

Bath and NE Somerset District Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny / 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

Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) Council 's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service 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. The service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements.

BANES commissions some post adoption support services and intermediary work from the South West Adoption Network (SWAN). An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with SWAN.

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.

BANES' s adoption service is extremely child focussed, with the child at the heart of its practice. It is thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and strives to ensure children are kept safe. Some improvement in the health and safety checklist though, would enhance this process. Considerable care and thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. An excellent range of support services, both pre and post order, is also provided adopters. This support is well thought out and families are provided with the necessary support to maximise successful adoption placements.

The service fully recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Every effort is made to engage birth parents in the care planning process and enable them to contribute to their child's future. This greatly assists in ensuring children have a well recorded background. However, whilst life work is undertaken, this work is not always completed in a timely manner. There is a robust and well managed letterbox system and assistance with letterbox

contact is available. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption triangle, which is clearly demonstrated in agency practice.

Improvements since the last inspection

BANES' last full inspection was carried out in December 2004, which resulted in seven actions and 13 recommendations being made. In January 2006, a visit was made to the adoption service to follow up these actions and recommendations. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result that all the actions had been completed and only one recommendation remained outstanding. This recommendation related to the development of an administrative system to evidence the induction programme provided to new panel members and has subsequently been addressed.

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.

BANES' s adoption service has a clear written recruitment plan, which is based on an awareness of children requiring adoption. This plan is regularly evaluated to ensure its recruitment strategies are effective. However, the service has a good reputation in the area, which results in a steady flow of enquiries from prospective adopters. BANES is therefore able to recruit a diverse range of adopters. This, together with effective collaboration of local adoption consortium members and the routine use of the national adoption register, ensures there is more placement choice for children. Consequently, older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups have been effectively matched and placed with adoptive families.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries with the service following up any expressions of interest from domestic adopters. Inter country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which BANES has commissioned to provide this specialist service. All adopters confirmed that they had received 'prompt', 'useful' information regarding the adoption process, which had effectively met their needs. Information meetings are held regularly and adopters were complimentary about the presentation and the quality of information provided.

BANES has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters. The materials used in the preparation training fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is held on a regular basis and is tailored to meet the varying needs of adopters. In addition, arrangements have been made with a voluntary adoption agency for inter country adopters to attend training that is specific to their needs.

Adopters spoke positively about preparation training stating that it was 'extremely well organised and presented'. The training materials used were said to be 'informative' and 'thought provoking'. Staff were said to be 'very welcoming', 'warm' and 'friendly'. They stated the atmosphere was 'inclusive', and enabled those attending to freely participate in group discussions.

Adopters' assessments are of a good quality; in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover issues of parenting capacity and support networks well. However, in one assessment, the issue of loss was not fully explored. 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. This checklist though, is not comprehensive, for example, it does not address the potential dangers of window blind chords.

Adopters were positive about the assessment process, which they described as 'open' and 'transparent'. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable' and 'skilled' manner. All adopters stated that their report was accurate and given to them in the required legislative timescale.

BANES works hard to ensure their adopters are fully aware of all aspects of the adoption process. Written information is provided regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes, as well as the National Adoption Register.

The adoption service is an extremely child focussed and fully recognises that the child's needs are of paramount consideration in matching a child to adopters. Considerable work has been undertaken to improve the quality of children's written assessment of needs, that is, the child permanence report. Consequently, the child permanence reports contain up-to-date, comprehensive information and are of a good quality.

Prior to matching, the service also ensures adopters are provided with the opportunity to meet with other professionals involved with the child, such as, the panel's medical adviser, the educational psychologist, the clinical psychologist, as well as foster carers. This provides adopters with the opportunity to discuss the information obtained and to consider the implications of this for themselves and their family.

Similar, careful thought and consideration is given to the child and adopters' needs at the matching, introduction and placement stages of the process. This proactive approach to the whole process ensures a child is matched with adopters, who best meets their assessed needs. This increases the chances of the child enjoying and benefiting from a stable and permanent home.

The adoption panel has a clear, written set of policies and procedures which govern

its function and operation. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's discussion, with reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations clearly recorded.

Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them, making 'real efforts to put them at ease'. This friendliness though, does not detract from the panel's thoroughness in considering the matters before them. Adopters stated that the questions asked were 'relevant' and 'appropriate'.

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

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified, very experienced and demonstrate impressive knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current thinking. Recruitment practices are robust and ensure children are kept safe.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. A good recording system is 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 outstanding.

