

Isles of Scilly

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin
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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 Isles of Scilly have made arrangements with Cornwall to provide an adoption service. These arrangements are outlined in the written service specification agreement. The adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. There is a service level agreement with a voluntary agency to work with prospective inter-country adopters.

The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters. The adoption team provide ongoing support for families with adopted children, where there is a need. They run regular social occasions for all adoptive families and specialist help is provided, when required.

The team provides support to birth parents from an early stage in the adoption process. Arrangements are in place to provide an independent counselling service to birth family members who feel unable to take up the offer of a service within the county. There is a letter box system to promote effective and positive contact between birth families and children. Services are also available for adults who have been affected by adoption, who are seeking information about their birth families.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced key inspection, the first one to take place since the respective adoption services of Cornwall Council and the Isles of Scilly merged. There are currently no assessments being undertaken on the Isles of Scilly, but the islands receive support from the adoption team and their representative elected member of council sits on the adoption panel.

This inspection found that the merged service provides good outcomes for children and young people and all adults affected by adoption. There are some outstanding features of practice; in particular, the adoption support service and provision of timely intervention and involvement for birth family members. Although only two birth family members commented on the service, both were very positive.

Adopters expressed their views about the service through interview and in questionnaires. Generally, their views were positive:

'The agency is a warm, caring organisation...you feel at any time that you can contact them'.

Some adopters said that in the past, due to staff sickness absence which is now

resolved, they had experienced delays in assessment and in their case being brought to panel. Those assessed more recently did not share this experience, and found no delays. The overall picture is one of improvement in the timeliness of the service, despite there being two vacant and frozen posts within the adoption team.

The adoption team works hard to avoid 'drift' for looked after children seeking permanent placements. The county has a recent history of interim senior managers in key positions. Throughout this challenging period, the adoption service, with its considerable collective experience and skills, has been a beacon of stability and sound practice. The recent appointment of a permanent head of service, who had been in post for six weeks at the time of the inspection, is widely seen as a positive development. He has some ideas for the future, which should reinforce existing strengths and enable the service to continue to progress.

Six recommendations have been made at this inspection, most of which do not directly impact on children. Two of these are in the Staying Safe section of the report. They have been made in relation to the quality of analysis in the reports on prospective adopters and the system for appointing the panel chair, which currently does not follow the agency's own policy.

Although some excellent examples of life story work were seen during the inspection, the inspectors were told that this is not the experience for all children, so this does have a direct impact for some. A recommendation has been made that this good practice is disseminated more widely and made available for all children.

Three recommendations are contained in the organisation section of the report. None of these recommendations has any direct impact on children. They relate to administrative processes around staff and panel members' files and the disaster recovery plan for adoption records.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in July 2008, two actions were set. The first related to quality assurance systems, which at the time were not fully in place, as required by the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. The service has brought about improvements in quality assurance and more improvements are planned.

A second action required the service to obtain all the necessary information in respect of staff and panel members. There has been some improvement, but a small number of checks have either not been completed or are insufficiently evidenced. This remains 'work in progress' and is the subject of a new recommendation.

Five recommendations were made at the last inspection. One concerned the need to improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters. This checklist is now comprehensive and details a wide range of potential hazards for children.

The service was previously asked to improve the quality of child permanence reports.

Child permanence reports seen were of a good standard and contained comprehensive information. This helps to ensure that effective matching takes place and that children's needs can be met.

The service was asked to ensure that adoption policies and procedures for the appointment of the adoption panel are in accordance with the national minimum standard and that the quality of panel minutes is improved. All this work has been completed and the panel minutes are now of a very good standard.

The service was asked to ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way. Although this has clearly improved and some excellent examples of life story work were seen, this very high quality work is not yet universally available for all children placed. The recommendation has been repeated.

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 works to an effective recruitment policy and is assertive in trying to ensure that there are sufficient adopters from a wide range of backgrounds to meet children's needs. Prospective adopters can access the service easily by registering their interest in adoption through the county's website. The adoption team attracts prospective adopters by going out in person to meet the public. The team manager has appeared on phone-in radio programmes during National Adoption Week, in order to raise the profile of adoption in Cornwall.

