

Brighton and Hove City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Mike Stapley / Lindy Latreille
Type of inspection	Key

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Responsible individual	
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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

Brighton and Hove's adoption service is not a stand-alone service but is a part of the larger team of Permanency and Adoption. Staff in the permanence and adoption team work with children and young people for whom long term fostering and/or adoption has been identified as their plan. This inspection has not included the long term fostering work as this is inspected under different regulations.

As well as the more traditional adoption service, Brighton and Hove have a concurrency team. This project has been set up to work with children aged from birth to two years where the prognosis of a return to birth families is considered as poor. In order to reduce the number of moves that children have in the care system, children are placed directly with foster-adopters and the concurrency team social workers work directly with the birth family in an agreed programme for the child to return to them, as well as working concurrently with the foster-adopters to pursue a plan of adoption should the rehabilitation fail.

The adoption service also have a new adoption support service which provides support, guidance and assistance to Birth families, adopters and children for whom adoption is the plan and children who have been placed for adoption. This team are experienced in carrying out attachment assessments on both children and adults.

Brighton and Hove also contract services from the Post Adoption Centre (PAC) to provide independent support and advocacy to birth parents, adopted adults and adoptive families and with Parent and Children Together (PACT) to provide a service to overseas adopters.

The service provides recruitment, assessment, preparation and training service for all prospective adopters and prepares and supports them to meet the needs of the wide range of children referred to them. The service is a member of Adoption South East Consortium, which broadens the choice of adoptive families available to children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This inspection was a key, announced inspection. The agency is very clear about the service it provides through its comprehensive policies and procedures which give good, clear guidance to staff. It is welcoming to those who are interested in adoption and has a strong commitment to equality and diversity. Staff work well together and receive regular and effective support and supervision from the management team. The systems for the preparation and assessment of adopters ensure that children are safeguarded, the adoption panel is robust and the agency receives good scrutiny at a

number of levels. The support of adopters is effective and the post adoption service to birth parents, particularly in relation to contact arrangements is good. This ensures that the service to children and adoptive families is strong, professional and effective.

Some areas could be developed and expanded; these include the more timely provision of life story books and later life letters to children and some improvements of the auditing process.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency had five actions and one recommendation following the previous inspection. All of these actions and recommendations have been addressed prior to the inspection.

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.

There is a written recruitment strategy which demonstrates that the agency has a clear understanding of the needs and numbers of children who may require an adoptive family. Recruitment is targeted to meet the needs of Brighton and Hove children and the Adoption and Permanence service has a clear recruitment strategy that is kept under review and reported on regularly within the management team. There is a Practice Manager with a lead role for recruitment that oversees the duty service to prospective adopters, recruitment events and the preparation group and allocation of assessments. There is also a lead Practice Manager for Family Finding who oversees all the family finding work and provides specialist advice on family finding strategies, maintains records on all children needing adoptive placements and chairs permanence planning meetings. The success of the campaigns is demonstrated by the large numbers of children who are placed locally and in a timely way.

Children generally do not wait too long for adoptive families, this is achieved by the use of inter-agency placements when there is not a suitable match for the adopters within Brighton and Hove. There are formalised systems in place to enable the adoption team to have an awareness of the children who may require an adoptive family and thus undertake timely planning to prevent delay. Clear assessments take place to look at sibling attachments in order to make sound decisions about separating or placing children with their brothers and sisters. The evidence seen also shows that every effort is made to place children in families which meet their cultural, religious and ethnicity needs. However, in line with the principles of

'Achieving the Right Balance', children's plans are not delayed in order to find a perfect match. There are also good and effective systems for matching to identify a clear profile of needs for the child which is updated as new information comes to light and matching meetings identify the best family to meet the identified needs.

