

City of Plymouth Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056793
Inspection date	12/12/2008
Inspector	Romana Jones / Mike Stapley
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Plymouth City Council, Civic Centre, Armada Way, PLYMOUTH, PL1 2AA
Telephone number	01752 305600
Email	
Registered person	Plymouth City Council
Registered manager	Karen Morris
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	15/09/2007

© 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

Plymouth City Council Adoption and Permanence Service is a local authority adoption service that 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 service also carries out the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters, the support of adoption placements and post adoption support to those affected by adoption, including birth records counselling. The service operates and maintains a letterbox system, which supports the exchange of information between adopted children and their birth families.

The service makes arrangements with a registered voluntary agency in respect of those wishing to adopt a child from overseas. The Adoption and Permanence Service provides support and supervision to inter-country adopters after approval.

The service 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.

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key National Minimum Standards were inspected. The inspectors found the service had made good progress since the previous inspection visit and that it is now operating to a good standard overall.

There is strong and effective leadership of the service ensuring that the service is child-centred in its approach with a good focus on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of service users. The management team has been expanded and delivers good and efficient management of the service and capable and effective support to staff. Communication and joint working between children's services teams and adoption teams is much improved and provides a more integrated service to children, adopters and others affected by adoption. Managers and staff in the adoption teams are skilled, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption. Their expertise is recognised and better utilised.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents is of a good quality and the service ensures that children are placed in safe, stable and secure placements. There has been good investment in the adoption support service in response to changes in legislation and expanding needs. A good quality and responsive support service is being provided to support children and adopters before

and after the adoption order is made and to adults affected by adoption. Careful consideration is given to matching children with adopters who can meet their needs, which results in good stability of placements. Good information is provided to adopters about children's needs, in particular access to medical advice on health needs.

The service recognises the lifelong implications of adoption and the importance of maintaining a child's heritage. Support for birth families is improving with a stronger emphasis on engaging and involving birth parents and birth families in the planning process and the recording of birth parents' views about adoption and contact. Birth parents and birth families are encouraged and supported to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

Two good practice recommendations have been made. The service should ensure that a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau check is obtained for all staff, including administrative support staff, before they begin working for the service and that contracted services monitor and review their service provision to each service user for whom they are responsible, to ensure that the service is delivering the outcomes that it is intended to achieve.

Improvements since the last inspection

A full inspection of the service was undertaken in September 2004 at which 12 statutory requirements and 10 good practice recommendations were made. A visit to the service, to follow-up on progress with addressing these requirements and recommendations, was made on 22 February 2006. The service was found, at that time, to have made considerable improvements and was judged to have taken action to meet most of these requirements and recommendations. The five statutory requirements and two good practice recommendations made at the follow-up inspection visit have all now been met.

The management of the service has been strengthened with expansion of the management team and the appointment of skilled and experienced managers who are knowledgeable about adoption who provide effective and efficient leadership of the service.

The Statement of Purpose has been approved by an executive member and is regularly updated. The children's guide has been reviewed to ensure that it meets regulatory requirements. There is evidence that case files are now being monitored regularly to ensure that they are up-to-date and that regulatory requirements are being met. Supervision case decisions are now being recorded in case files. The service has a strong focus on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of service users, which is underpinned by a comprehensive training programme for staff. More resources have been invested in adoption support services, with improved support for the implementation of contact plans.

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 service has a strong focus on meeting the needs of children and safeguarding and promoting the welfare of service users. It has a focused and proactive approach to recruiting adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement.

