

Bristol City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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 adoption service is part of the Children and Young People's Service of Bristol City Council. The service has an Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who acts as the responsible individual and who oversees all aspects of the service. A Strategy Leader Corporate Planning acts as the registered manager of the service. An Adoption Panel is chaired by an independent chair and makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker about children suitable for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the matching of children and prospective adopters.

A team manager operates a separate recruitment team of social workers which, in addition to its functions in relation to the fostering service, aims to recruit a sufficient pool of prospective adopters to meet the assessed needs of children needing adoptive families.

A team manager operates a permanency team of social workers and sessional workers and the Bristol Adoption Support Service (BASS). In addition to its functions in relation to the fostering service, this team also assesses prospective adopters and supports approved adopters following placement, until an Adoption Order is made. A Planning and Development Manager acts as the Adoption Support Service Advisor (ASSA) who advises the deliberations of the Adoption Panel and other key aspects of the service and who manages the family finding service and sessional workers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The inspection was announced. The agency provides a good level of services for young people who need to be adopted and for the recruitment, training and ongoing support of foster carers. Birth parents are sensitively supported throughout the adoption process and arrangements are in place for appropriate contact and tracing for birth families when necessary.

The service is managed and run by appropriately trained and experienced managers and practitioners.

Improvements since the last inspection

A Statement of Purpose and a Children's Guide is now in place and made available to all relevant stakeholders.

All children have case files which are comprehensive and up to date.

An effective Safeguarding Children policy is in place and all staff receive training in this policy.

Staff and panel members' case files are comprehensive and up to date and meet the requirements of Schedules 3 and 4.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards relating to this outcome group. However, there is a specialist Adoption Medical Adviser who attends and advises the Adoption Panel and who sees all children before they are considered by the Adoption Panel and then updates their medical report every three to six months prior to their placement for adoption. Also, the service contracts psychologists from the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team to provide a service to children and families post adoption.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Systems and policies are in place to ensure that children are appropriately matched with adopters.

Children who the Council propose placing for adoption have their needs assessed by a qualified social worker who submits an application for adoption to the Adoption Panel who make a recommendation about the young person's suitability for adoption to the ADM who makes the final decision. Birth parents are informed about the proposal and are made aware of all stages of the process. If the ADM approves the Panel's recommendation the council apply for a 'Placement Order'.

Prospective adoptive parents are recruited, prepared and supported by the adoption service teams and an application is made to the Panel who make recommendation to the ADM who makes the final decision about approval.

Thereupon there is a pool of approved young people needing an adoptive placement and a pool of approved adoptive parents waiting for a placement.

The social worker for the young person then consults the ASSA seeking an appropriate placement. The service has a 'Family Finders' team of qualified and experienced senior social workers who work to match young people with the most appropriate adoptive parents. If there are no appropriate adopters available within the council's pool of approved adopters the 'Family Finders' will consult the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) who have a register of approved carers and if an appropriate placement is found a 'matching meeting' takes place where the birth parents considerations are taken into account. The 'matching' is put before the Panel for consideration and recommendation to the ADM who makes the final decision.

The Council rigorously assess prospective adopters and prepares them well for placements. They are kept well informed about the 'matching' process.

Applicants to become adoptive parents are sent a comprehensive information pack and invited to attend an information event with groups of other applicants. Social workers conduct a home visit to check on aspects of the household's health and safety. Applicants attend a 'Preparation Group' which involves two Saturday and four evening workshops designed to both prepare and assess them. The council use the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) 'Form F' to inform the assessment process. This includes obtaining three personal references, medical

clearance from the applicant's GP and a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance. When a young person and adoptive parents have been 'matched' and a 'Placement Order' granted, a 'Placement Plan' is constructed outlining the young person's needs and the support adopters will require. This Plan is reviewed at the same frequency as the 'Looked After Children' (LAC) Placement Plan reviews until the 'Adoption Order' is made. Adopters can apply for an 'Adoption Order' 10 weeks after the 'Adoption Order' is made and support is given by the Council to affect this.

The role and functions of the Adoption Panel are clearly and correctly spelt out in the council's policy documents and in its 'Statement of Purpose' which also stipulates its constitution and membership. The constitution of the panel includes a person who was adopted themselves, a birth parent, two adopters, a medical advisor and a legal representative. There is also minority ethnic group representation in the group membership. Panels are held in a timely fashion at least 22 times per year. Panel recommendations are considered by the ADM and a decision is made within three to four working days.

