

Shropshire C C (inc Telford & Wrekin) Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
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Setting address	Observer House (joint Adoption Service), Holywell Street, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 5DE
Telephone number	01743 241915
Email	
Registered person	Shropshire County Council
Registered manager	Catherine Warner
Responsible individual	Christopher Dennison
Date of last inspection	18/07/2005

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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 Joint Adoption Service was established in 1998 to provide a comprehensive adoption service for the local authorities of Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin. This service level agreement is reviewed every five years.

The service provides adoptive families for children and young people for whom adoption is the plan. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports adoptive parents, including those adopting from abroad. It provides counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption, for birth families who are not voluntarily relinquishing their children and for adopted adults. They provide advice and consultancy for colleagues working with children and their families. They also undertake assessments and reports in relation to step-parent adoption applications.

The Joint Adoption Service is an active part of the West Midlands Regional Family Placement Consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over five days during which adopters and two birth families were seen, staff and managers interviewed including the ASSA, the agency decision makers for both Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin, two Independent Reviewing Officers, one from each local authority, a councillor and the panel chair. A selection of files were seen of adopters, children, adoption support assessments, adopters who had withdrawn or been counselled out, panel member's files and personnel files. Panel was observed on an additional day.

Surveys were received from 2 birth families and from 7 adopters.

Improvements since the last inspection

It is significant that despite experiencing staffing difficulties the Joint Adoption Service has made progress and development. The children's guides have been improved and although the detailed information needs to be updated there are effective, useful tools for working with children.

There is evidence of direct work with children who know prospective adopters and their views are captured and well presented as part of assessments.

Staff morale is good and there is a marked change in this since the last inspection. Staff are positive about working for the Joint Adoption Service and keen to develop

good practice.

Adoption Support has developed further. Adopters comment on the support they receive and there is effective use of training and therapeutic interventions, such as the use of Theraplay.

Changes to the premises the Joint Adoption Service work in has made a significant impact on how staff feel about their work and the way in which it is seen as being valued by the organisation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The practice in the Joint Adoption Service is to place all children with their own adopters. The systems in place to respond to enquiries about adoption are effective. Adopters are welcomed and listened to when they make their first enquiry. Two workers undertake a home visit undertaking an initial assessment, which appropriately identifies issues and allows applicants to be counselled or undertake early references if necessary.

Preparation groups are run every three or four months. They are a positive and effective introduction to adoption. It is seen as effective by adopters, social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). There is management oversight in the training and regular reviews of the course.

There are some full and effective elements to the assessments. There is a need for clarity about whether an assessment is specific or general to ensure appropriate issues are addressed. Some assessments are over reliant on the applicant's contribution and weak on analysis. There is good use of references from previous partners, all employers and children known to the applicants. There is a need for consistent analysis in all reports and for a fuller exploration of diversity. The health and safety checklist does not cover weapons, blinds, knives or poisonous plants. Adopter's experience of assessments is that they are handled with experience, skill and sensitivity by the assessing social workers. This included areas, such as inter-country adoption, where even though there have been recent changes in regulations adopters were confident in the knowledge of the assessing worker and of their ability to find the correct information.

Adoption panel is quorate and well-organised so that there are no reported delays or difficulties in getting dates to attend. There is evidence of emergency panel being held when necessary. There is an independent chair and a recognition of the need to

extend the membership to include panel members with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The system for ensuring checks and references are kept up to date has not been rigorous leading to Criminal Records Bureau [CRB] checks being out of date for four panel members. The panel members' files are now managed by the personnel section of Shropshire County Council and the CRB renewals have been requested.

The process of the panel observed allows all members to voice their opinions and there is clear collation of each member's recommendation. Conflicts of interest are not clearly stated with action taken agreed and recorded. This needs to be addressed. Similarly consideration of siblings is undertaken jointly and recorded in this way in the panel minutes. Consideration of each sibling should be full and complete.

The decision making process is not clear to all those involved in adoption. A number of workers speak of the decision makers 'ratifying' panel's recommendation. There is a sense in which workers see the panel as making the decision rather than the decision maker. An example is of adopters being contacted with a possible link the same day that panel consider their assessment and recommend approval. The same adopters are given detailed information about the link the following day. The decision is not made until the following week and is recorded as being made six weeks later. The panel minutes are recorded as being 'ratified' by the agency decision makers. This is not accurate as they do not attend panel and increases confusion about roles and responsibilities. There is confusion about when the agency decision is made.

There is a system for matching adopters who meet the needs of the children within the two authorities. This is not consistently effective as there are examples where there have been delays relating to younger siblings not being placed as early as possible. There is uncertainty among some social workers about twin track planning. Attendance by the adoption support worker at the second statutory review for the child is a positive step to move forward permanency plans for children.