There is a well-planned and well-resourced recruitment strategy, which is linked to current needs. There is a well-coordinated approach to family finding, which enables applicants who are able to provide homes for children waiting for an adoptive placement, particularly those with complex needs or sibling groups, to be appropriately prioritised with timescales linked to the care planning process. The service also collaborates with local adoption consortium members and uses the National Adoption Register and focused publicity and media, such as DVDs and the 'Be My Parent' publication, to widen placement choices. This has resulted in older children, children with disabilities and sibling groups being successfully placed with suitable adoptive families. Information provided for prospective adopters is good. This is supported by an innovative, informative and interesting web page on the Plymouth City Council's website and well-planned and well-executed Information Evenings. There are clear and well-established processes to deal with enquiries. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and of a good standard. Adopters reported that they found the information and preparation training provided helpful and informative and that the assessment process was thorough. Assessments reports are well-written, cover all necessary areas and include good analysis by assessing social workers.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted and appropriately managed. Applicants are invited to and made welcome at panel meetings. The meetings are well-organised and effectively chaired. Panel members give appropriate and rigorous scrutiny to applications. Panel minutes are well recorded, clearly state the panel's deliberations and recommendations and the reasons for these. There are very good links between panel members and the adoption service, including occasional joint training sessions. The agency decision-maker ensures that the agency decision is taken without delay and that all information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation are taken into account before making a considered and professional decision. Written notifications are sent out within the required timescale.

There are now 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. Good communication is now maintained between the children's services teams and the adoption teams, both at a managerial and practitioner level, with good arrangements for joint working across the service in place. This ensures that resources are concentrated on recruiting adopters that can meet current needs of children and avoiding delays for children who are waiting to be matched or for children for whom the plan may be adoption. Example of these are the matching criteria and adoption assessment team resource allocation meetings undertaken. The quality of Children's Permanence Reports is improving. Matching processes are sound, with careful consideration given to finding adoptive parents that can best meet a child's specific needs. Prospective adopters are provided with good information about a child's needs when considering a match. Where a child has complex, or specific needs, adopters are supported to have contact with the consultant involved with the child's healthcare so that they can make an informed decision about proceeding with a match.

The managers and staff of the service are all suitably qualified and experienced in adoption. They demonstrated very good knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. Recruitment practice was generally robust, with the exception of the recruitment of administrative staff, who have been allowed to commence duties before a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau check has been obtained. While a risk assessment process is used to ensure that the welfare of service users is safeguarded, in these circumstances, this does not meet National Minimum Standard 19 and so a recommendation has been made. There is a safeguarding policy and procedure in place. Staff confirmed that they have received training in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and other service users.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

This service has a strong and coherent approach to preparing and supporting adopters so that children are provided with stable and secure adoptive placements. There is good preparation for adopters, which has a good focus on helping adopters understand and prepare for the impact early life experiences have on future development and well-being, so that they are well prepared to meet the needs of children needing adoptive placements. The matching processes include consideration about support services required so that a clear adoption support plan can be put into place. Adopters are provided with a variety of support services, for example post-approval training, newsletters, adoption support groups, social events, a year's subscription to Adoption UK, an organisation which provides independent support, information and advice on good practice to everyone involved with adoption. The adoption support team has been expanded to meet a growing demand for adoption support services. There is a low level of disruptions of adoptive placements, which indicates that matching processes and support provided are effective.

The service has access to a range of specialist advice with well-established and responsive arrangements for accessing medical, legal and education advice.

Generally, people affected by adoption are receiving a service from the adoption service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need and they are given clear information about the service they can expect to receive. Consultation with service users on decisions made in relation to their service provision is being strengthened.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

This service recognises the importance of working with birth parents and birth families wherever possible in planning for their child. Birth parents' views about adoption and contact are now more clearly recorded and are included in reports presented to the adoption panel. There was evidence to show that wherever appropriate the agency carries out a viability assessment on any family members who may be able to provide the child with a secure, permanent home. One person who is caring for a child of their birth family praised the support they had been given for direct and letterbox contact with siblings who have been adopted and managing their child's behaviour. They reported that a recent direct contact had gone 'extremely well' and said, 'I now feel more confident and more able to be 'in charge' and take control of situations. I am a better parent and this can only be through the support and encouragement I have received from the adoption support worker and family support'.