Brighton and Hove has developed a concurrency programme within its adoption and fostering service. If concurrency is agreed as a plan the child will be placed with concurrent carers while an assessment of the birth family takes place. The plan for concurrency and the match with concurrent carers is presented to panel to ensure that these potential adoptive placements do receive sufficient scrutiny even though they are made on a fostering basis.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is a well thought out and comprehensive process. The adoption team hold information meetings throughout the year which give enquirers the opportunity to meet the team and ask any questions. Prospective adopters are then asked to complete a questionnaire which is used during the assessment process. This is then followed up by an initial visit by a social worker who will explain the assessment process and discuss the information provided in the questionnaire. If the prospective adopter wishes to continue the adoption process they are invited to attend a 'motivation' day prior to the preparation group which focuses on loss issues and decision making to become adoptive parents. Following the 'motivation day' applicants will be invited to complete an application which is completed prior to being invited to the preparation group. If the enquirers' interest is accepted, they then make a formal application and undertake preparation training. Until very recently the agency did not insist that the application form was completed prior to the commencement of the preparation training. This matter has now been addressed and recent evidence indicates that the application is completed in full prior to the commencement of the preparation training which in turn gives applicants access to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM). The preparation training is thorough and adopters say it is very useful. The agency undertakes robust checks including former partners, employers and other local authorities. In addition, as part of the assessment, where the applicant has school age children, the relevant school(s) will be contacted, with the permission of the applicant for information regarding the applicant's ability to promote the child's education. The agency has a health and safety checklist which has very recently been updated to include poisonous plants, hanging blind cords and an assessment for guns, weapons and ceremonial swords.

The agency carries out excellent assessments and includes children, both birth and adopted, in the process with great sensitivity. Assessments are evidence based, relate to research findings and adult attachment styles. The assessment usually takes no longer than eight months and where this is not the case the reasons are clearly stated in the Prospective Adopters Report (PAR). The assessment is discussed regularly in supervision sessions between the assessing social work and the practice manager. This is a very effective means of teasing out any issues relating to the assessment. It is focussed, documented and presented to the adoption panel as part of the assessment. Adopters, for the most part, described their assessing social workers as 'fantastic' and 'organised, excellent and sensitive'.

Once approved, adopters are given a post approval pack which is full of information about the next stage of the process. There are systems in place for ensuring that adopters receive full information about the children who are to be placed with them and the opportunity to meet the medical adviser, foster carers and anyone else involved in the child's life. There are good examples of when comprehensive medical information has been supplied to adopters to inform their decision-making process. Adopters prepare family books about themselves to show to the children who have been matched with them. Examples seen were age-appropriate and child friendly.

The adoption panel provides a robust scrutiny of the work of the agency, governed by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. There is a well-established practice of prospective adopters attending for their approval which has been extended to invite them for the matching panel. Information about the panel is sent to those people who plan to attend. Although daunting, adopters and staff report that they are made welcome and put at ease by the panel chair and other panel members

The agency has an appropriately constituted adoption panel which is underpinned by a comprehensive set of policies and procedures. There is a well-established pattern of adopter attendance and both staff and adopters confirmed that they were for the most part made to feel welcome and asked appropriate questions. Adopters said that their social worker prepared them well for the panel so it was not quite as daunting an experience as it could be. The adoption panel is chaired by an experienced, independent person who has proven abilities in this area. Panel members have a good range of personal and professional experience. All panel members have appropriate checks in place and have undertaken induction, training and appraisal. They are well prepared for the panel, having read the papers in advance, pick up relevant issues and ask appropriate questions. There are good mechanisms for the feedback of any issues of concern to the agency. This promotes robust recommendations which inform the decision-making.

The panel is well organised and well conducted by the independent chair who demonstrates sensitivity yet thoroughness. The panel is regularly convened, the paperwork is distributed to panel members in good time and the minutes are excellent, giving a good account of the business, the discussion and the reasons for the recommendation. Everyone interviewed felt that the panel was robust but necessarily so and understood that this was vital as it was all about planning for children's futures.

The agency decision maker is very experienced and gave a clear account of the decision making process, taking account of all the information, including the panel minutes, with opportunities to discuss any issues. The decision is made within the necessary timescales and letters to adopters and birth parents are appropriately worded and sent out in a timely way.