The nominated manager has a current CRB check in place as do all the established staff working for the Joint Adoption Service. There is a system in place to ensure CRB renewals are requested.

The child protection procedures are in place for children placed for adoption. The current heading for these relates to the adopters.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

There is evidence of some effective support provided for adoptive families. Some adopters refer to quick visits arranged in response to requests for help. Also that the adoption support work undertaken is positive and addresses real concerns, it is 'direct and on-the-ball'. The adoption support workers are able to undertake life story work when it is needed, even if it is the responsibility of another authority. The use

of attachment theory and in particular the use of Theraplay, is commented on by adopters as being effective and useful in helping their children make sense of their past and adjust to their situation.

There is some information from adopters indicating some feel that they are left on their own following approval and before placement. The managers are aware of this possibility and are working to address it. Not all adopters have the same experience and some feel they are well supported throughout. This support included those who are involved in inter-country adoption and continued to feel supported while out of this country.

There was evidence that adopters valued information about their child's heritage and were active in using this information to promote the child's positive self-image. This is evident in the value and respect placed on life story books and memorabilia kept safe for children.

In situations where a placement has been disrupted the Joint Adoption Service has clear procedures for arranging a disruption meeting. The one example seen, which related to this did not follow the service's procedure as the chair is not a manager and was not fully independent. There is a commitment to look at issues from disruption and use them to learn and develop practice.

Adoption Support Plans are in place in relation to all the files seen. Some of these are of good quality. Others do not address all the issues raised in the backgrounds of the adopters and children.

Specialist advisers are available to assist the work of the Adoption Service. Protocols are in place for the use of the medical and legal advisers. There is some close work with the Child and Mental Health Service (CAMHS) but this is not consistently in place. There is not a shared understanding of the relevant issues surrounding adoption in the work of related agencies, which has an impact on the services provided for some adopted children. Managers are aware of this and report that an audit is planned of the CAMHS service in relation to adoption.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a service level agreement with the adoption support agency After Adoption to provide independent support to birth family members. Leaflets are provided for birth families as well as verbal information and direct contact from the adoption support worker. There is a proactive approach to the provision of this service through the attendance of adoption support workers at the second statutory review of the child. Birth parents are not as fully aware of the services available as this should indicate. There is a recognition of individual birth parents responding on differing timescales.

There is some evidence of birth parent's views being recorded on the Child

Placement Report (CPR) but this is not done consistently. There is evidence of some good work with birth families to keep them involved in the process. A meeting between birth parents and adopters is usually arranged and support provided for all those involved.

Life story work is varied. The social workers for the children talk of the expectation that this work be completed. There was a view that the book was the work rather than an understanding of the book being a tool or a part of the process in the child understanding what had happened.

Information days are now established within the Joint Adoption Service. These events are used as a tool to pass information from those involved in a child's early life to their adoptive parents. Some social workers felt they were marginalised through this process, others saw the days as effective, although exhausting.

A letter-box system for indirect exchange of information has been operated by the Joint Adoption Service before the change in the legislation. It is an effective, well-established system, with reminders sent to participants. Whilst there is no direct involvement from social workers, the administrative staff refer any queries or uncertainties to the team manager or service manager. Adopters and birth parents have leaflets that provide information on what is suitable to include and direct support is provided if needed. No copy is kept of the information exchanged, which could lead to the loss of important exchanges.

Birth records counselling is undertaken by workers who have undertaken the relevant British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) training and local consortium. An effective system organises how this work is allocated.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a ratified statement of purpose in place. The children's guides have been significantly changed since the inspection in 2004. The presentation in colourful folders is appealing and has useful information for the child and social worker to work through. The details in the leaflets need updating with regard to the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Children's Rights Director's, clarity about complaints investigation and there is no summary of the services complaints procedure. The guides are also available in other languages, on request and in an audio version.

The information provided for prospective adopters is well presented and informative.

The leaflet that gives a clear and helpful timescale for prospective adopters currently has the application being made after the preparation course. This is no longer the case since the change in legislation in 2006. The letter inviting prospective adopters to attend adoption the panel is strongly worded in terms of their attendance. Adopters attendance at panel should be offered and left with the applicants to decide if they wish to attend.

The nominated manager does not have an appropriate management qualification. The nominated manager and the team manager are, however, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in the field of adoption. The service and adoption team are managed effectively and efficiently. Good use was made of the self-assessment documentation for this inspection and demonstrated an accurate appraisal of the service. It is noted that the service has been through a difficult time over the past two years, with key personnel being on sick leave for significant periods. Despite this the team's morale is good and the service is moving forward. The adoption social workers are very positive about the support they receive. There is regular monthly supervision, which is seen as valuable and constructive. There is a system for annual appraisal. Administrative staff are well supported and manage their current work load with an additional agency post.

