

# Shropshire C C (inc Telford & Wrekin) Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Vivien Slyfield
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	10/09/2007

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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 was a key, announced inspection.

The adoption agency provides a good range of support to adoptive families; this includes direct work by the adoption support team, who undertaken some sensitive work that is highly valued by adoptive families and assists in the maintenance of permanent families for children.

The service plans well for children needing adoptive placements and starts at an early stage to find appropriate families so that they are matched without delay. There is some good creative work undertaken with children to help them understand the move to adoptive families. The service is committed to supporting birth parents and relatives in maintaining contact and this is sensitively and effectively implemented. Adopted adults receive an appropriate service but unless there are prioritising needs they have to wait for some months for work to start with them.

The service recruits suitable adoptive families and prepares, assesses and approves them so they can meet the needs of adoptive children. However, greater consistency is needed in the standard of all reports presented to the panel. The adoption panel and decision making arrangements are robust and the decisions are made within the appropriate timescales. The notification process is not consistently clear and some letters do not make the decision clear. All the employed staff are recruited appropriately and receive good support and training. The lack of progress in some

recommendations has had an impact on the judgement for staying safe and organisation, making the overall outcome judgement satisfactory.

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

Following the last inspection, both the actions made have been met with robust recruitment and renewal procedures for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks being in place and appropriate adoption records held on the file seen. The previous recommendation about telephone verification is also met.

There were 16 recommendations of which nine are fully met. The panel minutes show the clear identification of any conflict of interest and separate recording of each child in a sibling group. The letter to prospective adopters inviting them to panel makes it clear they are not obliged to attend. There have been no disruptions within the last year but when these occur the procedures of the Joint Adoption Service are followed. Relevant issues are addressed in the adoption support plans and information is effectively passed on to adopters through the life history days and children are effectively prepared to move and their life story explained. All indirect contact exchanges are now copied. Reports are now signed by the manager and workers. The Statement of Purpose and the children's guide have been reviewed and are now compliant

Some progress has been made in relation to four recommendations but they are not fully met and have remained recommendations. Two which remain outstanding are the qualifications of the nominated manager and the review of the specialist child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).

### **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 an effective approach for ensuring the adoption team are aware of the needs of the children who may require an adoptive family at an early stage. This informs the recruitment strategy and enables the team to give appropriate and up to date information to any enquirers. This ensures that children do not wait an unnecessarily long time for a suitable family.

The service undertakes preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. Adopters are able to talk with a worker knowledgeable about adoption from their first contact with the service. Adopters commented; 'we had an initial phone enquiry and the social worker was extremely helpful' and 'the information supplied was very thorough and explained the process extremely well.' The monthly information

evenings provide prospective applicants with useful information and adopters comment on the skills of the worker who runs these as being; 'brilliant, really puts people at ease.' The system for accepting applications is clear and purposeful; a thorough initial visit takes place which is undertaken by two experienced workers allowing a skilled and consistent response. Early references, including medicals are undertaken at an early stage if appropriate. The service is clear about the potential resource offered before an application is sent to the enquirers if they appear to be suitable potential adopters. Adopters are well prepared; they attend a preparation course which they describe as an 'excellent preparation course; with practical hits and tips' and adopters with children said, 'we still relate back to it with our children now.'

Most assessments of prospective adoptive parents are thorough and staff are clear in undertaking all the required references and suitability checks. The exploration of equality and diversity is variable as in the degree of analysis where prospective adopters have written significant amounts of the report themselves. All adopters expressed very positive views about their access to social workers, describing them as 'brilliant' and 'totally put us at ease.'

Adopters are given information about the children and have a well thought out plan of introductions prior to placement; as one said 'the information supplied was very comprehensive and helped us whilst coming to our decision.' 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, some of which are informed by work undertaken by the service's play therapists. Whilst the needs of individual children are well considered, the recording of the needs of sibling groups does not identify each child's individual needs sufficiently within the matching report. The adoption support workers can be involved to help children with particular challenges become more able to adjust to family life.