There is a rigorous recruitment and selection procedure for the manager and staff and all are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced and subject to robust

checking procedures. The safeguarding procedures comply with the requirements of the legislation and make specific reference to historical abuse. The Adoption Team confirmed that they receive regular training in safeguarding and had a course specifically tailored for them.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Brighton and Hove Adoption Agency provides its own adoption support service. It does not have a separate team of adoption support social workers as it sees adoption support as an integral part of the adoption service. Therefore all of the social workers that are employed by the agency undertake adoption support as part of their day to day work. Therefore this gives all of the team an opportunity to develop new skills and experience. Within the team there are social workers who are trained and experienced to offer Birth Records Counselling. There are also specialist staff within the service managed by the Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) who have a dedicated role including the staff involved in managing direct and indirect contact and the adoption support teacher.

The agency takes its responsibilities for preparing adopters to care for children placed with them very seriously and demonstrated that adopters are well prepared and have a clear understanding of the likely needs of looked after children. It is committed to provide a range of support to maintain children in their adoptive families and the extremely low disruption rate is testament to the preparation and support given.

The agency has a thriving letterbox service with over 250 contacts. It is highly organised and well managed. Social workers are available to help and support birth parents in writing letters whenever necessary in a sensitive manner. Letters which are sent to birth parents who have a learning disability are translated into 'easy read' which is good practice. The letterbox service is provided until the young person reaches the age of 18 but in many cases the team will carry on providing additional support. The team are also responsible for organising direct contact which in most cases is supervised by support workers who receive appropriate training.

The adoption team is involved in the preparation groups for adopters and discusses the impact of contact with prospective adopters. In addition they run adoption support groups throughout the city which is very time consuming but worthwhile. There are many different support groups including a Parent and Toddler 'Drop In' group each Monday afternoon. A visit was paid to this service as part of the inspection and adoptive parents spoke very highly of this group. Adopters are able to share common experiences at this group and discuss issues of a similar nature. In addition there is an Adoption Support Group for parents with younger children (under the age of six), a support group for children of primary school age and a support group for parents with teenagers. The agency also supports a Lesbian and Gay Adopters group which was also visited as part of the inspection. This group is facilitated by its members and is only open to those who have adopted, been

approved or accepted for the preparation group. In addition there are events such as a 'Summer Picnic' and 'Fun Day'.

There are opportunities for adopters to participate in workshops and training events on various topics including Attachment and Trauma.

One of the strengths of the Adoption Support Service is the Adoption Support Teacher who provides not only support to adoptive parents and children but offers advice and guidance to schools. In addition she provides training for teachers and support staff in schools which includes 'Attachment Difficulties in Class'. This particular aspect of the service is seen as extremely positive and well received by both schools and adopters alike. In addition the team liaises closely with the National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents (NORCAP), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and Post Adoption Centre (PAC). The agency has a service level agreement with the latter that is kept under regular review and is currently very well used by adoptive families.

The team has a very high volume of work. More and more families are seeking support, and once a service is started it is often not a simple matter to just close the case. The team are able to offer a service fairly quickly although for Birth Records Counselling there is a waiting list of approximately three months.

Adopters spoken to had mixed views about the service they received from the agency, some were very complimentary, while others were negative, some felt the service could be more 'joined up'. However overall the inspectors are satisfied that the agency provides a good adoption support service although there are areas that could be developed including developing further links with CAMHS who provide an important service. Some adopters spoken to stated it was difficult to get an appointment with CAMHS and there was a long waiting list. From discussion it was evident that this service was not well used by the agency with only one referral being made during the past 12 months.

The Fostering and Adoption service has a contract with a local child psychotherapist to provide additional specialist input to adoptive families as required or consultancy to staff within the service.

The agency provides good financial support packages to its adopters to enable placements to be made and to continue. This includes ongoing financial support to enable an adopter to remain at home for longer than anticipated to meet the needs of the child. This also allows the adopters to buy in other services to assist and support them with the task of parenting an adoptive child with challenging needs.