The registered manager of the service has a professional social work qualification, is qualified in management and has many years experience in child care management and practice. All social work staff working in the service have a professional social work qualification and are suitably vetted at the time of recruitment. It was noted that two CRB checks on staff/panel members require updating in line with the three year principle.

The council has a robust 'Complaints Procedure'. A record of complaints received about the service in 2008 is in place and the actions taken by the service were appropriate.

Policies are in place to safeguard and protect service users.

The council operates a 'Letterbox' system for periodic contact/communication between children and their birth parents/relatives where appropriate which is appropriately safeguarded.

There is a policy on discouraging adopters from smoking and on the physical chastisement of adopted children.

All staff working for the service receive training on the Council's 'Safeguarding Children' policy.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adoptive parents are well supported by a range of services. These include a comprehensive information pack and attendance at a four day Preparation Group. The assessment and approval process provides intensive information exchange about the reality of adoption. The Adoption Support Plan outlines how the needs of the young person placed and of the adoptive parents will be met. These plans are appropriately reviewed.

The BASS team gives ongoing post-adoption support to adopters where necessary

and keeps them informed by the distribution of a periodic information newsletter.

The agency can access the services of the 'Education for Children Looked After' (ECLAS) team who can give adopted young people additional educational support when necessary. They can also access psychiatric/psychology support by referring young people to the 'Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services' (CAMHS). Life story work with young people is carried out by social workers from the locality teams who have received specialist training in this area.

Inter-agency adopters are kept well informed about all aspects of the adoption process.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has a service level agreement with the 'South West Adoption Network' (SWAN) who offer support and counselling to birth parents and who undertake 'tracing' for adults who were adopted and for birth parents whose children are now adults.

The agency consults birth parent at all relevant points during the matching and adoption process including matters that pertain to racial, cultural and religious matters.

The Placement Plan takes into account all of the young person's needs and the actions necessary to support them.

An effective 'Letterbox' system is in place to allow birth parents to maintain contact with their children. The system effectively safeguards the adopted young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards relating to this outcome group.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

A clearly written and comprehensive Statement of Purpose is in place which spells out the aims and objectives of the service and the names and qualifications of the managers and practitioners involved in the service.

A Children's Guide is also in place.

The council's website has a page on the Adoption Service which gives comprehensive information and advice about all aspects of the service.

A comprehensive information pack is posted to prospective adopters at the time of

their initial enquiry. They are invited to attend an informal information evening and will attend a 'Preparation Group' which provides them with training on key issues of adoption. During the assessment process prospective adopters are given a model BAAF Form F to inform them about the process. One prospective adopter was sent a model form where the adopter's names had been snowpaked out but could still have been read through.

The manager of the service is appropriately qualified both professionally and in management. They have many years experience in child care social work practice and in service management.

All practitioners are professionally qualified and experienced in child care. Supervision for practitioners is regular and appropriate.

All members of the management team are regularly supervised by the registered manager. All management and practitioners have personal development plans in place which are reviewed annually.

The registered manager reviews complaints about the service on a regular basis. Although the service was seen to be working efficiently and effectively staffing levels are just adequate. Practitioners commented that workloads are such that there was little room for service development.

Although staff training programmes address all key skill areas some practitioners commented that they would like more training on 'attachment, separation and loss' and 'biological/neurological effects'.

Case records for children and adopters were seen to be comprehensive, clearly written and up to date. The council have effective methods of allowing service users access to their files should they wish to do so.

Panel members brought to the inspectors attention that some children's 'Permanency Reports' could be better written in a 'user friendly' style to help young people understand them more easily.

Staff personnel files are held under secure conditions which ensure their confidentiality and are comprehensive and well ordered. A recommendation about the frequency of CRB checks has been made earlier in this report.

The office space available for the service is adequate if a little basic and the fact that the overall service is based in two different buildings does not allow ease of communication.

Although there is a risk assessment for the safekeeping of archive files a Disaster Recovery Plan is not in place.

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 CRB checks on staff and panel members are updated every three years. NMS 19
- ensure that prospective adopters are not sent confidential documents that have not been effectively censored. NMS 3
- ensure that staffing levels are such that they allow room for service development and can address prospective difficulties during periods of high sickness and absenteeism.
- ensure that children's 'Permanency Reports' are written in a more 'user friendly' style. NMS 27
- review the appropriateness of the premises used by the adoption service. NMS 29
- ensure that a Disaster Recovery Plan is in place for the safekeeping of archive files. NMS 29