The adoption panel meets monthly; applicants are invited to attend for their approval and will soon be invited for the matching with children. Although they see it as 'daunting', adopters said they are made welcome and put at ease. The panel is appropriately constituted with a mix of members who have personal and professional experience of adoption. They receive regular training and legal updates to ensure their contribution is effective. The panel is well chaired and all members demonstrate that they are well prepared and ask appropriate questions. The role of agency adviser is ably undertaken by the nominated manager for the adoption service. The adoption panel process is well organised, members receive the papers in good time to enable them to give them full consideration in advance of the panel and the minutes are full. Decision making is timely and thorough; however, the agency decision is not consistently notified to birth parents and the notification to adopters states that approval is 'recommended'.

There is a robust and thorough recruitment process for staff employed by the council; all staff undergo appropriate suitability checks and have the necessary qualifications.

The service has general safeguarding policies and procedures in place but specific adoption policies and procedures do not focus on the child placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services nor do they specify how to manage situations of historical abuse. However, practitioners are acting in a safe manner to protect children from risk although they are not supported by the current policies and procedures.

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

The provision is good.

The adoption service provides some impressive support to adoptive families with a small number of staff, which enables them to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. The support service is good with some outstanding features. This support commences during the preparation, assessment and approval process. Following approval, the team provide training which covers issues such as attachment, therapeutic parenting and child development to start to equip adopters with the skills to parent an adoptive child in a therapeutic way. Adopters have access to further training to build on their initial skills, which includes issues such as behaviour management, contact and telling. Adopters spoken with demonstrated an awareness of the importance of the child's birth family to enable a child to develop a positive self-identity. The system of referral allows the service to make early contact with anyone requesting assessment and to provide a 'stop-gap' measure while waiting for time to become available within the team for work to start. There is evidence of this working effectively, but as one adopter put it, 'problem is the waiting list'. There are two experienced play therapists and the adoption support service advisor (ASSA) who undertake direct work with children. The role of the ASSA is carried out by an experienced and skilled practitioner who is highly committed to the provision of good quality support. Their work is well supported through counselling and clinical supervision. All the adopters who have used the service viewed it positively. One adopter said, 'When we got the real support required two years ago our lives were changed beyond recognition for the better!' and another that there are 'wonderful staff who are completely over-worked' and 'this little tiny place has made such a difference to so many children.' There is evidence of effective work in supporting adoptive families. There is limited evidence of adoption support assessments being completed and recorded making it difficult to manage this very stretched service.

In addition to training, the support adoption team assist adoptive parents in their relationship with schools to facilitate positive experiences in school. This work includes the provision of information booklets and training for schools in the needs of adoptive children as well as specific work in relation to particular children.

There has recently been a change in the management of CAMHS, which managers of the Joint Adoption Service believe will be positive in making the CAMHS services more accessible to adopted children and young people. The current situation means that adoptive families receive a poor service from CAMHS with some adopters

viewing it as damaging and others as 'absolutely useless'.

The agency has very few disruptions of adoption placements and none in the last year, but when this does happen, support is offered to all parties, a disruption meeting is held and that any lessons to be learned are implemented to improve practice.

The agency has access to medical and legal advice in addition to the other specialist services which they use. Both advisers are available for staff to access as well as the adoption panel. The medical adviser will meet with prospective adopters who have commented how useful these meetings are in gaining accurate information about their children. The legal advisers are similarly committed and ensure staff and panel members have access to up to date information to inform their deliberations.

### **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 contributing information about their family. There is clear evidence that their views are sought and recorded on the report presented to the panel, 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 some examples of one-off meetings between birth parents and adopters, which enable positive contact to be maintained and first hand information about the child's family to be gained. The service provides support for birth families and one person said the service 'is very helpful - very supportive.' There is a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency which provides counselling and support for birth parents. Managers report that this service is well used by birth parents.

Social workers are aware of the importance of a child's life story and foster carers are asked to produce the life story book and work well to prepare children for their moving on. Some examples are available of very good tools to help their child understand their history and when and where they are moving. Letters for later life are also provided and recorded on the child's adoption file.

There is a strong commitment to maintaining and facilitating contact arrangements which are sensitively handled. The service manages a large letterbox; there are arrangements in place to ensure that letters are appropriate and assistance is offered to facilitate this with leaflets, examples and direct contact with the letter box coordinator. The service now keeps copies of the letters before passing them on to ensure the information is held if the originals are lost, go astray, or are destroyed or damaged.