The adoption team has a clear policy of welcoming all applicants, including those with minority religious beliefs, those in same sex partnerships and single people. Indeed, a significant proportion of prospective adopters presented to the adoption panel during the inspection, were same sex couples. Adopters confirm that they are welcomed and assessed in line with the principles of anti-discriminatory practice. Consequently, the service attracts prospective adopters through reputation and word-of-mouth contacts, in addition to formal recruitment methods. In some instances, significant financial resources have been made available to place sibling groups of children with disabilities.

The adoption team's staff are a very strong asset, who are widely regarded by colleagues, elected members and adopters as a valued resource. One adopter said: 'all staff from social worker to reception staff are very friendly, approachable and professional'.

Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account, if they are of sufficient age and understanding to be consulted. The service actively and promptly seeks placements nationally for any children who cannot be placed locally, for example for children of dual heritage background or those with specific religious needs. One particular challenge for Cornwall is that only 0.5% of the population is from a minority ethnic background. This makes it difficult to recruit from these groups, in terms of staff, adopters and members of the adoption panel. The independent reviewing officer reports that children are generally matched without undue delay. Any delay is usually due to legal proceedings.

Prospective adopters are invited to an information meeting, which they describe as warm and welcoming. A proportion of these are open meetings, advertised in the local press. If prospective adopters wish to pursue their enquiry, they undertake a focused and comprehensive programme of preparation and assessment. Any prospective adopters who wish to adopt a child from another country are referred to Parents and Children Together, a voluntary organisation which specialises in this work.

There is a robust preparation and assessment process, with all the statutory checks in place. There is a detailed health and safety checklist with risk assessments on any pets in the household. References are taken up and supported by interviews. There is evidence of appropriate challenge to prospective adopters, where there is an issue which could have implications for a child placed with the family.

Detailed and intensive preparation training includes involvement from existing adopters, birth family members, foster carers and professionals. One adopter said (of the preparation course):

'We are glad we went and think it is an eye opener. The course has been very helpful. It helps you to understand all aspects of the whole process from beginning to end'.

People adopting for a second time do not routinely go through further preparation training. Different issues are involved for second time adopters. This was discussed with the team manager, who said that experienced adopters can repeat the preparation, if there has been a significant gap between assessments. Although some reported delays with their first adoption, second-time adopters said that the process was particularly prompt and efficient. One family said:

'The process second time around was extremely fast. Everyone involved from our social worker, our daughter's social worker, panel and social services, have worked exceptionally hard to make the process a smooth and happy experience. All went well without a problem.'

The medical advisor and the psychology service provide expert input into the training. Their involvement is significantly valued by adopters and social workers. The medical advisor contributes to the assessment of prospective adopters, by advising the social work team on any medical issues and how they might impact on

the aim of permanence, for any child placed.

Some adopters thought that the graphic emphasis on child protection early in the programme was a little negative, although others understood the necessity for this. The team manager responded to this by saying that it is crucial that adopters know where the children have come from. It is essential that they understand the impact that abuse may have had, before proceeding further with their application. The preparation course ends on a positive note. The social work team also think that the balance is right.

All the social workers in the team come from a child protection background. This helps them to respond appropriately to children's needs and to link effectively with placing social workers, who work with child protection issues daily. Adoption social workers are very experienced. The majority of adopters report an excellent service from their social worker. Staff were praised for their sensitivity, dedication and support throughout the adoption journey. One adopter commented:

'I have never met a more hard working, thorough, kind and professional person'.

Another said: 'The information received was good but the knowledge and skills of the social worker were far more informative. Books were also suggested to us, which we invested in and these have proved to be an excellent resource'.

Generally, adopters viewed their assessment as a well-managed, fair and open process. The team manager conducts a mid-way review and there is always a second opinion assessment. Some adopters commented on delays due to their social worker's sickness absence, but recent assessments have all been completed in a timely manner.