Legal and medical advice is of a very high standard; the medical adviser is extremely good at speaking with adoptive parents to enable them to consider the medical implications of caring for an adoptive child. The legal adviser specialises in adoption and gives useful updates to staff and the adoption panel on case law. Both these advisers are an invaluable asset to the overall processes of adoption and adoption support.

The adoption agency operates a system similar to duty with regards to those seeking Birth Records Counselling as they are the all important first contact with those that wish to use the service. The agency social workers who undertake this area of work have facilitated seminars for staff and advise colleagues accordingly. In addition they have set up workshops for people thinking about tracing birth relatives which was very successful.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency works with birth parents to enable effective plans to be made and implemented for their children. Birth parents are invited to all planning and review meetings prior to adoption placements. There is evidence to show that the agency involves birth parents in planning for their child and their views are recorded on the child permanence report. In addition the agency uses a form to record the views of birth mothers and those seen during the course of the inspection were fully completed.

Birth parents' views about adoption and contact are clearly recorded wherever possible. However as the majority of birth parents are involved in contested care proceedings at the time when the adoption pack paperwork is completed, they often do not wish to record their views. Birth parents have access to social work support through the adoption support service or if they prefer they can obtain confidential advice and counselling through the contract the agency has with the post adoption centre. In addition the agency has a great deal of information that is available for birth parents including 'If Your Child Is Being Adopted' Information from NORCAP and a leaflet entitled 'Is adoption the plan for you child'.

Life story work and the provision of the life story book for the child is of a good standard. Social workers are aware of the importance of this but there is evidence that children do not receive their life story book at an appropriate time. In one instance, this had still not been received after the adoption order was made and amendments had to be made due to incorrect information in the life story book. Clearly this lack of attention to such a significant document is poor practice. In addition not all children had a later life letter.

The Adoption Support Services Advisor (ASSA) takes a lead role in the oversight of services to birth families provided by the Adoption and Permanence service. She supervises the letterbox co-ordinator who as part of her role works with birth parents directly to support them with the contact arrangements. These arrangements for both indirect and direct contact are very good. There is a robust letterbox system in place, which is underpinned by good procedures, guidance on letter-writing for adopters and birth parents, and the issue of continuing the letterbox for post 18-years-old is addressed well and sensitively. The team will assist with letter-writing and this also provides an avenue for both birth parents and adopters to access support in relation to other matters. The arrangement for letterbox contact are

included in the programme of preparation so that all potential adopters have a clear understanding of how the system works and the benefits for the adopted child. The agency has many support group for adopters and plans are being made for an adopted children's support group.

Within the agency there is a high number of direct contact arrangements and the model that the Adoption and Permanence service staff have developed provides for a high level of support and preparation to all parties involved including birth parents pre, during and post direct contact meetings.

The agency has a dedicated 'Birth Family Support and Information Service' for birth families' members affected by adoption including siblings as appropriate. This is run by a specialist senior social worker who has a counselling qualification and is based within family support services. Information about this service is provided to birth family members when adoption becomes the care plan and is also sent again to birth parents after the plan for adoption has been agreed at panel.

The agency are involved in a number of direct contacts which they supervise. These arrangements are underpinned by comprehensive agreements about expectations of behaviour and conduct, to facilitate the smooth running of these situations. The visits are undertaken sensitively and professionally to ensure that contact is a positive experience for all parties and that it continues for the child's benefit. Birth family members expressed a high degree of satisfaction with their experience of direct contact and were full of praise for the social workers' support and willingness to spend time at weekends and holidays to promote and facilitate the arrangements. There is clear respect for, and consideration of the welfare of, all parties.

