

# Southend on Sea Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Dancer / Kay Mehrtens
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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Paul Greenhalgh
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	07/12/2006

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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 and those who wish to adopt a child from overseas; 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.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection all of the National Minimum Standards were assessed. The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents is of a good quality and children are well placed in safe, stable and secure placements. Support services provided by this agency to adoptive families are of a good quality. The support provided helps to make and maintain the child's placement into adulthood and beyond.

Birth parents, other relatives and adoptees are provided with a support service. Some aspects of the agencies work is not as well developed as, until very recently, much of the support and counselling work with birth families had been undertaken by an external agency; all support is now delivered in house. For adoptees and birth relatives of adoptees wanting to make contact some very skilled and sensitive work is carried out. Where appropriate the agency supports people affected by adoption during reunions.

The agency is well managed and staff well supported by skilled, supportive and experienced managers with a clear child-centred approach taken to the adoption work.

### Improvements since the last inspection

The agency developed an action plan as a result of the last inspection and has addressed all issues arising from that inspection. This has meant the standards of practice and the management of the agency have improved. For example, there is a much more robust approach taken to the recruitment of staff, there is a fully staffed adoption team managed by a strong and supportive management team. The agency takes a far more coherent approach to monitoring the work of the agency, including

close tracking of children and adopters through the system. It has also developed a clear written recruitment strategy to target those adopters who are likely to be able to meet the needs of the children coming through the system.

### **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 arrangements in place for the recruitment of adopters ensure that the focus remains on the needs of the children waiting for a placement. People are welcomed without prejudice although the needs of the children are rightly considered above those of prospective adopters. There are sound arrangements in respect to family finding for children and the local consortium and the national adoption register are routinely used. The agency has a very low rate of disruptions and this is a strong indication that appropriate placements are made and maintained. The agency ensures that where children are of an age and level of understanding their views are obtained and acted upon where possible.

The formal application to adopt is not taken in a timely way. This means that applicants do not have access to the formal routes of appealing an adverse decision about their suitability from the point of the assessment commencing.

People who wish to adopt from another country are referred to a specialist agency for preparation and then return to this agency for the assessment and approval processes. People who wish to adopt a child from this country are provided with good quality preparation training which is run by the agency and prepares them well for the task of parenting a child who may have complex needs.

The assessment process is sensitively undertaken by experienced social workers. However, some assessment reports are overly descriptive and lack a full analysis of the information provided by adopters. Second opinion visits are carried out and these can allow for any concerns noted to be checked out. There are a full range of checks carried out on adopters to help assess their suitability to adopt. However, the home health and safety checklists do not include an assessment of risks to young children from hanging cords on window blinds. In addition not all health and safety checklists are updated as issues are addressed making it difficult to establish if the home is free from all preventable hazards. Children's permanence reports were also of a variable quality although all assessments were at least adequate.

Adopters are well informed about the matching, introduction and placement processes. This agency has good processes in place in respect to matching children with adopters who are likely to meet their needs into adulthood and beyond. The

agency provides prospective adopters with full information about the child being placed and the medical adviser will meet with prospective adopters to discuss any medical needs the child may have. Other specialisms are accessed as required such as those relating to the child's psychological and educational needs. Direct work with children is carried out to ensure that they understand their situation and are prepared for the move into their new family.

The arrangements for the operation and management of the panel are of a good quality. The panel is governed by clear policies and procedures and business is conducted in an efficient and effective manner. Adopters are invited to attend the panel for their approval and the matching consideration and are treated with sensitively and respect.

The panel is properly constituted, regularly convened and the chair and panel members have suitable qualities and experience. There is an induction process in place and new members observe a panel as a part of this process. Training in relevant issues is provided to members to ensure they remain up to date with current legislation and practice. All required recruitment checks are carried out to ensure that panel members are suitable for the role. Specialist advice is provided by the medical and legal advisers. While panel minutes are made the reasons do not make up part of the minutes, not all minutes clearly show what is advice and what is a recommendation and strengths and areas for development are not being pulled through from the discussion. On the case files the extracts of the minutes do not all show a list of attendees.

The agency decision-making processes are effective. Due regard is taken to the information surrounding the case and the panels recommendations. Decisions are made in a timely way and the relevant people are informed of the decision promptly.

The procedures for the recruitment of staff follow good practice in safeguarding children. In the main the agency evidenced a robust recruitment process takes place.

