

North Somerset Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056766
Inspection date	22/09/2008
Inspector	Romana Jones / Heather Chaplin
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	North Somerset Council, PO Box 52, WESTON-SUPER-MARE, Avon, BS23 1ZY
Telephone number	01275 888 999
Email	
Registered person	North Somerset Council
Registered manager	Jenny Slee
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	15/06/2005

© 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

North Somerset 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 an independent social worker.

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.

North Somerset Council commissions some post adoption support services 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.

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key National Minimum Standards were inspected. The inspectors found the service is operating to a good standard overall and that all of the statutory requirements and good practice recommendations made at the previous inspection had been met.

The service has a number of particular strengths. These include strong and effective leadership of the service by an experienced and capable management team, which delivers good and efficient management of the service and provides good support and guidance to staff. There is also effective, child-focused communication and joint working between children's services teams, the adoption team and other services so that when the permanency plan is for adoption, a proactive approach is employed to execute that plan as effectively as possible. Managers and staff in the adoption are skilled, experienced with expertise in adoption matters and committed to providing a high quality service to people whose lives have been touched by adoption. The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents are of a good quality and the service ensures that children are placed in safe, stable and secure placements. 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 suitable and stable placements

being made. Good information is provided to adopters about children's needs, in particular access to advice from clinical and educational psychologists in relation to emotional health and development and attachment and behavioural issues.

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 there are clear timescales for written information about a child's heritage, for example a life story book and Later Life letter, to be produced and provided to adoptive parents and that the Disaster Recovery Plan is reviewed to ensure that archive premises risk assessment is updated and a timescale set for any action required.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has met the four statutory requirements and four good practice recommendations made at the last inspection in June 2005. The service has produced a children's guide, which has been recently updated. An adoption steering group focusing on service delivery was established in 2004. Performance management data is regularly presented to the Looked After Children's progress group. The current re-modelling of the Children and Young People's Service aims to further improve the service to looked after and adopted children. Senior managers undertake audits to ensure that files meet regulatory requirements.

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 clear written recruitment plan, which is based on the needs of children waiting for adoption. This plan is regularly evaluated to ensure that the recruitment strategies are effective. The service is child focused and fully recognises that the child's needs are of paramount consideration in matching a child to adopters. Good and effective communication is maintained between the children's services teams and the adoption team, 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 is adoption.

Adopters report that they chose to apply to this service over others in their area because of the warm welcome and good quality service they received at the initial enquiry stage. Adopters described the social workers who visited them initially as someone they 'could get on with', 'easy to get on with and chat to' and 'clear about the processes'. There is a well-coordinated and proactive approach to recruiting adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption, which ensures that there is effective linking and appropriate prioritisation of applications to match current needs. The Adoption Consultation and Assessment Service (ACAS) and the system of adoption coordination meetings are effective means of assisting with assessment of need, care planning and ensuring that delays in processes are avoided. The service also works effectively with local adoption consortium members and uses the National Adoption Register to ensure that there are sufficient adopters from diverse backgrounds to match the needs of children waiting for adoption.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and of a good standard. Adopters reported that they found the information and preparation course provided helpful and informative and that the assessment process was 'thorough'. Adopters said that the service had been 'really helpful' and that they were 'really pleased with how it's gone'. Another adopter said that the assessment process 'was a lot less scary, difficult and intrusive than I thought it would be. We took it seriously, did our homework. We never felt judged by (our social worker) who was great, relaxed'. 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. The panel is conscientious about its quality assurance function and provides feedback on the quality of cases being presented to ensure that service delivery is consistent and of good quality. Panel minutes are well recorded, clearly state the panel's deliberations and recommendations and the reasons for these. 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. 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, a 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.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. Recruitment practices are robust and ensure children are kept safe. There is an effective safeguarding policy and procedure in operation.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service is pro-active and creative in its 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 strong focus on helping adopters understand 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 with clear adoption support plan can be put into place. The stability of adoptive placements indicates that matching processes and support provided are very effective.

The service maintains good communication with adoptive families on a regular basis through contact with an adoption social worker, leaflets or a newsletter. A good range of support systems for adopters is offered through the Supporting Adoptive Families In North Somerset (SAFINS) group. The service is open and responsive to feedback from adopters about their support needs. Examples of the support services offered are support groups; social events such as a picnic or Christmas party; monthly Attachment, Behaviour, Consultation and Support (ABCs) drop-in sessions to discuss attachment or behavioural issues; the multi-agency CONSULT service, which includes clinical and educational psychology support; Our Place in Bristol, which is a centre for foster and adoptive families; the sitting service; the summer and youth schemes for children and young people who have been adopted. The adoption support grant is used to support adopters financially when necessary. Support Plans are also reviewed for at least a period of three years after the adoption order is granted.

The adoption service ensures that adopters are made aware of the support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Written information is also provided to adopters. Adopters reported that they had been fully informed about sources of post adoption support. Adopters who had had contact with the CONSULT service and attended the drop-in sessions said that they had found this to be good support. Inter-country adopters reported that they had received good support from their assessing social worker, who was 'extremely knowledgeable'. Adopters who had attended Our Place in Bristol said this was 'very positive'.

