

Portsmouth City Council Adoption Agency

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

The agency 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 family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre- and post-adoption order; post-adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post-adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages direct contact arrangements and a letterbox contact system. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency refers them for preparation by an Adoption Support Agency specialising in this work and they return to this agency for the rest of the assessment process.

The service is a member of the South Coast Adoption Consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This full, announced inspection found the adoption service provided by Portsmouth Council to be of a good standard. The service is well managed and the social workers and staff are well trained and supervised. Adopters are correctly recruited, prepared and matched to ensure that children for whom the plan is adoption will have the best possible life opportunities.

The service needs to ensure that adopters are assessed and a decision is made about their suitability to adopt is made within eight months of the receipt of their formal application to adopt. The security of the archived adoption records needs to be enhanced.

Improvements since the last inspection

There is now one identified line manager for the service who monitors the comprehensiveness and accuracy of social workers' written records on adopters. The approval status of all approved adopters waiting for a child to be placed is now reviewed annually by the panel. The statement of purpose now makes explicit that the agency will respond to all requests for assessment of adoption support needs. All adopters' assessments now contain full details of their employment records, and safety checklists of households are regularly updated. Social workers in the adoption team now construct children's life story books and these contain the reasons why children have been adopted.

All staff and panel members' files now contain a dated record of when their written references have been followed up verbally.

The IT systems within the agency have been upgraded and improved since the time of the previous inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

This provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

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. The service has not had an adoption breakdown since 2007. There have been no safeguarding concerns about adopted children since the time of the previous inspection.

Children who are unable to remain with their birth families are helped to be kept safe through a permanency plan for adoption. There is effective matching of child and adopters and a well-planned period of introduction. Social workers in the adoption team link with placing social workers to write the permanency plan and to find the best child/adopter match. In collaboration with social workers, adopters produce a suitably formatted information document for specific children which contains a profile of themselves and their household. This can include an informative DVD. The service has a comparatively higher number of potential adopters who apply and are assessed and seen by the adoption panel outside of the recommended eight month period than the national average. A small number of children for whom the plan is adoption wait longer than the recommended six months for an adoption place. Children's ongoing physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted by adopters attending effective preparation group training, the ongoing support of specialist workers within the adoption team, and referral to the local child and adolescent mental health services team if deemed necessary. There is an additional preparation group that provides specialist training for second time adopters. Specialist workers in the adoption team have been trained to undertake direct therapeutic work with children known as 'theraplay'. Children's emotional and psychological health is further promoted by the early presentation of life story books and later life letters by suitably trained practitioners. These documents help to promote children's sense of identity.

Social workers make rigorous health and safety checks of potential adopters households according to national guidance and potential adopters are linked to a free home check service from specialists within the local council. Potential applicants to adopt must agree to stop smoking and are not allowed to apply to adopt for a period

of six 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 and administrative staff are familiar with the policies and procedures of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and receive training in their application. Adopters also receive appropriate training in safeguarding children. Placing social workers visit adoption households within the early stages of the placements on a weekly basis and always see the child alone. Children are given appropriate information about adoption including those which advise them how to make complaints or raise concerns about their care.

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 record which is constructed by a member of the adoption team in liaison with the child's placing social worker. 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. The service will try in the first instance to find a suitable adoption household within the South Coast Adoption Consortium. Comprehensive information about each party is exchanged before proceeding with introductory arrangements, which are well planned and 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. The service has access to a medical practitioner who is a member of the adoption panel and who assesses and updates medical records of children placed for adoption. 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.

Adopted children's educational progress is supported by the service. The council has a corporate parenting team who promote the educational support of looked after children and who will support those children making the transition to being adopted. All children for whom the plan is adoption have a personal education plan in place which is appropriately reviewed. The service employs an educational psychologist to provide a monthly clinic where adopters can raise any concerns about a child's educational or behavioural progress.