There is a commitment to the service to adopted adults and to ensuring the information from them informs the current practice of assessment and matching. Monthly surgeries are available for post adoption work but there remains a waiting list for schedule two counselling which is currently six months. However, the staff



assess the need of enquirers and will provide a more timely service if needed. Enquirers are given appropriate written information to enable them to have a choice of who to contact, particularly if the agency cannot assist them directly. The staff involved in this work are mindful of the potential risks to individuals and are aware of the possibility of disclosures of historical abuse and how to refer them on appropriately.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has updated its Statement of Purpose, which provides information for anyone wishing to use the service. It has also developed its children's guide, to make the information more accessible to a diverse group of children. A number of resources are used to assist children in understanding the adoption process and what it means for them.

The service provides good written information for enquirers to enable them to know more about what adoption means and what the service will provide. All the managers in the service are appropriately knowledgeable, skilled and experienced; there are clear roles, responsibilities and accountabilities which are understood by all the staff. Although identified at the last inspection the nominated manager does not have the qualifications identified in the national minimum standards. There remain a number of further recommendations outstanding from the last inspection which has impacted on the judgement of management of the service.

Staff are organised and managed effectively and are well supported through regular, planned and recorded supervision in addition to informal arrangements. There are clear channels of communication including regular team meetings and senior management meetings to evaluate the joint arrangement. There is a high standard of supervision available for the adoption support workers, inclining counselling and clinical supervision. The administrative support is good and social workers are particularly appreciative of their role, while administrative staff feel fully integrated in the adoption team.

Staff in the adoption team state they have had a good level of training, including external training of a high quality. The service has a sufficient number of suitably qualified and experienced staff to undertake the work and no deficits in service were noted, apart from the delays in the provision of adoption support and post adoption services. Staff feel that the Joint Adoption Service is a reasonable employer and commented that they enjoy their work.

The executive of both councils receive regular written reports and have briefings by senior officers to ensure they are aware of the work of the agency and can monitor outcomes for children.

Records in relation to adopters are well structured, information is easy to access and they contain all the appropriate information. The children's adoption files are compliant and there is an expectation that the adoption service managers check these files before they are archived. There is evidence of file audits and case decisions made in supervision on the files.

The files on staff contain all the required information and show evidence of robust recruitment systems and renewal of CRB checks. The files on panel members have improved and the files stored at the head offices and the adoption service offices together make a compliant record. The electronic records are backed up daily and archive storage of files was compliant at last inspection and not revisited on this occasion.

The adoption team are based in a location which is accessible and very convenient for anyone who wishes to visit. The premises are secure, with appropriate storage and security for records and information technology systems. The use of these premises for the therapeutic work of the adoption support aspect of the service is not wholly appropriate and staff comment on the confidentiality difficulties caused in direct work with children because of the layout of the rooms being close together. There is a disaster recovery plan in place that includes the premises of the adoption service.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. The service user is at the centre of all its work and their needs are addressed. All service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture or gender and policies and written information are inclusive.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that adopters are given accurate, up-to-date and full written information to help them understand the needs and background of the child, with particular reference to the separate consideration of the needs of siblings in the matching report (NMS 5)
- ensure that there are clear processes in place to convey its decision, orally to the child and in writing to the parents or guardians of the child and prospective/approved adopters as appropriate, in regard to the letter to prospective adopters about their approval and consistency in notifying birth

- parents of the agency's decision (NMS 13)
- ensure that an assessment is undertaken in compliance with the ASS Regs 2005 13(1) (NMS 6)
  - ensure there are procedures in place to access other specialisms according to its needs, with particular reference to the audit of CAMHS services to ensure a consistent and effective service for adopted children and those placed for adoption (NMS 18.4)
  - ensure that the nominated manager has a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 4 in Management or another qualification which matches the competencies required by the NVQ at Level 4 (NMS 14)
  - ensure the premises of the adoption agency are appropriate for the purpose, in relation to the therapeutic work undertaken. (NMS 29.1)