by adopters before the adoption order is made. The service operates an excellent letterbox system to facilitate and monitor written communication between children and their birth families.

There is an outstanding service in place to assist adults who been adopted to access their birth records. This includes a counselling service provided by highly skilled

practitioners. One adopted person who had used this service commented, 'The social worker was there every step of the way. They were there to help me to deal with my emotions when I needed them. I am eternally grateful.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Although the Plymouth area has a low representation of people from minority ethnic groups, the service addresses the issue of ensuring prospective adopters for children who are of dual or mixed heritage by using their membership of the South West Adoption Consortium to secure timely and appropriately matched placements. Other examples of promoting equality and diversity include the approval of adopters from a wide variety of backgrounds including same sex couples, single gay people, older people, single people and people from religious and ethnic minorities. Membership of the adoption panel includes members from minority ethnic groups. The service takes measures to ensure that adoption is available for children with significant special needs and disabilities. The agency has addressed the gender imbalance within the social work staff group by the appointment of a full-time male social worker. The council has an excellent corporate equality and diversity policy in place.

Children and adopters are provided with a wide range of information about the service. A Statement of Purpose is in place which spells out the service's aims and objectives for all stakeholders. It can be made available in different languages and formats on request. The statement is reviewed annually by the manager of the service. There is a clearly written children's guide to adoption which is available in different age formats. At the first placement review children complete a written review of their adoption placement experience which is constructed in a user-friendly format. There is comprehensive information about the adoption service contained within the council's website and a DVD about the service is sent to prospective adopters with the information pack which is sent to them within five days of their expression of interest. Applicants are invited to attend information evenings. The agency responds to enquirers with an initial visit by a social worker who will give them further information about adoption and who will carry out an initial assessment report. This extensive range of information helps to keep children and adopters fully informed about the adoption service.

There is a team of social workers who undertake the recruitment, assessment and preparation training aspect of the work and a second team of adoption support workers who support children, adopters and all those affected by adoption. Each of these teams is separately managed. The manager and all those in management

positions within the service are suitably qualified and have many years experience in child care work. Both teams are supported by a small team of administrators. One of the administration team coordinates the letterbox contact system. There are some long term sicknesses amongst the social workers and there is currently a vacancy for a full time worker in the administrative staff team. These posts have been covered, in part, by the use of sessional workers. All social workers have a professional qualification and are registered as members of the General Social Care Council. All social workers receive an outstanding level of training and have either the Post Qualifying award in Child Care or are registered candidates. All staff undertake an annual performance appraisal that identifies their training and development needs. Social workers receive monthly one-to-one supervision and there are monthly team meetings. Staff vetting and recruitment practice includes the taking of enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks which are followed up every three years. Personal references are taken up which are confirmed verbally. Applicants make declarations of health which are followed up by the council's occupational health department if there are any concerns raised. The careful selection and ongoing support of staff helps to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and service users.

A properly constituted and independently chaired adoption panel meets fortnightly to make recommendations about adopters approval, children's suitability to be adopted, and child/adopter matches to the agency decision maker who makes the final decisions on these recommendations in a timely manner. As stated earlier in this report, a number of adopters are assessed and seen by the adoption panel outside of the eight month period recommended by the national minimum standards.

Adopters' case files and the personnel files of staff and adoption panel members are well ordered and comprehensive in content. These are kept under secure conditions to ensure their confidentiality. Children's adoption records are securely archived. There is a disaster recovery plan in place which is reviewed annually.

The service conducts a feedback questionnaire survey of adopters after they are approved to elicit their views on the assessment, preparation and approval process. The agency conducts an annual report of the adoption service which is monitored by the Director of Children's Services and the council's corporate parenting group and council cabinet. Ongoing internal review helps to ensure service development and the provision of a high quality service to adopters and children.

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):

- ensure that adoption panels make a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of their formal application. (NMS 17.7)