The agency has safeguarding procedures which relate to children who are placed for adoption and which relate to dealing with allegations of historical abuse. All staff are trained in the procedures.

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

The provision is good.

The support services provided by the agency are of a good quality. It shows a strong commitment to supporting adoptive families in maintaining safe, stable and secure placements. There is a range of activities which supports placements and these, along with the thorough preparation of adopters and the careful matching and placement processes, ensure that all support needs are well met.

Recent developments in the support services have meant that a multi-disciplinary approach is now taken in providing support services and children's needs are placed

at the centre of the work. Some services have been developed by the agency and some via the consortium arrangement. There is a strong approach to ensuring that the educational and emotional needs of children are met to a high standard and this in turn helps to stabilise all areas of the child's life. Health needs are explored and a proactive approach taken to ensure that adopters are aware of any health needs and that they understand the implications of these for them as a family. A range of social events are also arranged which provide a good chance for all in the adoptive family to meet up with others in a similar situation. People who have adopted a child from overseas can access these services.

The agency has access to a range of specialist services in addition to the medical and legal adviser.

The agency takes a sensitive approach to working with adoptees and others affected by adoption when carrying out work to do with birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact and when offering intermediary services.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has recently taken all of the work with birth parents back in house and as such some is currently at the early stages of development. However, There are some good pieces of work being carried out by individual workers and some good examples of sensitive work having been carried out with birth parents. For example they are encouraged to be as fully involved as is possible in the planning for their child and in providing information about their family.

The agency gives a high priority to ensuring each child is provided with life story work and a book and later life letters are written for the child to access in the future. This work supports adopters in talking to the child about his history.

The agency has a number of letter-box and direct contact arrangements which it administers. These are currently subject to a review to assess how well the arrangements are meeting the needs of the children.

Independent support to birth parents is now carried out in house and this work is at an early stage of development. There are clear referral systems to the adoption team in place and this happens when a plan for adoption has been identified as a possibility.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has clear policies and procedures which underpin its Statement of Purpose. This document does not include the arrangements for assessing the support needs of people previously unknown. However, it is a well-managed agency which ensures that children are informed about the process and are enabled to have an input into the planning where possible. Parties interested in becoming adopters are well supported in making an informed choice about if adoption is right for them and their family.

The managers of the agency are suitably qualified and experienced in adoption matters. Managers at all levels exercise sound leadership of the service and have a supportive and inclusive style of management. There are good monitoring systems in place for the work of the agency and these help to ensure that delays for children are kept to a minimum. This clear commitment to carrying out its work to a high standard is seen across the authority, including the executive, which takes a proactive approach to ensure it remains well informed about the work of the agency.

The arrangements for the management of workloads are effective and the diverse skill mix among staff on the adoption team provides adopters and children with a good range of expertise. Staff receive regular good quality supervision and there is good access to training. Social workers said the calibre of their administrative support staff was of a very good quality and placing social workers said that they are well supported by the adoption team manager and workers. The teams across the authority share a clear aim which is to provide good quality placements for the children.

Case files for children and adopters are well maintained and well ordered. File audits are carried out effectively. In a minority of cases some documents either have not been signed by the writer or the signature is illegible. Appropriate attention is paid to the safety and security of records and there are clear arrangements for access to records. Comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff and these evidence that robust recruitment practices take place.

The premises the adoption team work from are of a good standard and provide the agency with secure and well-equipped premises. However, the upper floor of the premises are not accessible to those with mobility difficulties. While there is a corporate disaster recovery plan the agency does not have such a plan which specifically relates to the provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records for the adoption service.

## 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
1	include, in the Statement of Purpose, the procedure for assessing needs for adoption support services for people previously unknown to the service (The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations (England) as amended 2005 Regulation 2(1) Schedule 1 7A)	31/10/2008

## Recommendations

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

- accept the formal application from adopters before any checks are carried out (NMS 4.1)
- ensure that any risks in prospective adopters' households in relation to the risks to children from hanging cords on window blinds are excluded and that any gaps identified in the health and safety assessments are addressed before a child is placed (NMS 4.6)
- ensure the panel minutes clearly state the panel's reasons for conclusions reached, all recommendations made and advice provided and that each set of minutes include a list of attendees (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that the strategy for supporting birth parents is closely monitored and reviewed (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that all written entries in records are signed and dated
- develop a disaster recovery plan which relates to the provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records for the adoption team