Prospective Adopter Reports (PARs) are generally of a good standard, although in some instances, there could have been more extensive involvement of their wider family, especially when living in the same household. Placing social workers value the PARs produced by the adoption service. Prospective adopters are encouraged to write about themselves, with analytical comments from the social worker. Usually, this works well, but in a small number of reports, there is insufficient depth of analysis in social workers' comments.

The adoption team has a good system in place to ensure that the matching process is achieved with optimal outcomes for children. There is a formal matching meeting. Prospective adopters have the opportunity to discuss the children's needs with the medical advisor, who commented:

'The adoption unit have worked with myself to ensure that pathways are in place for health assessments post placement and to ensure that adoption reports are as accurate as possible.'

Adopters varied as to whether they had been kept informed during the potentially very difficult waiting period between approval and matching. However, letters from

the adoption team were seen on their files, which clearly conveyed the message that they had not been forgotten.

Once they had been linked with a child, adopters said that information within Cornwall is good, but from other placing authorities, information can be variable. This is no reflection on Cornwall's adoption service. Cornish foster carers were praised for their support and accurate, detailed advice to prospective adopters.

The adoption service works constructively with birth family members from the outset, to ensure that they are fully involved in making choices for their child. Birth family members' views are generally recorded on the child permanency reports (CPRs).

CPRs are of good quality, with comprehensive information about the child. Placing social workers are offered training to help them to complete these in a detailed and correct manner.

Birth family members confirmed that there are arrangements in place to ensure that they are kept informed of any serious illness or death of their child after placement. The social worker allocated to support the birth parent is closely involved in family finding, which helps to ensure that the birth family's wishes are kept in mind throughout the process. The only instances found during the inspection where this had not happened, were in cases where the birth family cannot be traced.

The adoption panel is informed by clear policies and procedures and demonstrates effective practice throughout the complex process of approval and matching. The panel's chairperson, who is approaching the end of her term, is well able to manage all the panel's functions with intelligence, clarity and diplomacy. She structures questions and handles divergent views extremely well. Adopters say that they found the chair to be warm and welcoming in a stressful situation. Despite the life-changing issues at state, adopters felt that the panel was in general, a positive experience for them.

The current chairperson is independent, but has been appointed by the panel members. The appointment was ratified by the agency decision maker who was in post at the time. Although the present chairperson's appointment by the panel has worked very well in practice, the agency's own procedures state that this person should be appointed by the agency.

In discussion, the recently appointed head of service, who is also the new agency decision maker, said that he is mindful of this. He is considering how the service can move forward by appointing the next chairperson in line with its own procedures. This would bring a further element of independence and rigour to the panel.

Panel members sign a confidentiality agreement and undergo relevant statutory checks before they are allowed to commence work. There are some minor shortfalls, which have been addressed under the Organisation section of the report.

Panel meetings are operating in a professional but amicable manner. Minutes are of

very good quality, with clearly evidenced recommendations. There are excellent systems in place for processing the minutes efficiently. Administration staff record the minutes in relays, so that they can focus on just part of the meeting, then type the minutes immediately. The agency decision maker says that there are robust systems in place to ensure that he receives the minutes in a timely manner. He looks through all the minutes and will challenge any recommendations that he considers to be insufficiently evidenced. There are no reported delays in the decision making process.

Social workers presenting children to the panel do not routinely receive the minute relating to their own case, prior to any court proceedings. If there is an inaccuracy in the minutes, this could potentially lead to the social worker being placed in a difficult situation in court. In discussion, the service agreed to consider how this could be facilitated in future.

The agency has very well qualified managers. The team manager makes sure that all applicants for posts within the team are suitably checked and that telephone enquiries are made to verify references. Criminal Records Bureau checks are obtained for all staff and are renewed every three years. Cornwall and the Council of the Isles of Scilly have clear written recruitment procedures which reflect sound principles in terms of safe recruitment, equal opportunities and fair practice.

