

Portsmouth City Council Adoption Agency

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Romana Young
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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; 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. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency refers them for preparation by an Adoption Support Agency specialising in this work and they return to this agency for the rest of the process. The agency also has a contract with an Adoption Support Agency to provide independent support to birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption.

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 the agency ensures that children are placed in safe, stable and secure placements.

The agency provides a good quality support service to adoptive families which means that adoptive placements are maintained throughout childhood and beyond.

Birth parents and relatives are provided with a support service with a range of professionals being available to offer the service. This includes an independent Adoption Support Agency although the take up of the support offered by birth parents is currently limited.

For adoptees and birth relatives of adoptees using the counselling services some very skilled and sensitive work is carried out. The agency has recently begun to offer an intermediary service which is yet to be used.

Overall the management of the agency is efficient. However, the management structure means that the appointed manager does not have line management responsibility for much of the work of the agency. This means that she has little control or influence over these pieces of work but she does have the responsibility. A minority of staff expressed a level of dissatisfaction about the level of support provided to them by their most immediate managers. However, this agency does

take a child centred approach to its work and the outcomes for Portsmouth children are good.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection there was one action made and seven recommendations. The action has been addressed as have five of the recommendations. The recommendations which remain relate to ensuring that applicants full employment history is obtained and ensuring that files for adopters and children are comprehensive and accurate in content.

The service has been through some changes in management and staffing since the last inspection. A new agency manager has been appointed following the retirement of the previous manager and the adoption team has grown significantly. The increased numbers of staff have meant that the support services provided to adopters, children and adult adoptees have expanded considerably, the family finding for and direct work with children is undertaken in a more systematic way and delays for children are being kept to the minimum. In addition work with birth parents can be carried out by a range of people thus providing birth parents with a level of choice of worker.

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 agency takes a proactive approach in the recruitment of adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. Enquirers are welcomed without prejudice although the focus remains on the needs of the children and enquirers are prioritised on this basis. There are good systems in place in respect to permanency planning for children which ensure that delays are highlighted and therefore can be kept to a minimum. These systems also inform the recruitment processes about the needs of the children coming through the system. There are good arrangements in respect to family finding and the local consortium, adoption exchange days and the national adoption register are routinely used. The agency ensures that where children are of an age and level of understanding their views are obtained and acted upon where possible. The agency is mindful of delay and where an exact match cannot be made in a timely way it will look to ways to support prospective adopters in addressing any shortfalls. Where approved adopters circumstances have changed over time the agency has not yet returned these cases to panel for re-consideration of their approval; this means the prospective adopters are unable to access the appeals system.

People who want to adopt a child from another country attend preparation courses run by an agency specialising in this type of work which is registered and inspected by Ofsted. They then return to this agency for the assessment and approval processes. People who want to adopt a child from this country are provided with good quality preparation training which is run by this agency which prepares them well for the task of parenting a child who may have complex needs. The agency also runs training sessions for adoptive grandparents and other significant people. This is good practice as it ensures that people who will be significant in the life of an adopted child are fully aware of and understand the complexities of adoption.

The quality of the assessments of adopters is overall satisfactory. The better assessments show a robust approach has been taken to analysing all information gathered. Some assessments do not show a full employment history on applicants and this makes it difficult to check out any gaps in employment. Some of the health and safety checklists being used do not include consideration of the safe storage of dangerous weapons, any risks hanging cords on window blinds may present to a child or consideration of poisonous plants. Adopters were in the main very satisfied with their assessment process, one called the social worker reliable, supportive and as having good communication skills and another said their social worker arranged appointments to meet the adopters needs.

The agency provides good information to adopters about the matching, introduction and placement processes. The matching processes are sound. The agency ensures that adopters have all known information about a child's needs to help them make an informed decision about whether they wish to proceed to a match. There is a matching information meeting held during which a range of people who have worked with the child meet with the adopters to share information. Where there are any medical issues the agency medical adviser meets with prospective adopters to discuss these and any implications they may have for the future. Children's permanence reports were of a variable quality although all assessments were at least adequate enough to inform the matching processes. Children are well prepared to move into their new family via the good quality direct work carried out with them.

The adoption panel is governed by clear policies and procedures and its operation and management is of a good quality. Adopters are invited to attend their approval panel and the panel hearing a match. Adopters are well supported by their social worker during their panel attendance and overall adopters felt they had been treated respectfully. The panel properly constituted and the chair and its members have suitable qualities and experience in adoption matters. A range of specialist advice is available to panel including medical and legal advice. Panels are convened regularly so as not to cause delay for children. Panel members undergo a robust recruitment process. There is an induction process and a training programme in place which ensures that panel members are kept up to date in adoption law and practice. The administration of the panel is of a good quality including the minutes made of panel meetings. The strengths and weaknesses of an application are not pulled through into the minutes to inform the family finding process.

The agency decision-making processes are effective and the decision is made in a

timely way. The decision maker takes into account all of the information surrounding the case and the panels recommendations.

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 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.

