

Solihull MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056812
Inspection date	13/05/2010
Inspector	Vivien Slyfield / Carole Moore
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	11/12/2006

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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

Solihull adoption service is part of the Education and Children's Services Directorate for the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull. Solihull is a small borough and has developed close networking relationships across departments and agencies in its service provision. The borough is part of the West Midlands Consortium and works in partnership with neighbouring authorities.

The adoption team is based in offices in the centre of Solihull and consists of a team manager, assistant team manager and seven qualified social workers, two of whom focus on the provision of adoption support services. A recruitment team has been established that recruits both foster carers and adoptive parents. A professional adviser and a panel administrator support the adoption panel.

The adoption team prepares, assesses, supports and trains prospective and approved adopters. The assessments include stepparent adoption and adoption with a foreign element. The team provides a family-finding service for children from Solihull who need adoptive families and matches them with suitable adopters.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was a key, announced inspection during which all the key standards and previous requirements and recommendations were considered.

The adoption service provides a good range of support to adoptive families; this includes close liaison with other agencies and a strong working relationship with the looked after and adoption team for children-health, which assists in the maintenance of permanent families for children.

The agency works well with birth families to involve them in planning for their children and providing information in order to promote their heritage and sense of identity. They are committed to supporting birth parents and relatives in maintaining contact and are supported in this through the service level agreement with a local adoption support agency.

The agency recruits suitable adoptive families and prepares, assesses and approves them thoroughly so they can meet the needs of adoptive children. The adoption panel and decision-making arrangements are robust. However, the service has not been thorough and robust in ensuring that everyone who works on the panel is suitably recruited and that there is an effective system for renewal of Criminal Records Bureau checks. All the employed staff are recruited appropriately and

receive good support and training. Although management arrangements are generally good, this shortfall has had an impact on the judgement for staying safe and organisation, making their overall outcome judgement satisfactory.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection, two requirements and seven recommendations were made. The requirements related to Criminal Records Bureau checks being in place prior to prospective adopters being presented to the adoption panel, and panel minutes reflecting that full consideration is given to the needs of each individual child in a sibling group.

The seven recommendations included: reducing the wait for prospective adopters to attend a preparation course; maintaining an up-to-date knowledge about inter-country adoption; making greater use of the panel adviser; presenting the adoption panel minutes to the following panel for consideration; providing administrative support for the letterbox scheme; holding life appreciation days; and providing evidence of supervision decisions in the electronic records. All these requirements and recommendations have been addressed in full.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service has a systematic and effective approach for ensuring the adoption team are aware of the diverse needs of the children who may require an adoptive family at an early stage. This informs the recruitment strategy and the recruitment and marketing officer, enabling the team to give appropriate and current information to any enquirer. The system also facilitates the opportunity to 'fast track' people who are potentially good matches for children waiting. This ensures that children do not wait an unnecessarily long time for a suitable family, although delays have been experienced due to the court process. Children are placed with adopters who meet their cultural, racial and religious needs wherever possible and serious consideration is given to the benefits or otherwise of placing siblings together. Decisions are based on thorough assessments, informed by current research, and ensure the needs of each individual child are fully considered.

Although the service does not recruit many adopters it has sufficient to meet the needs of Solihull children needing adoptive families. In the last year all adoptive placements were with adopters approved by Solihull. Adopters said they had useful information at their initial contact with the service; one adopter stated there is a 'comprehensive booklet' and they spoke to 'friendly, knowledgeable staff who are

courteous and empathic'. An initial visit to the prospective applicant's home allows for further exchange of information and for the workers to identify issues that need early exploration, including medicals, to confirm whether or not an application is appropriate. There is a formal information meeting at the start of the preparation group, which runs twice a year and a reciprocal arrangement with two other local authorities allowing applicants the option of other groups if necessary.

The application form is provided for prospective adopters at the end of the information session, but is not usually returned before the start of the preparation course, as directed in the statutory guidance. The preparation course is thorough and adopters spoke very positively about it, particularly valuing the contact with approved adopters. One adopter said the course is 'well constructed with the right amount of activity', and another that it 'provided helpful detailed information'. Applicants know who their assessing social worker will be by the end of the course.

Assessments are thorough and staff have a clear and consistent approach in undertaking all the required references and suitability checks. These include international police references when necessary and references are sought from all employers. Constructive use has been made of the attachment style interview approach, with staff receiving training to use this to inform and support their assessments. All adopters expressed very positive views about their assessing social workers, describing them as 'really brilliant workers'. If needed, arrangements are made for a second opinion visit and report to be undertaken. If the service decides that it does not want to progress an application, it discusses this with the applicants and presents a brief report to the adoption panel.