Adoption team members are also very well qualified. More than half of the team's social workers hold the post qualification childcare award. Specialist advisors are also appropriately qualified, experienced people who provide a high quality service. The majority of the team have received specific training in birth records counselling and have a good understanding of the impact of this service on all parties involved.

The service regards safeguarding adult and child service users as a very high priority. There are sound policies and practices to ensure that this happens. The child protection policy makes specific reference to historical abuse, to ensure that staff are aware of how to respond in the event of any disclosure. Staff have a strong grounding in child protection practice, so any allegations are responded to promptly and in line with procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service provides exceptionally good post adoption support services through a clear policy and prompt, effective intervention. Although the adoption service is small and is not, therefore, specialised into assessment and post adoption support teams, staff have detailed knowledge of the families in Cornwall and all have some input into supporting them when necessary.

Adopters report feeling reassured by their social workers' support throughout the adoption process and the knowledge that they are 'not going to disappear', as one adopter put it, after the Adoption Order has been made. Families experiencing

difficulties are offered a consultation clinic appointment within two weeks of their request for help.

The expertise of the adoption team is extremely well supported by an excellent psychological service, which it uses appropriately throughout the adoption process. The psychology service is well-resourced and reports clear and effective communication between the two services in relation to training, consultation and therapy.

There are strong links with the local child and adolescent mental health service, so that children affected by adoption do not have to wait for an assessment.

Adoptive families also have access to the Jigsaw service. This service is staffed by a range of professionals and provides play therapy and support directly to children and families, very quickly and effectively. Adopters say that they really value this input. The adoption service has access to an exceptionally good range of specialist advisors, all of whom are appropriately experienced, qualified and registered with their respective professional bodies.

The rate of disruptions to adoptive placements is very low. The agency does not yet have an independent person to chair disruption meetings. In discussion, the agency considers that to obtain someone from outside the agency to do this work, could lead to unnecessary delays. They believe that the present system of using the independent reviewing officer, works well in practice.

Services are very well tailored to individual needs. The adoption service welcomes everyone, irrespective of background and is a member of New Family Social, an information and support service for gay and lesbian adopters. There is a strong regard for the safety of vulnerable adults accessing birth records counselling, as well as children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Birth family members are contacted at an early stage in the adoption process. They receive a service which is independent of the referral and assessment teams. Any families unable or unwilling to speak with the adoption team, can request to be referred to an independent counsellor.

Both birth family members interviewed say that they have received a very good service. They find the adoption team supportive, non-judgmental and approachable. For example, the support provided enabled a young person to parent her own child, who was able to return home to her. The outcomes for both parties have been very positive. Birth family members say that they are encouraged and supported to participate in providing information about their child's history.

Excellent, professional and fully developed life story work has been completed for some children. Examples seen are impressive, but they are mainly completed within

one team by talented staff who are not in a position to work across all the teams. The books are in an attractive and durable format which is suitable for younger children and it is recognised that this would not necessarily be appropriate for older children. Social workers value this quality of work very highly but commented that the same standard of life story work (in whatever format) is not consistently available across all the social work teams. Adopters confirm this and a minority received their child's life story work late. In one instance, the adopter had to return this for amendment.

The service has a good letterbox system in place, managed by two social workers and a member of the administrative team. The system is very well managed, with robust security. Adopters and birth family members confirmed that despite the occasional minor difficulty with inappropriate content of letters, the system works very well. Social workers edit the letters to ensure that children and parents only receive suitable information. They send out reminders approximately one month before the letterbox contact is due to take place and if there is a piece of difficult news in the letter, they would contact the receiving party by phone to help them to understand the information and adjust to it.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Although the adoption panel does not reflect the wide range of cultures in the country, it is representative of the locality. All users of this service are welcomed without prejudice. The agency is receptive to applications from a diverse range of prospective adopters. This policy is openly stated on their website and in their literature. One questionnaire from adopters commented positively on the agency's inclusive policy:

'They treat cases as individuals. We are a complex family but they gave us a chance - I'm sure others wouldn't have'.

