

# Surrey County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	Adoption & Permanency Team, Runnymede Centre, Chertsey Road, ADDLESTONE, Surrey, KT15 2EP
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**Date of last inspection**

10/06/2011

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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 adoption agency of Surrey County Council operates all the statutory duties it carries responsibility for under current legislation. This includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching and placement of children with suitable families and support to people who have been affected by adoption.

The service operates from accessible premises in Addlestone, Surrey.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection, conducted over the course of one week by two inspectors.

The agency demonstrates excellent commitment to supporting children, adopters and birth families and sees this work as an integral part of maintaining positive outcomes for children in placement. This encourages inclusive and enabling practice. The quality, depth and range of the support provided, in addition to the uptake of the services and the positive impact on some of the users, is good. The promotion of equality and diversity is seen as outstanding.

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

This is the first inspection by Ofsted since the transfer of children's services from the Commission Social care Inspection.

### **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 developed a comprehensive programme of preparation and training for all adopters to ensure they have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. Adopters commented that the "Adoption preparation course was very good and informative" and that the "Home study was

also well thought through". While another adopter commented that "The four one day workshops we attended were very useful and interesting". All prospective adopters receive ongoing, high quality training in safeguarding which ensures they have the knowledge and skills to keep children safe from any sort of harm. All adopters spoken to are aware of what to do if a child discloses possible abuse. The preparation training for adopters includes information on how to keep children safe from inappropriate use of the internet and social networking sites. Adopters spoken to valued the work of their assessing social workers and would contact them if they were unsure of any particular issue.

Children seen during the inspection appear to be confident, secure and happy. The agency seeks the views of children whenever possible and ensures their wishes are acted upon where appropriate.

Assessing social workers carry out health and safety checks on proposed adopters' households. The agency has a comprehensive Health and Safety Checklist which is reviewed annually. 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 as required and that all pets in the home had been risk assessed.

Prospective adopters are actively encouraged to ensure that children's health is promoted by a well balanced diet and healthy lifestyle. The agency's post order support plans carefully document all the information that has been shared with adopters regarding health and what needs are known or anticipated. These plans also make clear the responsibilities of the adoptive parent including parental responsibility pending adoption.

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.

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. The agency promotes children's emotional and psychological health through a wide range of services. Children and their families may be referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) team, which offers a specialist service to adoptive families. The agency has improved its support of newly placed children and uses therapeutic models in working with families where there are concerns about the developing parent-child relationship. This has been very effective in helping strengthen attachment and enabling families to become more confident as adoptive parents. Adopters spoken to during the inspection spoke highly of the expert advice and support offered by the agency.

The team 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. There is 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. The agency uses a matching tool which helps identify the family which meets the needs of the child most closely. This 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. 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.

The safeguarding procedures are well understood and make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce that is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides excellent support to adoptive families to enable children to enjoy and achieve to their full potential in a stable environment. Adopters are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting; this starts with the preparation training and assessment and is supplemented by further post approval training. This addresses a variety of issues such as attachment, trauma, talking about adoption, and managing behaviour.

The extent of support services is outstanding and includes consultation with clinical psychologists, educational psychologists, psychotherapists and child and mental health services. Consultation is carried out with the carer and practical help offered as well as possibly referring the child and carer on for more intensive support. This helps the adopters to promote the child's social and emotional development and enables the child to develop emotional resilience and positive self esteem.

Adopters are well prepared and well supported to help the child develop positive relationships and behaviour whilst assisting the child to understand and manage their own behaviour. Adopters are very complimentary about the support they receive. Adopters and young people alike spoke highly of the support they received from the agency. One adopter commented that "We are very appreciative of the service provided. It has been an immense source of relief to know that we have someone we can talk to when everything has seemed to be totally over-whelming. I really

don't know what we would have done with it". One young person commented that "I would just like to say got a lot of support (that) I needed and it is really appreciated because it has helped me".

One of the ways in which adopters keep in touch with the agency is through the fortnightly Parent and Toddler group; and adopters have said wholeheartedly that this is an extremely valuable resource. It is really effective and provides supportive contacts with people in similar situations. The agency is planning to further develop its adoption support services by piloting a monthly drop in surgery for adopters. As well as social work staff adopters will be able to discuss any issues relating to school with an educational psychologist which should be of great benefit to adopters and children alike. The agency pays for three years membership of Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency. This gives adopters access to a variety of services including peer advice, support, and training. In addition a regular newsletter keeps families informed about service developments. Adopters are also put in touch with other local adoption support services, to provide choice and a range of services which may be able to help support the adoptive placement.

Children are extremely well supported in their educational attainment. The educational psychologist 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 prepares the school and helps staff to understand the complex issues that each child may have. Where necessary the educational psychologist will provide consultation with the adopter and work in partnership with the school to ensure the child is able to achieve their educational goals. This ensures that school and placement stability is maintained and improved. Currently there is no education policy in place that promotes and values education. However the authority will be implementing a policy across all services for children.

