

East Sussex County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC050780
Inspection date	17/11/2008
Inspector	Paul Clark
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	East Sussex County Council, 52 St. Leonards Road, EASTBOURNE, East Sussex, BN21 3UU
Telephone number	01323 747 154
Email	
Registered person	East Sussex County Council
Registered manager	Carole Sykes
Responsible individual	Sally Carnie/Theresa Lovell-Hill (Job share)
Date of last inspection	02/08/2007

© Crown copyright 2008

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

East Sussex County Council Adoption Service is based in Eastbourne. The recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters is carried out by qualified social workers in the 'Adoption and Permanency Team'. Additionally, when work loads demand it, independent social workers are commissioned to carry out assessments on a sessional basis. The council have service level agreements with independent agencies to carry out inter-country adoptions; counselling services for people affected by adoption; and birth records counselling and tracing. Some members of the Adoption and Permanency Team are also trained to carry out counselling work.

The overall management of the team is carried out by an Operations Manager who stands as the 'Registered Manager' of the service and the service function is monitored by the Heads of Service (job share) of Looked After Children (LAC) who stand as the 'Responsible Individual' of the service. The Deputy Director of Children's Services acts as the 'Agency Decision Maker'. The council have been advised that they need to inform Ofsted in writing of the names of the Registered Manager and Responsible Individual and to make Ofsted aware if any changes are made to these arrangements.

The Operations Manager oversees two Practice Managers, one of whom stands as the Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA). The Practice Managers share functions of the direct management of the team. There are two geographically based 'Adoption and Permanency Panels' who meet on alternative weeks and who are chaired by Independent Chairpersons. The Operations Manager acts as the Panel Advisor. The council is a member of a consortium of six local authorities called 'Adoption South East' who offer placements to all children throughout the regions within the consortium who are needing an adoption placement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection found that the adoption service is well organised and managed by an effective management group and a team of well trained and supervised social workers. The promotion of equality and diversity in the adoption service of East Sussex County Council is good. The safety and wellbeing of adopted young people is promoted by effective systems, policies and procedures and the high standard of service which is carried out by managers and practitioners.

Improvements since the last inspection

All staff now have Criminal Record Bureau checks in place and these are updated every three years. Clear case records are now in place for all young people using the service. Adopters have a clear understanding of the post approval support that is available to them. Birth parents now have access to a social worker independent of the child's social worker and the Registered Manager has a professional qualification in Management. Referees are now contacted both in writing and verbally. A comprehensive staff training programme is now in place and staff undertaking birth record counselling have now been trained in this work. Case files now include supervisors decision making and a Disaster Recovery Plan is now in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for this outcome group.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The council has effective systems in place to ensure that children and adopters are well matched and that adopters are appropriately assessed and prepared for the adoption task in a way that ensures children's safety and wellbeing. The council ensure that children are matched with adopters who reflect their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language. There is good liaison between locality social workers and social workers from the Adoption and Permanency Team when initially matching children and adopters. Potential 'matches' are referred to the Adoption Panel for consideration and recommendations are made to the Agency Decision Maker for final approval. The council is a member of the 'Adoption South East' consortium of six local authorities. This enables them to draw from a greater number of approved adoption households. The social workers ensure that all possible placement avenues are explored when making care plans for the young people. 'Twin tracking' is an established part of the council's practice.

Prospective adopters are appropriately, informed and prepared for the adoption task by the provision of a comprehensive information pack, information evenings, social work visits, 'Motivation to Adopt' events and a four day 'Group Preparation' course. Potential adopters are informed about the importance of having an awareness of equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice as part of the 'Group Preparation Course'. The council have approved a number of 'same sex' adopters and a number of single adopters. The council does not have a recording system in place to ensure that preparation and assessments of potential adopters are timely, and carried out within the eight month period recommended by the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

There are two Adoption Panels held on alternate weeks in the west and the east of

the region. These are chaired by independent chairpersons. Documentation is in place which clearly spells out the aims and objectives of the panel and its constitution. There are panel members with medical and legal expertise and members with personal experience of adoption. A training programme is in place to ensure that panel members have the appropriate skills and individual panel membership and function is reviewed annually. The council are aware of the need to address the gender imbalance of the panel and to increase the number of members from black and/or ethnic minorities. Panel recommendations are considered and responded to by the Agency Decision Maker in a timely manner.

The Registered Manager has lengthy experience of social work practice and management in child care and has appropriate professional and management qualifications. However, copies of these qualifications are not on their file. The Registered Manager acts as the agency advisor to the panel but is not registered with the General Social Care Council as recommended by the Adoption Agencies Recommendations 2005, Reg. 8(2).

A comprehensive training programme ensures that all social work practitioners are provided with the key skills to operate within the adoption service. All social workers are given access to the Post Qualifying Award in Child Care. Appropriate staff vetting and recruitment practices are in place. However, it was noted that some staff personnel records did not have the photocopies of qualifications signed and dated when the originals were seen. Also, some did not have copies of photo ID.