The agency has a detailed and accessible Statement of Purpose, which contains all the information required to inform service users and the public about the range of provision on offer. There is a children's guide, which can be made available in different formats if necessary.

Prospective adopters receive good quality written information describing the agency's functions, much of which is now also available on the website. Most adopters said that this had enabled them to find out what they needed to know to guide them through the process, although a minority were unclear about some aspects.

The adoption team is highly experienced and well-qualified. All staff engage in the full range of work covered by the service, to a high standard. The team is well respected. Placing social workers, senior managers and elected members all regard the team as a valued resource.

The adoption service manager qualified in social work many years ago and has a recognised management qualification. She exercises clear and supportive leadership. Staff regard their manager as a highly knowledgeable and approachable person, who is always willing to help. Day-to-day supervision and support is delegated to senior practitioners, who also have specific development roles within the team. There are clear arrangements in place for deputisation, should the need arise.

The service has robust systems in place to ensure that staff produce work of consistent quality. Reports are carefully monitored and are generally of a good standard. The adoption panel also has an important quality assurance function and provides feedback on reports and assessments, through the advisor to the panel and the team manager.

The head of children's services provides strong and effective leadership, based on a lifetime's experience of managing children's provision and a strong personal commitment to adoption. The service also has a senior manager who is available for guidance and support, as well as engaging in quality monitoring.

Although the adoption service currently reports annually to the elected members of the council, the head of service and team manager both recognise that twice-yearly reporting is necessary to meet the standard. The team has plans to put this in place.

The adoption team is organised effectively to ensure that there are no delays in work allocation. There are two vacant posts at present, but both have been frozen due to financial constraints. The team is providing a good service with existing staff, but is looking forward to being fully staffed in the future.

All staff interviewed were extremely positive and constructive. They said that they enjoy working for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. They regard the agency as a fair and competent employer, that despite the current national financial climate, does its best to promote good practice through comprehensive training and professional development.

Case recording is generally of a high standard. Records are factual and appropriate, with clear recording of supervision notes and case decisions. The service has a computerised record system which is robust and easy to use. It provides good quality information which is readily accessible, but with clear permissions and restrictions to access in place to ensure confidentiality.

Some social workers find the policy of having to come to the adoption service's offices to read PARs quite challenging. The service manager justifies this practice because of the need to have a face-to-face discussion with the placing social workers

and answer any queries, as well as ensuring security of the file information.

Staff personnel files inspected are generally maintained well. They contain most of the information required to ensure that safe recruitment is taking place. However, there are some gaps in employment history, in particular with members of staff recruited more than two years ago. Panel members' files are generally satisfactory. One panel member's file has a reference missing. Some social work-qualified panel members' files lack evidence of experience and qualifications.

The adoption service has its own offices which are of a suitable layout and standard. However, these premises have sustained water damage and are currently undergoing extensive remedial works, which is taking some months. The team is based in a temporary building which they have adapted well to suit their needs. Members of the public are seen in accessible premises nearby, in a building which also houses file records securely. The service has good computer facilities. IT systems are very well-managed and access to computer records is effectively safeguarded.

The service's archive facilities are professionally managed in an external storage facility. The archive has safeguards in place to protect records, including a disaster recovery plan. However, this does not yet include provision for the expert conservation of records that become accidentally damaged by fire or water.

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 consistency in the prospective adopter reports so that they provide sufficient detailed and objective analysis by the social worker (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that the adoption agency appoints the panel chair, in line with the relevant policy (NMS 10.2)
- continue to work towards ensuring that the high quality life story work provided for some children, is available for all children and that it is always produced in a timely manner (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that panel members' files contain two written references and that they demonstrate evidence of experience and qualifications; also ensure that staff files contain all the information required by Schedule 3 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 (NMS 28.1)
- prepare two reports each year, to update the elected members of the council on the adoption service (NMS 17.3)
- ensure that the risk assessment on record recovery contains provision for professional emergency conservation of damaged documents. (NMS 29.5)