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. Adopters can receive a setting up grant to enable them to purchase essential household items. Prospective adopters receive information during their

preparation training about promoting children's healthy lifestyles and engaging them in activities that promote good health. Adopted children are invited to attend periodic social events which are organised by the service. There is also an annual social event organised for adoption families.

The adoption support workers within the team 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 support for any agreed contact arrangements with birth families. There are quarterly information evenings arranged for adopters where they receive help and advice about adoption and where they can air any views about the support they receive collectively. Adopters are given three years membership of Adoption UK. Foster carers who go on to adopt a child placed with them can retain their fostering allowance. This ongoing support for adoptive families reduces the likelihood of adoption disruption and gives children stability and better outcomes.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

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 clearly written children's guides about adoption, the inclusion of birth parents and children's views in 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.

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 will facilitate supervised contact between birth parents and adopted children where necessary. The manager of the service oversees an effective letterbox system to facilitate and monitor written communication between children and their birth families.

The social workers within the adoption team have been trained to produce good quality life story work and they will also assist placing social workers in the production of later life letters. The careful construction of these important documents helps to 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 also provides adopted children with a strong sense of their personal identity.

The adoption service have a specialist worker trained in counselling skills to provide support and counselling for birth families whose children have been adopted. This

agency reports a low take up of this service by birth parents.

There is a specialist worker within the adoption team to assist adults who have been adopted to access their birth records.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

This provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a corporate policy in place on equality and diversity. The Portsmouth area and the other regions within the consortium have a low representation of people from minority ethnic groups. The service addresses the issue of ensuring there are suitably matched adopters for children who are from minority ethnic groups, or are of dual or mixed race heritage by using specific recruitment advertising and accessing the national register of adopters 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 single people and people from religious and ethnic minorities. Membership of the adoption panel includes members from a minority ethnic group. The service takes measures to ensure that adoption is available for children with significant special needs and disabilities. There is currently a gender imbalance within the social work staff group which the service is seeking to address.

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 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 registered 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 are helped by their social worker to complete a questionnaire which reviews their adoption placement experience. There is comprehensive information about the adoption service contained within the council's website. Applicants are invited to attend information evenings. The agency responds to enquirers with an initial visit by social workers who will give them further information about adoption and who will carry out an initial assessment report. This good range of information helps to keep children and adopters fully informed about the adoption service. Adopters have access to a well stocked resource library where there is a range of information materials about adoption.

There is a team of social workers who undertake the recruitment, assessment and preparation training aspect of the work and within the team there are also two adoption support workers who support children, adopters and all those affected by

adoption. One of these workers has a counselling qualification. The registered manager has professional social work and management qualifications and has many years experience in child care work. The team is supported by a small team of administrators. The manager coordinates the letterbox contact system, acts as the panel advisor and manages the adoption support services. All social workers have a professional qualification and are registered as members of the General Social Care Council. Two of the nine social workers have the Post Qualifying award in Child Care. All staff undertake an annual performance development review that identifies their training and development needs. Social workers receive monthly one-to-one supervision from the team manager and there are fortnightly team meetings. Staff vetting and recruitment practice includes the taking of enhanced Criminal Record 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 central list identifies the members of a properly constituted and independently chaired adoption panel which meets at least monthly. The panel makes recommendations about adopters' approval, children's suitability to be adopted, and child/adopter matches to the agency decision maker who makes the 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 recommended eight month period.

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 archived and this is subject to a written risk assessment of their safe storage. The archive is below ground level and has been subject to periodic flooding. In response to this, the adoption files have been raised to a higher shelf level. The inspector observed that a live electrical extension socket with plugged in attachments had been placed on combustible material at the base of an archive shelf. There is a disaster recovery plan in place which is reviewed annually.

The agency conducts a report of the adoption service twice annually. This report is monitored by the Director of Children Services and by the council's corporate parenting group. Ongoing internal review helps to ensure service development and the provision of a good 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 receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)

- ensure that there are facilities for the secure retention of records. (NMS 28.1)