The service has access to a range of specialist advice with well-established and responsive arrangements for accessing medical, legal and education advice. In addition to these support services, the service has commissioned the South West Adoption Network (SWAN), an adoption support agency, to provide a range of services for all those involved with adoption.

Generally, people affected by adoption are receiving a 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 generally good.

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 and maintaining the child's heritage. Birth parents' views about adoption and contact are now more clearly recorded and are included in reports presented to the adoption panel. There is a Contact Protocol in place so that birth family members' views about contact are elicited and recorded. A birth parent contributes to the preparation course for prospective adopters to assist adopters in gaining an understanding of adoption from birth parents' perspective.

The service contracts South West Adoption Network (SWAN) to provide independent adoption support services to birth parents. The adoption social worker who is the link worker for a child also works with birth parents independently of the childcare social worker if they so wish. There was evidence of good engagement with birth parents and several examples of commendable practice in involving birth parents in the matching decision-making process. Birth parents are encouraged to meet with adopters where appropriate. Adopters who had met with birth parents reported that this was a positive experience for them and was helpful to them in maintaining the child's heritage. The social worker who manages the Letterbox scheme provides advice and guidance for birth parents and birth families that use this service. The Letterbox service is conscientiously managed and well run but is, at times, stretched to fully meet demand. The service operates a policy of reviewing Letterbox Agreements on a regular basis to take account of changes in circumstances.

Birth parents and birth families are enabled and encouraged to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage. Social workers recognise the importance of obtaining clear and appropriate information from birth parents and birth families about themselves and life before the child's adoption which can be used to produce a life story book and a Later Life letter that can be used to help prepare a child for adoption and maintain their heritage after placement. However some adopters reported that more than four months after placement, they had not yet received a life story book or Later Life letter for the child placed. The placing authority responsible for these placements varied. A recommendation has been made that there are clear guidelines for social workers on the production of life story books and Later Life letters and when these should be provided to adopters.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service is efficiently and effectively managed. 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 operation and strategic direction of the service. The service has produced a children's guide, which has been recently been updated to include contact details for Ofsted and the Children's Champion.

Information provided to adopters and other service users is comprehensive and of a good quality. Adopters reported that the information they were provided with by the agency clearly explained the adoption process in enough detail and that they found this information useful and informative. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted, which is effectively communicated to adopters.

The managers of the adoption service are appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare. They demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and a strong commitment to developing and maintaining a high quality service. The current re-modelling of the Children and Young People's Service aims to further improve the service to looked after and adopted children. Staff feel that the adoption team manager is 'approachable' and appreciate her availability for consultation and advice. They feel that there is good and effective leadership of the service. One social worker said 'I am very happy in my job here. The team are fabulous - it's a very, very supportive team and a pleasure to be in it. Most of us have real skills and there's always someone to thrash something out with if need be. We are able to stay focused on our job through the remodelling and period of change. I get a lot of job satisfaction. I feel we are listened to. I get regular supervision with rarely a change of date or time, which is a contrast to other teams. The team manager operates an 'open door' policy and is very calm'. Another social worker described the manager as 'amenable and open to talking things through' and 'approachable'. This social worker said that they are given regular one to one supervision and that the team manager 'makes this a priority'.

There are a number of quality assurance systems in place to monitor the performance of the service. These include the adoption panel's focus on quality assurance, regular meetings between senior managers, systems for monitoring the progress of adoption plans on a monthly basis, an annual performance assessment and report, management auditing of case files, regular supervision and annual appraisals systems for staff and quantitative and qualitative monitoring of contracted services. There is a strong commitment to adoption as a positive choice for permanence for children and very good systems in place to ensure cooperative working across the service so that delays for children whose plan is adoption are minimised.

The service is adequately staffed, although some areas, particularly managing the

Letter Box system are somewhat stretched at times. There are systems in place to determine and prioritise caseloads and staff feel their workloads are generally manageable. Staff are suitably qualified and skilled and experienced in working with children. Staff in the adoption team have good expertise in adoption. There is an excellent commitment to staff training and development, including access to, and support for, higher level professional qualifications. Staff reported that they are supported to access training that meets their professional and personal development needs. Social workers were very positive about the training provided on attachment and trauma and are looking forward to the planned training on Theraplay, which they had requested.

There is very 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. Files are being regularly audited. Case files contained 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. The files examined were well ordered, well-maintained and evidenced that a robust recruitment process is operated.

The premises are of a good standard, secure and well equipped. The arrangements for storage and retrieval of archived files are suitable. However, the premises risk assessment for the archive storage needs to be updated. The Disaster Recovery Plan should be reviewed to ensure that risk assessments are reviewed and a timescale set for any action required. A recommendation has been made.

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 there are clear timescales for written information about a child's heritage, for example a life story book and Later Life letter, to be produced and provided to adoptive parents on behalf of the child (National Minimum Standard 34).
- ensure that the Disaster Recovery Plan, which includes both provision of premises and safeguarding and back-up of records, is reviewed (National Minimum Standard 29).