The Joint Adoption Service is seen as a competent employer. Staff feel the arrangements for the Joint Adoption Team work well and that having a dedicated service manager assists the development of the service. Staff feel they are supported and enabled to undertake 'quality work, we are trained and supported to do the best job [we] can'. Training is seen as accessible and appropriate by the majority of staff, one said 'I think training is very good here'. The administrative staff felt they would benefit from some training in child protection, to support their work in answering the telephones. Staff feel the approach of the service is open and creative. Students are welcomed into the team and their contributions valued. There are two practice teachers in the team.

The work of the service is monitored by both local authorities. There are reports to both committees twice a year and two further interim reports. The councillor seen during the inspection is very well informed and committed to the provision of quality permanency for children in this area.

Although the structure of the files was clear and well-organised there were some weaknesses in the recording. The front sheet for the adopter's files is recognised by the managers as not relevant to adopter's files and is in the process of being changed. There is a gap in the case record for one adopter from December 2006 to August 2007. There is an audit system for files, councillors select 10 files each month to be viewed by the manager. There is evidence of supervision decision signed and recorded on adopter's files.

The children's adoption files hold too much inappropriate information, such as disputes between staff in memos and full case records. The standard of Child Placement Reports [CPRs] was variable. Some were poor, with chronologies used as case logs and information about siblings being mixed between each CPR. Some of

the CPRs and support plans were not signed. The decision making process is not clear from the records. Records showed decisions being made weeks after panel's recommendation and in some cases after placement. Letters of notification were not always evident on files. There is confusion about when the notification is made. It needs to follow the agency's decision rather than panel's recommendation. The panel minute extract relating to each child does not specify who was present at the panel. One of the files seen had no panel minutes, others had a joint minute relating to siblings.

Personnel files were very well-organised and in good order. They are compliant with regulations but do not clearly record telephone verification of references. There is an effective system for renewal and recording of CRB checks. The panel members' files were transferred to the personnel section two weeks before the inspection and it was then identified that some CRB checks were out-of-date. These have been requested but were not back at the time of the inspection.

The premises are now suitable for the purposes of the Joint Adoption Service following significant work being undertaken. Staff are very positive about the improvements and now all have their own computer and telephone. File are stored appropriately in lockable rooms and the archive storage is suitable and well managed.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
19	must ensure that staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency must have a current CRB check in place at all times, this includes all panel members (LAA Regs 2003 15 Schedules 3 and 4)	30/11/2007
25	must ensure that comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child in compliance with regulations [AA Regs 2005 Schedule 1]	31/01/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure consistent use of analysis in assessment of adopters and full exploration of issues of diversity. The health and safety checklist should include weapons, cords of blinds, knives and poisonous plants. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure that conflicts of interest in panel are clearly identified and the action taken to address this recorded. [National Minimum Standard 10]
- ensure full consideration and separate recording of the needs of siblings discussed at the panel [National Minimum Standard 10]
- ensure that there are clear processes in place for decision making, with clear notification of the date of the agency's decision. [National Minimum Standard 13]
- should ensure that the child is the focus of the safeguarding procedure for children placed for adoption, rather than the adopters, to allow for situations of abuse by other adults than the adopters including situations of historical abuse [National Minimum Standard 32]
- ensure that disruption meetings are organised in compliance with the procedures of the Joint Adoption Service [National Minimum Standard 6]
- ensure all the relevant issues are addressed in adoption support plans [National Minimum Standard 6]
- effective use is made of the audit of CAMHS services to ensure a consistent and effective service for adopted children and those placed for adoption [National Minimum Standard 18]
- enable children's social workers to gain a fuller understanding of the importance of life story work and the part within this of a life story book [National Minimum Standard 8]
- should consider copying all letter-box exchanges [National Minimum Standard 8]
- ensure changes are made to the children's guides and statement of purpose to provide accurate and up-to-date information [National Minimum Standard 1]
- reword the letter to prospective adopters making it clear they are invited to attend panel but are not under pressure to do so. The information about the process and timescales should accurately reflect practice and guidance [National Minimum Standard 3]
- ensure that letters of notification of all the agency's decisions are made within the specified guidelines and timescales [National Minimum Standard 25]
- ensure all reports are signed appropriately [National Minimum Standard 25]
- ensure that telephone verification of references are undertaken and clearly recorded on the personnel files [National Minimum Standard 28]
- ensure that the nominated manager has a qualification at level 4 National Vocational Qualification [NVQ] in management or another qualification which matches the competencies required by the NVQ level 4 [National Minimum Standard 14]