There is effective and clear communication between the adoption team and children's teams. This allows for early identification of the possible need for an adoptive placement and for family finding to start at an early stage to prevent delay for children. A matching meeting allows full consideration of each child's needs and the possible matches with the skills and abilities of approved adopters. Adopters state that they had all the available information; one said, 'We were kept fully informed throughout and were never left wondering.' Introductions between the child and adopters are well planned and organised including all introductions having a meaningful review prior to the child moving. The service has established life appreciation days, which allow the adopters to gain first-hand information from those who have been involved in the child's early life. Both adopters and professionals commented with enthusiasm about these meetings; one adopter said, 'It was a great day!' All proposed matches are presented to the adoption panel.

There are usually two adoption panels each month and there are systems in place to arrange for additional panels should they be required. Workers reported an effective and well-organised panel administration, which is supported by clear and well-informed procedures. Adopters are invited to attend the panel meeting and are well prepared and supported by staff in doing so. Adopters' experience of panel is positive; they felt welcomed and respected by a panel which asked appropriate questions. The panel meetings are seen by workers as robust in their consideration of the matters presented and members are aware of the monitoring and quality

assurance aspect of their role. The minutes are full but some examples make it difficult to gain a complete picture of the matter considered. There is well structured and clear recording of the reasons for the recommendation. The records demonstrate that the agency's decision-making process is robust and timely with full consideration of all the relevant information, including the panel minutes, prior to the decision being made and letters of notification sent.

The membership of the panel draws on a range of skills, knowledge and life experience. The service faced difficulties when their chairperson left and the vice-chairperson was unable to attend all the panels. The rapid appointment of a new chairperson has meant new Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks have not been undertaken. The system for renewal of CRB checks for panel members is not robust and two members do not have a current CRB check.

The service has an effective and thorough recruitment process for staff employed by the council; all staff undergo appropriate suitability checks and have the necessary qualifications. There is a system in place for the renewal of CRB checks for employed staff.

There are procedures in place relating to allegations made about adoptive parents but they do not address the full circumstances of children placed for adoption, nor do they relate to situations of historical abuse.

Although there are some weaknesses in this outcome area they have a minimal impact on the safety of children, who are well matched with adopters who have been appropriately assessed by the service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The adoption service provides a range of support, from a small number of workers, for adoptive families which enables them to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. This support commences during the preparation, assessment and approval process, when clear information about the needs of children are highlighted and discussed, along with strategies to meet these needs. Workers are sensitive to the support needs of adopters following approval and ensure they remain in regular contact. A variety of training, workshops, a newsletter and events are in place to facilitate the development of adopters' skills and knowledge. Adopters are very confident of the on-going support from the service and aware that they can re-contact the service in the future should their needs change. There is an effective system to identify children and adopters' support needs. These are identified by the adoption team workers in liaison with their child care colleagues and incorporated into each child's adoption support plan.

There is well-established support from the child and adolescent mental health team through the looked after and adoption team for children-health (LAATCH). There is close work with this team and in particular with the clinical psychologist to ensure

that there is a timely response to adoptive families both pre and post adoption order. One social worker said, 'LAATCH is enormously respected.' LAATCH provides a range of services from consultation with professionals to direct work with adoptive families and includes both training and liaison with schools. LAATCH ensures that services are provided for adoptive families who live or move outside the local area. There is a flexible approach to the support provided, with a recognition that sometimes the support needs to be long term and has been provided in one situation, in varying degrees of intensity, for a family over a period of three to five years.

In addition to the specialist service provided by LAATCH there is effective use made of medical and legal advisers. Staff across the teams found that both professions were responsive to queries and that the protocols and systems in place allow effective and accessible communication.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service makes strong efforts to involve birth parents in planning for their child's adoption and in contributing information about their family. There is clear evidence that their views are sought and recorded on the child permanence report, or an explanation given if this is not possible. The adoption panel are robust in ensuring appropriate information is available for the child in the future. There are examples of one-off meetings between birth parents and adopters, which enable positive contact to be maintained after adoption and first-hand information about the child's family to be gained. The service provides good and long-lasting independent support for birth families through the arrangement of support with a local adoption support agency. Children's social workers are fully aware of this service and make efforts to encourage its use by the families with whom they work. The post adoption workers also undertake some direct work with birth parents and have made a DVD of their views to show to adopters and other birth parents. Birth families commented positively about their contact with the post adoption team; one said, 'I felt comfortable around them and felt they were helping me.'