This agency shows a strong commitment to supporting adoptive placements to ensure that children are provided with safe, stable and secure placements. Adopters are well prepared to parent a child from the care system and therefore likely to have needs arising from adverse life experiences. The matching processes include further consideration about any support services the child or adoptive parents may benefit from and clear adoption support plans are devised for each family. These plans are reviewed at a minimum of annually. Adopters are provided with a variety of support services to which all are welcomed. These include further training, social events, group work, social work support and paid membership to a national adoption support agency. Both adopter and placing social workers who commented positively about the support on offer showed a confidence that if required support would be provided. The low level of disruptions of adoptive placements is a good indication that where there are difficulties emerging in adoptive placements support is provided in a timely way.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advice. The arrangements in respect to accessing medical, legal and education advice are well-established. The arrangements for ensuring children's physical health needs are met are especially well managed and coordinated. The arrangements for accessing the local children and adolescent mental health service are not always effective for children who are placed for adoption and this is subject to inter-agency discussion.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

This agency recognises the importance of working with birth parents wherever possible in planning for their child. Some evidence was noted that birth parents are helped to provide their views about the plans for their child to the adoption agency manager and the panel. Wherever appropriate the agency carries out a viability assessment on any family members who may be able to provide the child with a safe, stable and secure placement.

Birth parents have a choice of people, apart from the childcare social worker, with whom they can talk to about their wishes and feeling for the child and their own

wishes and fears about adoption and the lifelong implications for them and their child. These include the family finding social workers, the family centre staff and an independent adoption support agency which is also registered and inspected by Ofsted. Some good work was noted as having been done with birth parents but, as with other agencies nationally, take up of the services is low.

The agency ensures 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. The quality of life story books is variable with some reported as over romanticising the child's history. However, this work when done well supports adopters in talking to the child about his history.

The agency helps to maintain the child's heritage through a well-managed letterbox system. Contact arrangements are planned and agreed, the system is efficiently administered and the adoption agency manager is responsible for ensuring the content is appropriate. There are leaflets provided to participants and help in writing letters can be provided wherever necessary.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a range of policies and procedures which underpin the Statement of Purpose. This document does not include the arrangements for assessing the support needs of people previously unknown. There are children's guides in place and these along with other resources are used to inform and prepare children for an adoptive placement.

The information which is provided to both domestic and overseas adopters is of a good quality and adopters reported that they found the information useful to refer to and informative. There is information provided before approval and a pack of information provided after approval.

The appointed manager of the adoption service is appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare. While there are clear lines of responsibility throughout the agency the nominated manager does not have line management responsibility for much of the work of the agency including the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters. This means that she has responsibility for these tasks without any management or decision making abilities. There is a mix of views among staff as to how well they feel supported by management, some reported that supervision is not always held as a priority and some staff felt that the external training was not easily accessible.

While staff feel very busy there are systems in place to determine and prioritise caseloads and in general staff feel their caseloads are manageable. The skill mix, knowledge and experience among staff on the adoption team provides adopters and children with a good range of expertise. Some staff are able to carry out pieces of work that interest them other staff said they too would like the opportunity to do this. In respect to the preparation and assessment of adopters, while some adopters have reported delays at these and other stages of the process, other information suggests that these delays are historical ones so although very frustrating for the people concerned more recent applicants have confirmed a good and prompt service. Adopters comments about their workers have been overall very positive. One stated of their social worker that she is "Very approachable, human and professional – always more than willing to help us along our way." Some adopters said that they would recommend the agency to others with one adopter saying they already had strongly recommended the agency.

The arrangements for administration of the agency is of a good quality, all social workers value their admin staff and say that calibre of admin staff in Portsmouth is good.

Monitoring and controlling the work of the agency is taken seriously. There are a range of processes in place to look at most areas of practice. The executive are well appraised of the challenges and developments and they maintain a strong focus on outcomes for children.

The agency maintains files for adopters and children. The agency is moving towards electronic recording. Files are audited but the audit sheets are not always being signed of, there is no evidence of case supervision decisions on the files seen and some sloppy practice was noted in terms of spelling mistakes and a failure to sign important documents. There are written policies and procedures in place in respect to case recording which some files do not meet. There are also clear policies in place in respect to access to records.

There are personnel files kept in respect to staff employed and panel members. In the main these were well ordered, well-maintained and evidence a robust recruitment process. However, the agency is not keeping evidence to show that references have been verified by phone call to each referee.

The premises the adoption team work from are of a good standard and provide the agency with secure and well-equipped premises. Likewise the arrangements for storage and retrieval of archived files are efficient. However, while the IT systems are password protected and backed up on a daily basis they are not fit for purpose and are due to be replaced. There is a disaster recovery plan there is not 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
4	ensure that when the adoption agency considers that a prospective adopter may no longer be suitable to adopt a child the case is referred back to the panel to consider (The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 24 (4))	30/10/2008
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)	30/10/2008
14	review the arrangements for line management and supervision of the work of the adoption service (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 Regulation 5)	02/01/2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that full employment histories are obtained for each adopter and ensure that any risks in prospective adopters' households in relation to issues detailed in the main body of the report are excluded (NMS 4.6)
- ensure the life story books clearly explain the reasons for the adoption and are of a consistently good quality (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that evidence is kept to show that references in respect to staff have been verified with the referee (NMS 28.2)
- ensure that all case files are comprehensive and accurate in content (NMS 25.5)
- progress the arrangements for upgrading the IT systems in the adoption agency premises and detail the arrangements for premises in the disaster recovery plan (NMS 29.3, 29.5)