The arrangements for independent counselling support provided to birth parents have recently changed with the closure of the voluntary service that was contracted to provide this service. Suitable interim arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency registered with Ofsted have been put into place while the tendering process for a new contract is undertaken. The new provider of these services will be an agency registered to provide this type of adoption support service. Discussions with the previous service provider and feedback from birth parents highlighted that monitoring of the service delivery of this adoption support service to birth parents needed to more robust to ensure that the service provider is delivering the outcomes that it is intended to achieve. A recommendation has been made relating to National Minimum Standard 34.

The provision of life story books to adopters at an appropriate point in the placement process has improved with the adoption's panel's insistence that a child's life story book is prepared before the matching application is presented to the adoption panel. Children's social workers are being given better training and support in this area of work with the result that the quality of life story books and Later Life letters is improving.

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 there are systems in place to ensure 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 service is well-managed and well-resourced and carries out its tasks and responsibilities effectively and efficiently. The Statement of Purpose is up-to-date and clearly details the service's aims, objectives and the services provided. The Statement of Purpose is supported by a range of policies and procedures which underpin the operations and strategic direction of the service. There are children's guides in place and these are used along with other resources to inform and prepare children for an adoptive placement. The service has produced an attractive story book for children, which social workers and adopters have found very useful as a tool for discussing adoption with younger children.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a strong approach to valuing and promoting equality and diversity throughout the service, seen in both policies and procedures and practice. Adopters reported that contact they had with the service was non-discriminatory and that they were treated with sensitivity and respect.

Information provided to adopters and other service users is comprehensive and of a good quality. Adopters reported that they found the information useful and informative. They particularly the information available on the website and felt this was an accessible way to obtain information.

The managers of the adoption service are appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare. The managers demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and a strong commitment to developing the service. The service has been careful to appoint managers with the qualities and experience it needs, for example, re-advertising positions rather than making an appointment that was not ideal. Although this has meant that some vacancies have taken some time to fill, it has been of benefit to the service as staff spoke highly of their managers and feel that there is now good and effective leadership of the service.

There are a now more robust quality assurance systems in place to monitor the service's performance. There is a strong commitment to adoption as a positive choice

for permanence for children and a good systems in place to ensure cooperative working across the service so that delays for children whose plan is adoption are minimised. Reports on the performance of the adoption agency are now produced twice a year.

The service is now fully staffed with some recent expansion in the adoption support team. There are systems in place to determine and prioritise caseloads and staff feel their workloads are reasonable and manageable. Staff are suitably qualified and skilled and experienced in working with children. Staff in the adoption teams have good expertise in adoption. There is a very good commitment to staff training and development, including access to, and support for, higher level professional qualifications. One social worker has undertaken research into the role and experiences of adoptive grandparents as part of a higher level professional qualification, which is being published. He has also produced a new leaflet for adoptive grandparents.

There is good administrative support for the operation of the service. Social workers praised the work of administrators within the service and said that administrative support is of a high calibre. Staff confirmed that they are provided with good access to computer and other equipment so that they can work efficiently and effectively.

Case records were well-organised and generally well-maintained. The service is moving towards electronic recording. Files are being regularly audited. Case files now contain evidence of case supervision decisions. There are written policies and procedures in place in respect to case recording and access to records.

There are personnel files kept in respect of staff employed and panel members. These were well ordered, well-maintained and evidenced a robust recruitment process for all staff, except for administrative staff, some of whom have been allowed to start working for the agency before a satisfactory Criminal Records Bureau check has been obtained. This issue has been dealt with in the Staying Safe section of the report.

The premises are of a good standard, secure and well equipped. The arrangements for storage and retrieval of archived files are suitable. There is a disaster recovery plan in place.

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):

- ensure that no person is allowed to begin work for the adoption agency until written confirmation has been received that the outcome of the Criminal Records

Bureau check is satisfactory (National Minimum Standard 19.5).

- ensure that the service responsible for the delivery of adoption support services to birth parents monitors and reviews the service provision to each service user for whom they are responsible, including the length of service provision and whether the service is delivering the outcomes that it is intended to achieve (National Minimum Standard 34.7).