BANES has a strong commitment to supporting their adopters, which has resulted in the development of pro-active, multi-agency, integrated adoption support services. These support services are available to adopters at all stages of the adoption process, with the aim of enabling adoptive parents to provide stable and permanent homes for their children.

The range of support services provided is extensive and includes financial support packages, for example, settling in grants, adoption allowances, a regular news letter, social events, a peer support scheme and an adopters' support group.

The medical adviser will also meet with adopters prior to matching, as well as before and after the adoption order has been made to discuss any medical issues relating to the child. In addition, adopters are offered the opportunity to bring their child for three further medical appointments, which are arranged at different stages of their

development. The medical adviser also holds a monthly adoption clinic.

BANES, children and young people's service, together with Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership and the National Health Trust, have also jointly funded the Locate service. This is a local, specialist psychological support service, which adopters and their children are able to access. The service has clinical psychologists and a therapist in its team and offers consultation to adoptive parents. It also provides specific packages of support to new adopters, which sometimes involves offering adopters' individual appointments, attendance at their support group or undertaking direct work with a child. In addition, Locate provides a variety of training for adopters.

The excellent relationships that exist between the adoption service and other services within the Council, enables adoptive families to access a variety of other specialist services to meet their needs, for example, the provision of additional educational support to a child. The service will also, if necessary, commission specialist individual therapy for an adoptive family.

The family placement section, where the adoption service is located, has a dedicated out of hours service. Staff have a good understanding of adoption and as a consequence are more able to effectively meet adoptive families' needs.

In addition to these support services, BANES has commissioned the services of SWAN, an adoption support agency. This service provides a helpline, counselling and support groups and is available to all adopters and their children, who live in the area.

The adoption service ensures that adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Details of these services are made available on their website. Written information is also provided adopters. Adoption support plans are of a good standard and these plans are reviewed, where ever necessary. Any requests for support are responded to 'promptly', with adopters stating the support packages were 'extremely well thought out', and 'excellent support provided'. There was also a real confidence amongst adopters, who had not required support, would receive support, should it required in the future.

The adoption service has access to a range of specialist advisers, all of whom are extremely committed to their work and provide an excellent service to adopters, at all stages of the adoption process.

The adoption service's practice is very child focussed. This practice, together with the excellent support given to adoptive placements and the qualitative matching of children with adopters, has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of stable and successful adoption placements.

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. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to overcome these difficulties and to engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in child permanence reports, and this is very carefully monitored by the independent reviewing officer.

BANES has a contract with SWAN, an adoption support agency, to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided at various stages of the adoption process, and real efforts are made to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time and the work is carried out in a thoughtful and sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

BANES has a commitment to gathering information about children's backgrounds and encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They also recognise 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, including the production of life story books, are not always carried out in a timely way.

BANES 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. This is a robust system, which is managed in an effective and efficient manner. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling 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 is up-to-date and clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. The statement of purpose 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 can be produced in a variety of formats to meet children's differing needs. They 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, attractively presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's 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 extremely committed to the service. Staff speak highly of them and indicate that the adoption service is effectively led and well managed.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the agency's performance, however, some of these systems require improvement. The Council is committed to the adoption of children, which is seen as a positive choice for permanence. Quarterly reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service are provided, which enables the service's progress to be effectively monitored.

The service is fully staffed with a group of workers who are able to demonstrate significant levels of skill, knowledge and experience of working with children in general and adoption in particular. They receive regular, good quality supervision and are encouraged and well supported in their work by a committed manager and senior practitioner. Staff are clear about the structure of the service, its lines of accountability and communication. They also have a good understanding of their roles, responsibilities and who deputises, in the absence of their manager.

The management of the service's work is carried out in an efficient and equitable manner; with staff's interests, knowledge, skills and expertise being used in determining its allocation. The administrative support provided is of a good standard, which enables staff to carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities provided. Staff are very positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided, which they state are of a good standard.

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 not all records are dated and signed. Some case records also breach confidentiality, as they contain names of other children.

The overall administration is efficient, well managed and appropriately structured to provide support to a busy agency. Administrative records are well maintained and stored in a confidential, secure manner.

Personnel files and panel members' files were well ordered, securely stored and contained all the required information.

The premises are very well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology equipment and communication systems. The premises are accessible and are fit for purpose.

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):

- improve the health and safety checklist for prospective adopters (NMS 4)
- ensure that life story work and the production of a life story book is carried out in a timely way (NMS 8)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (NMS 17)
- ensure that there are no breaches of confidentiality in case records (NMW 26).