Social workers are aware of the importance of a child's life story and are committed to producing a life story book within an appropriate timescale. They are able to use a number of tools which have been developed by the adoption team, including a range of story books such as Harry's Story and Molly Mouse. Social workers are clear that life story books are part of the preparation of a child for their future and of their on-going significance for children. There are examples of social workers providing more than one book for a child to address their needs and of collecting memorabilia from birth if adoption is the plan.

The service has established life appreciation days, which is a positive development towards ensuring that a child's early life experiences are valued and passed on to their adopters. The service provides a robust indirect contact between children and their birth families through a letterbox exchange. The letterbox has administrative support and clear systems in place to send advance reminders when exchanges are

due, and reviews the exchange with both birth families and adopters. Both adopters and birth families are supported in the letters they write, including through a pack of information, which includes example letters. The letterbox provides a strong commitment to meaningful exchanges which are focused clearly on the needs of the child. A birth parent survey expressed a positive view of the service and said, 'They let me know how my kids are getting on.'

A birth records counselling service is provided by the team. The number of requests for this service is low but the workers involved are committed to the provision of quality support and are aware of the implications of sensitive information for all those involved in adoption.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has a current Statement of Purpose, which provides clear, comprehensive information for anyone wishing to use the service. It has also developed a very child-friendly range of children's guides, to make the information more accessible to a diverse group of children. The guides do not have Ofsted's contact details. These documents are available in other formats and languages if necessary. A number of resources are used to assist children to understand the adoption process and what it means for them.

Prospective adopters receive good, clear, well-presented written information at various stages of the process, which enables them to be aware of what should happen next. Adopters commented that this was useful and they were clear about the children who need adoptive families. The information about children is up to date due to effective communication between the adoption and children's teams and their managers.

The service is well managed at all levels. There is an effective, strategic approach to improving outcomes for children which is supported by operational activities. The manager has appropriate skills, qualifications, knowledge and experience as well as demonstrating enthusiasm and commitment to the work of the service and outcomes for children. There are clear lines of accountability and good communication, both between the management team and the staff group. Staff comment on the approachability and knowledge of the managers saying, 'They're really approachable, there's always an open door.' The adoption team managers are referred to as 'brilliant' by a number of staff across the teams.

The adoption and post adoption team are well-established workers with a wide range

of skills, knowledge and experience who are committed to the provision of a high quality service. They work well and effectively as a team and with their child care colleagues. They are supported through regular planned, as well as informal, supervision and annual appraisal. Staff comment that the internal training provided is good and there is a planned system for refreshing training in safeguarding. Specialist training is also available and staff pass on information gained through this to the rest of the team in a variety of forums including in the newly established professional issues meetings. The administrative support for the adoption team is effective and well informed. Administrative staff feel a part of the team and work with the same child-focused aim.

Staff view the council as a good employer. Some commented on the value in the small size of the council, which allows for easy communication across different levels of the organisation. The executive is committed to corporate parenting and kept informed of the service's activities through written reports twice a year and monitoring systems.

Case records and children's adoption files are well maintained, supervision decisions are clearly recorded and there is evidence of file audits on the paper files. Storage of records, including the archive arrangements, are appropriate and give due consideration to the maintenance of original documents for the child's adoption file.

The panel members' files do not comply with the requirements of the regulations. They do not consistently contain all the required information, for example, references, proof of qualifications, photographs, home contact details and CVs. Staff personnel files contain the appropriate information with the support of a database for the renewal of Criminal Records Bureau checks.

The premises are suitable for the purposes of the service and allow access and meetings to take place at ground floor level if necessary. Staff outside the adoption team raised some issues about the use of the building for contact, but this does not impinge on the use of it by the adoption service.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service user is at the centre of all the work and their needs are addressed. All service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture or gender. Access to information is addressed through the availability of information in different formats and languages. Policies and written information are inclusive in their use of language.

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):

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- ensure that prospective adopters are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process, which takes the application for assessment of adopters prior to the preparation course, as in the statutory Adoption Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002 (NMS 4)
 - ensure that the minutes of the panel meetings are accurate and informative (NMS 12.3)
 - ensure that no panel member is allowed to begin work until any relevant CRB and all status checks have been satisfactorily completed and that an up-to-date, comprehensive personnel file is maintained for each member of the adoption panel (NMS 11.3 and 28.1)
 - ensure that there is a written policy in place which is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption, and a procedure for dealing with allegations of historical abuse which may be made by service users during the course of service provision (LAA Regulations 2003 9(1)(a) and NMS 32.4)
 - produce a written guide to the adoption service which shall consist of a statement as to the matters listed in Schedule 2, with particular regard to the address and telephone number of the Commission (Ofsted). (LAA Regulations 2003 3 (1) and NMS 1.4)