A record is kept of all complaints received and the actions taken in response to them. These records lacked sufficient detail. Copies of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) child protection policies and procedures are in place and available for staff reference. Staff are well versed in these. As part of the assessment of adopters process social workers carry out health and safety checks of adopter's households using a council checklist. However, this does not include recent British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) advice about ornamental weapons, poisonous plants and the length of draw cords from blinds.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Through both its own internal provision and through its service level agreements (SLA) with external agencies the council provides an outstanding level of support for its adoptive parents and those people affected by adoption. Birth parents are supported in a non discriminatory and non judgemental manner. Adopters are provided with free membership of 'Adoption UK' for a year after approval. This gives them a high level of support which includes free training and advice and a link to a 'Buddy' network.

Foster carers who go on to adopt a child placed with them can get ongoing full financial support.

The adoption service can access educational support from a recently appointed

'Virtual Head Teacher for Looked After Children' who manages a teaching team within the council. The adoption service holds monthly 'Permanency Planning Panels' for social workers which has a member from the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team to offer support and advice on adoption planning for individual young people which includes issues of race and culture.

The council have a SLA with a local agency who provide counselling services to birth parents, adopted adults and adopters. They also have a SLA with another agency to provide a tracing and counselling service for adopted adults and birth parents which includes the statutory duty to counsel. The council have a SLA with another agency to carry out inter-country adoption.

As part of their mandatory training social workers undertake training in 'Life Story Work'. The east of the region has a dedicated Life Story Worker' in post but this service is not available to the west of the region. The council have an effective 'Letterbox' system in place which handles contact arrangements between birth parents and adopted children. Birth parents spoken to expressed their gratitude for the sensitive way in which this service is run. Supervised contact is well organised and overseen by skilled staff.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The council ensure that birth parents are supported and consulted in a fair and even handed way throughout the adoption process. Social workers consult birth parents at the placement planning stage and keep them fully informed about the adoption process. This includes asking them about their preferred choice of placement for their child and their feelings about the proposed placement if this has been established. Birth parents and adopters are encouraged to meet where this is thought appropriate and exchange important information about children's histories and their likes and dislikes. As previously stated, the council have SLAs with local agencies to provide counselling and support for birth parents. The council have yet to develop a support group for birth parents. Young people's care plans contain details of the support necessary to meet the ongoing needs of adopted young people. This includes the way that self identity issues and cultural needs will be met and the support that adoptive families will need.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards for this outcome group.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity in the adoption service of East Sussex County Council is good. The adoption service is well organised and managed by an effective management group and a team of well trained and supervised social workers. A comprehensive and clearly written Statement of Purpose is in place and a well formatted 'Young Person's Guide' is given to every adopted young person. These documents are available in braille, audio tape and in other languages.

Prospective adopters are given an impressive array of information documents and the council website has a page dedicated to adoption. Prospective adopters can apply online. The council have made recruitment drives at local events including information access for the extended family of prospective adopters.

The Registered Manager of the service is appropriately qualified in management and in social work and has extensive experience in child settings. Social workers receive 1:1 supervision every three to four weeks. Team meetings are held fortnightly. The adoption team hold practice development meetings every six to eight weeks. A report of the quality of the service is carried out every six months and copies are sent to the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Chair of the LSCB. Social work staff are professionally qualified and have access to an impressive range of available training including courses on 'Attachment and Loss', 'Birth Trauma', 'Life Story Work' and the Post Qualifying Award in Child Care. All but one of the team has this award. Social workers spoken to felt that the council was a fair and competent employer. All are provided with IT systems that they can access from home.

Social workers feel well supported by a well organised and efficient administrative support team. Staff personnel files contain detail of vetting and recruitment checks and recommendations have been made earlier in this report. Archived files are held in rented premises. Although, the arrangements for their safekeeping is well organised and a 'Disaster Recovery Plan' is in place it was noted on inspection that a leaking gutter is causing a danger of water damage and this must be addressed.

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
29	ensure that the danger of water damage to archived files is	05/01/2009

	addressed. Reg 16 (2)(a)	
--	--------------------------	--

Recommendations

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

- ensure that there is a recording system in place to ensure that preparation and assessments of potential adopters are timely, and that they are carried out within the eight month period recommended by the Adoption and Children Act 2002. (NMS 4)
- ensure that the gender imbalance of the panel is addressed and that the number of members from black and/or ethnic minorities is increased. (NMS 11)
- ensure that the Registered Manager is registered with the General Social Care Council. (NMS 14)
- ensure that staff personnel records have the photocopies of qualifications signed and dated when the originals were seen and that all staff personnel records have copies of their photo ID. (NMS 19)
- ensure that details of complaints received and the actions taken in response to them are recorded in more detail. (NMS 24)
- ensure that the council's health and safety checklist of adopter's households includes the recent British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) advice about ornamental weapons, poisonous plants and the length of draw cords from blinds. (NMS 32)