

Cornwall County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / Heather Chaplin
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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

Cornwall County Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. A voluntary agency has been commissioned to provide preparation training for inter country adopters.

The service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. In addition, the service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports information exchange in adoption placements. The service also provides a counselling and support service to birth parents.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation, which were judged as good.

Cornwall's adoption service is child focussed and effectively matches children and adopters. A range of support services to adopters is provided, both pre and post order. This ensures that families are provided with the necessary support to maintain stable and permanent adoptive homes.

Considerable efforts are made to engage birth parents in the care planning process so they are able to contribute to their child's future. Life story work is undertaken, however, this work is not always completed in a timely manner. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. All those involved in the adoption triangle are respected, valued and receive an individually tailored service.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. However, quality assurance systems used by the service are not sufficiently robust, particularly in relation to the adoption panel policy and procedures, the personnel, panel members and agency records.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection of Cornwall was carried out in January 2005, which resulted in seven actions and 32 recommendations being made. In April 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had made some effort to address these matters. In this visit four actions and 25 recommendations were identified. These related to the outcomes for staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution, and organisation. All actions raised have been met, however, of the 25 recommendations raised, seven were not met. This includes, the health and safety check list, the adoption panel policy and procedures, case recording and staff recruitment.

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.

Cornwall's adoption service has a good, effective recruitment strategy, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. The success of their recruitment campaign has resulted in a diverse range of adopters and more placement choice for children. Cornwall has placed a number of children in adoptive homes with differing needs for example, older children, children with disabilities and large groups of siblings.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and to follow up any expressions of interest. Information meetings are held on a regular basis. Adopters are complimentary about the presentation and quality of information provided.

The adoption service is child focussed and makes every effort to ensure children are effectively matched with adopters. Efforts have been made to improve the quality of information provided adopters. However, despite this the child permanence reports (CPRS) are of variable quality and as a consequence, this compromises the effectiveness of the matching process.

There is a formal process in place for the preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Inter country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which has been commissioned by Cornwall to provide this specialist service. The process fully informs adopters about the complexities involved in adoption and parenting a child from the care system.

Adopters spoke positively about preparation training stating that the materials used were 'informative', 'thought provoking', 'stimulating' and 'made us think carefully

about adoption'. In fact the majority of adopters stated that the training was 'brilliant'.

Adopters' assessments are generally of a good quality, as they were thorough, analytical and covered issues of parenting capacity well. Some assessments though were less thorough and analytical. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are obtained. The service also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. However, this checklist is not comprehensive, for example, it does not address the danger of window blind chords.

Adopters were positive about the assessment process, which they described as an 'open' and 'positive experience'. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'thorough', 'thoughtful' and 'sensitive' manner. Adopters stated that their report was accurate and given to them in the required timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. Once a match has been identified, adopters receive information about the child including the opportunity to meet with other relevant professionals and foster carers.

The adoption panel has a written policy and procedure which govern its function and operation. However, this does not meet the NMS. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. Preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance, for example, their adoption worker talks to them about the process and written leaflets are provided. Adopters indicated that the panel made them welcome, put them at ease and were thorough in considering the matters before them.

Cornwall's adoption panel reflects the community it serves. The panel is arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in relation to children's adoption and the approval of adopters. There is good, effective administrative support to the panel.

The panel observed was well chaired, panel members were well prepared, made appropriate observations and asked relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, however, they do not fully meet NMS.

The agency's 'decision maker' ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are always sent out within the necessary timescales.

The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are all appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced in their work. However, staff recruitment systems are not sufficiently robust to ensure children are adequately safeguarded.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the NMS and Regulations. There is a system in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The adoption service fully recognises the importance of providing sensitive and qualitative support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. A range of support services have been developed, which are available for adopters both before and after the adoption order. These services include financial support packages, a regular news letter, social events, a buddy scheme and support groups for adopters. Training is also provided to adopters. Adopters are also able to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, additional educational support. A similar service is also provided for inter country adopters through Cornwall's commissioning arrangements with a voluntary agency.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Requests for support are responded to promptly and adoption support plans are generally of a good standard. Adopters confirm that they have been informed of the support package available to them and are confident such support will be provided, if required.

The adoption service has access to a variety of specialist advisers, with written protocols in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist services available increases the likelihood of adopters receiving appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Both staff and adopters indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service and are a valuable asset to the agency's adoption services.

The service responds promptly to adoption enquiries, which are dealt with in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. Agency practice is focused on those using the service. Services users confirmed that they are listened to, their wishes and feelings are considered and they are fully consulted on any decision affecting their lives. The agency also ensures that the welfare and safety of the service user and others affected by the adoption are carefully considered, before deciding any service should be provided. The adoption service makes sure any service commissioned is supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. This ensures the service provided is of the required qualitative standard to meet agency needs.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service is committed to working with birth parents, and encourages them to be as fully involved as possible in planning for their children's future. Whilst

at times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, it is clear that Cornwall makes appropriate efforts to involve them in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports, though this was not evident in every case.

Support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage. The adoption service provides support and counselling to birth parents and families. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time, and work with them is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner.

The adoption service also provides an opportunity for the birth and adoptive parents to meet. This enables adopters to receive information from the birth parents first hand, and can provide them with a firm basis for future contract arrangements.

Cornwall has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds, and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They are also recognising the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child, and use such work to prepare a child for adoption. However, such work is not always carried out in timely way.

Cornwall has a limited number of direct contact arrangements, however, the service will provide adopters with support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. All contact arrangements are well recorded. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system, which is being developed. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling and intermediately service. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The adoption service carries out its various tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. Its Statement of Purpose (SOP) is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. The SOP is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which informs and underpins the operations and strategic direction of the agency.

The service has two Children's Guides which are attractively presented, written in a child friendly form and contain all the required information.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is welcoming,

does not discriminate, is attractively presented and is clearly in their practice. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The management of the adoption service is undertaken by people who are appropriately qualified and have the necessary background, knowledge and skills in adoption. They demonstrate a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and are committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and managed.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance, though some improvements are required. The Council is committed to the adoption of children as a positive choice for permanence, carefully considering the written reports regarding the management and outcomes of the adoption service.

Staff are clear about their roles and lines of accountability and communication is good. They have considerable knowledge, skills and experience in working with children and specifically, children placed for adoption. The allocation of work is managed equitably. All staff receive regular qualitative, informal, and formal supervision and good standards of work are achieved. Similarly, administrative support is of a good standard, enabling staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. The adoption service has sufficient staff resources to undertake the range of work required. Staff spoke positively of the range of training and professional development opportunities provided.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised and maintained. The majority contained full and up-to-date information, though this was not evident in every record. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner.

Personnel and panel members files are well ordered and securely stored. The recruitment and selection process is not sufficiently robust, as not all personnel files contain the information required. There is a system to verify the legitimacy of references though this is not always consistently applied. Similarly, panel members' files did not contain all the required information.

The premises are well resourced and secure, which enables an effective adoption service to be provided.

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
17	ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 7(a)(b))	05/01/2009
28	ensure all the required information relating to the adoption service's personnel and panel members are obtained (Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, 6 (2)(c).	05/01/2009

Recommendations

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

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure the adoption policies and procedures are in accordance with the National Minimum Standards (NMS 10)
- improve the quality of the adoption panel minutes (NMS 12)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way (NMS 8).