The agency ensures during the assessment of the prospective adopter's suitability to adopt, that the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there. Children seen live in attractive, good quality homes which vary considerably in location and style to help meet a range of needs. The agency has clear written policies concerning the safety of children in adopter's homes and in vehicles used to transport the child.

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

The provision is good.

Children's wishes and feelings are sought throughout the adoption journey. Looked after children in pre-adoptive placements are consulted throughout by direct work and as part of the independent review process. However there is no clear recorded mechanism in place to ensure that views of children are taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing the service.

Children receive the children's guide to adoption and advice on how to seek independent advocacy as well as how to contact the office of the Children's Rights

Director. The children's guide is very informative and creative and also contains a child-like summary of the agency's Statement of Purpose. This is significantly complemented and enhanced by two very child friendly booklets about adoption including 'Little Bears Story' which portrays how three bears find a new family through adoption. Interpreters are available for children whose first language is not English while appropriate arrangements are made to ascertain the wishes of children who have non-verbal communications skills.

Since the last inspection, there has been a change to the responsibilities of children's workers and adoption workers. Children's social workers stay involved with the child up to the point of matching and they are responsible for all life story work including the life story books. The adoption team provide templates for the life story book and are available for support. The social workers are really clear about the importance of life story and other work which helps young people to understand their heritage. Life story books seen are of a high quality and are used as tools to help children understand their history. Later life letters are also well written and are sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption; why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. There is a clear understanding and commitment by adopters to maintain each child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to collect and store information from a child's birth family and early life. Adopters value this information and ensure it is available and shared with their children.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their child and maintaining a child's heritage and does this to a good standard. The child permanence reports clearly show that birth parents are involved in care planning and their wishes and views are consistently recorded, often in their own words. The child permanence reports are of a good quality.

Adopters demonstrate a very empathetic attitude towards the birth family and are encouraged to meet birth parents and share information about the family of origin with their adoptive child. Adopters comment that the preparation training plays a pivotal part in helping them understand and accept this important aspect of adoption and adoptive parenting.

Children and adopters understand the importance of arrangements for contact with their birth families. Contact arrangements may be face-to-face, or via the post box system. The authority's post box 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. These arrangements contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining contact agreements for the benefit of the child's understanding in the future. Work is currently being undertaken to look at ways of having a more robust reminder system as currently administrative resources are not 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 post box is flexible enough to allow for young people over the age of 18 years to choose to maintain post box contact following their eighteenth



birthday. 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 contact arrangements work well.

There are effective measures to deliver services to adopted adults and their birth relatives; this is partly undertaken by the agency and partly through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. Service users receive a prompt, sensitive response.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency strives hard to ensure that due care and attention are given to issues of equality and diversity throughout the whole of its operations. Services are user-focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the agency is non-discriminatory and that they are treated with sensitivity and respect. Staff are provided with good support and training in this area. 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 although this has proved difficult. The agency welcomes applicants from people from all walks of life and from all racial and cultural backgrounds. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff. The agency takes a sensitive approach in counselling and supporting people in making the decision about whether applying to adopt is the right course for them.

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 agency actively recruits applicants from a variety of backgrounds to provide high quality placements to enable it to meet a wide range of children's needs. The children with disabilities team work very closely with the adoption team and show a very high level of commitment in identifying and supporting placements for young people with disabilities.

Information packs are sent out promptly to ensure that prospective applicants feel valued and well informed. Clear information about the adoption processes and why they are in place is provided both verbally at information sessions and in writing starting with the initial enquiry and culminating in a preparation for applicants who progress to a formal application.

The agency's preparation of prospective adopters is thorough, rigorous and generally of a very high standard. Adopters reported that they found the preparation course to be thorough, well planned and organised and that it helped them to gain a better understanding of all aspects of adoption. Comments from adopters about their preparation included, 'Training was very good and informative. At the end I felt I understood the background of the children and the lifetime implications of adopting a child' and 'We were given lots of information on the positives and negatives of becoming adopters'.

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. However in one case it was noted that the agency decision makers letter regarding a matching was not received within laid down timescales.

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 and also contact the office of the Children's Rights Director. This helps to ensure that children can access independent support.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. 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.

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 regular supervision from their line manager. 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. Surrey 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 now reports every six months to the Executive which provides a high level of scrutiny and 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 are regularly monitored and any comments are recorded on individual files. Confidentiality agreements are made with panel members and any visitors to the service, including inspectors, which helps to ensure that personal information is safeguarded.

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 agency has a contract with Surrey History Centre for the archiving

of adoption files and records files and a local company manages the storage and retrieval of records in line with the national minimum standards.

## **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 the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency and adoption support agency in monitoring and developing its service. (National Minimum Standard 34)
- ensure that the child's birth parents and prospective adopters are informed orally within two working days and in writing within five working days of the agency's decision-maker's decision. (National Minimum Standard 17)
- ensure that the placing agency has, and is fully implementing, a written education policy that promotes and values children's education. (National Minimum Standard 34)