The feedback gained from one particular birth parent was very positive. The birth parent felt that the adoption support team had been very supportive of her. This support had enabled contact to progress from indirect to direct contact.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The statement of purpose and underpinning policies and procedures provide a clear framework for the operation of the agency and are child-focused. There are two children's guides, one is for younger children with age appropriate graphics and one for older children which is aimed at a child who is able to read independently and understand the reality of adoption. This guide, combined with other resources available, enable children's social workers to have appropriate tools for working with children to help them understand adoption and move on to their new families. There

is very clear information in the guide for older children of who to contact if a child is unhappy.

The written information which is sent to enquirers is informative and this is supplemented by regular information events which offer the opportunity to speak to adoptive parents and staff. This gives enquirers a good understanding of the process and the children who may need an adoptive family. The agency has an inclusive approach and the material used reflects different types of families from different backgrounds in a positive manner. Prospective adopters and adopters alike stated that Brighton and Hove is very welcoming and has a good understanding of diversity issues.

The adoption agency is well managed at all levels by people who demonstrate commitment, knowledge, skill, experience and enthusiasm to provide a good service for children. Management arrangements are clear; roles and responsibilities are well-defined, lines of accountability are well-established, mechanisms for communication are effective and staff are well supported. Staff feel that the stability of the Council contributes to the provision of services which are based on need and there are good mechanisms in place to ensure the executives are informed of the activities of the adoption agency.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision from their managers. The adoption team, who are very experienced, have good peer support and opportunities for external consultation when they are undertaking specialised pieces of work for complex cases, which shows a commitment to supporting staff and to ensuring work is carried out to a good, professional standard. Training needs are highlighted through the appraisal system and access to training is good. External training can be more difficult to access because of the cost, but the manager is committed to supporting her staff in accessing this where possible. The administrative support is good and offer excellent support to the adoption team.

On the preparation courses applicants are always given the opportunity to talk to other adoptive parents who have adopted children. Clear and accurate information is given about children who need families locally, through the consortium, through the national adoption register and through inter-agency placements generally.

The executive side of the Council has good mechanisms for keeping itself informed through regular meetings with senior officers and the corporate parenting panel. The adoption service provides a report twice a year on its management and outcomes. These mechanisms ensure there is good and effective scrutiny of the service.

Staff report that Brighton and Hove is a good place to work, being child-focused and supportive, and many staff, particularly in the adoption service, have worked for the City for a number of years. This provides a stable work force and consistency of service.

Case records on both adopters and children are mainly electronic; they contain all the required information and include records of case supervision. The manager

described a clear system for case file audit but the evidence for this was not readily accessible on the files seen. Local procedures state that management audit files every three months although a city wide policy document states files will be audited every two years. There is therefore a need to clarify how often such an audit takes place and ensure it is completed within laid down timescales. Documented procedures are in place for access to records and confidentiality and the arrangements for archiving are secure.

Personnel files demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment and selection of staff. Likewise, files on panel members contain all the required information.

The managers of the adoption agency all have extensive knowledge and experience of local authority childcare and adoption practice. Managers have the management skills and financial expertise to manage the work efficiently and effectively and in a professional manner as evidenced in meetings and discussions during the course of the inspection.

The adoption and permanence service has a business plan detailing the objectives for the year. The agency has a high level of adoption activity and good performance against national adoption indicators. The adoption panel chair, professional advisor and service manager meet at least annually with the agency decision maker. The panel chair contributes to the adoption report.

The city council provides office premises that meet health and safety requirements to which staff have access during office hours and are accessible by private and public transport. Secure filing is provided on each site, which is alarmed and/or has security staff on the premises. IT services are provided corporately and data is backed up according to industry standards. Adoption records are sent to the East Sussex archive which has industry standard storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The efforts to recruit a diverse range of adopters is impressive and creative wherever possible, the staff team is seen to promote diversity and there is a strong approach throughout the city council to promote inclusion.

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
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8	ensure that a social worker prepares a letter for the child that explains the child's history as set out in the adoption placement plan. (Adoption Agencies Regs 2005, Schedule 5)	31/03/2009
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that life story books are available for children in a timely way when they are placed for adoption (National Minimum Standard 7)