

Devon County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Devon County Council Adoption Service provides recruitment, assessment and preparation of prospective adopters, and adoptive placements for children, some of whom have complex needs. 98% of Devon children are placed within the county, and as the county approves more adopters than there are available matches, some approved adopters may be available for matching with children from other authorities. Applications from people with disabilities, single people and same sex couples are welcomed.

Prospective adopters who wish to adopt a child from another country are referred to Parents and Children Together (PACT) for an initial contact meeting, and any subsequent assessment is negotiated directly with that agency.

The service is well supported through the senior management structure and has grown considerably over the past twelve years to the present staffing level of an Operations Manager, three practice managers and 12.2 whole time equivalent (WTE) social workers across two teams. There is also a letterbox coordinator and two recently appointed community care workers, clerical staff and a panel administrator.

Adoptive families are invited to social and educational events, and those seeking help and advice with their children may be offered social work, therapeutic and/or practical family support. The Consultancy, a registered adoption support agency in Exeter, provides monthly consultation sessions under a service level agreement to adoptive parents who are in need of support with their children's behaviour or attachment issues. The county is entering the pilot stage of a similar agreement with another registered adoption support agency, Catch Point Adoptive Family Support.

A full range of adoption support services are provided in-house, including counselling for individuals and groups of birth family members, and birth records counselling for adults affected by adoption. There is an active letterbox contact scheme to help children and birth family members maintain contact.

The county is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC), a forum which enables adopters, children and staff to access resources available throughout the south west region.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a very positive inspection, where the majority of service users who commented in interview or on questionnaires said that they have experienced

exceptionally good outcomes.

The county provides a high quality recruitment, preparation and assessment service for prospective adopters which incorporates best practice and learns from self-evaluation. Adoption panel processes are robust, with welcoming, user-friendly panel meetings that have been able to respond to specific needs, for example those of prospective adopters with physical disabilities. The service welcomes service users from all ethnic backgrounds and with a wide range of lifestyles, and staff are fully aware of and responsive to equality and diversity issues.

Many adopters were highly complimentary about individual staff, and any less positive comments were often coloured by what can be a seemingly endless wait for a placement after approval. Whilst this is inevitably a very frustrating and stressful experience for adopters, it is largely beyond the agency's control.

Post-adoption support for families is also of a high standard, and helps to ensure that placements are supported, with a resulting low rate of disruption. Direct work with children, including life story work and post-adoption contact, is also of exceptional quality. Services for birth family members and adopted adults are also very good, although staff resources are under increasing pressure in this area due to changes in service user demand, an issue already being addressed.

The adoption service has grown significantly since the last inspection in response to changing needs, and some additional staff have been appointed and staff roles further defined. The service is very well managed and supported, with strong leadership at all levels. There is an exceptionally 'joined up' approach to learning from research, problem solving and, in particular, funding for complex placement needs.

The service seeks evaluative feedback from all its activities and is continually striving for further development and improvement. Some areas for discussion have been identified within the text of the report but as the service is already addressing these, no recommendations have been made.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, two requirements were made. The first was in respect of the need for a safeguarding policy, and the second was a requirement repeated from the previous inspection in relation to staff and panel members' files. Both areas for improvement have now been addressed.

Six recommendations were made at the last inspection. These concerned life story work, equitable pay and conditions for staff, the recording of supervision decisions and the need for improvement in the monitoring and auditing of case files. One recommendation was outstanding from the previous inspection, concerning the need for further work on the Disaster Recovery Plan, and finally, there was a recommendation in relation to investment in computer equipment. All of these recommendations have been addressed.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service operates an effective recruitment strategy to ensure that there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the vast majority of children (98%) waiting for a placement in Devon. The adoption team recruits so successfully that Devon is able to offer adoptive placements to other agencies to help meet the needs of children around the country.

One member of staff has been designated as the family finder, and focuses on working with children's social workers to ensure that suitable matches are achieved. Devon is predominantly a white area, but good efforts have been made to recruit adopters from all ethnic backgrounds. There are no 'blanket bans' on any individuals or groups. Adopters include same sex and opposite sex couples, people with disabilities and single people, the overriding criteria being whether or not they can meet the needs of children awaiting placement.

The county is highly successful in finding permanent families for children with severe disabilities, and there is a wealth of skill and knowledge within the adoption team to facilitate this work. The Head of Service has strong links with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) and liaises with the PCT to implement effective plans to ensure that children with complex medical needs are suitably placed and very well supported. The work done to find placements with children with disabilities is of an exceptionally high standard.

As a part of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC), the service works with other adoption agencies to help meet children's needs through permanency. Sibling groups are placed together wherever possible, for example one group of four siblings, who were placed with a family in London.

Children who have sufficient age and understanding of their situation are consulted about matching considerations, and the service has actively sought the views of young people in trans-racial placements. Subsequently their views were published, and the research made available to social workers to help inform their practice, which is a very positive child-centred strategy.

Devon operates a thorough and comprehensive assessment and preparation process. Prospective applicants are welcomed to an information session, held every six weeks at various locations around the county. Most, but not quite all, adopters interviewed found the timing of the meeting (currently Friday afternoon) convenient, as it falls

within working hours. In discussion with the team, it transpired that the service had tried a range of times and that the meetings had been changed from evenings in order to accommodate prospective adopters' views. On occasion staff have delivered this information session in adopters' own homes, in response to specific needs, which demonstrates the helpfulness and flexibility of the staff team. The majority interviewed had no difficulty with the timing.

All adopters interviewed commented favourably on the friendly approach and helpfulness of the assessment procedure, and very positive questionnaires were received, praising the commitment and knowledge of individual social workers in the adoption team. The service holds four-day preparation groups for prospective adopters, and they have a choice of which group to attend.

The preparation programme includes an explanation of the process of adoption, medical issues, attachment patterns, separation and loss, behaviour, contact, and adoption support. There is an additional session specifically for adopters who already have an existing child in the family. All adopters spoken with enjoyed the preparation programme, and questionnaires supported this, many also commenting on the usefulness of meeting existing adopters.

The medical advisor participates in the preparation groups and, in particular, she promotes the needs of children affected by maternal drug and alcohol abuse, and explains the complexities of some learning disabilities, with the help of existing adopters who have adopted children with profound disabilities.

All adoption file records seen contain the necessary statutory checks, including evidence that Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks have been obtained. Referees are always interviewed, and records of the interviews are presented to the adoption panel alongside the Prospective Adopters' Report.

The health and safety of children being placed for adoption is of paramount importance. A health and safety checklist is used in assessing potential risks to children and this has recently been updated and improved. It now includes a full range of likely hazards including blind cords, ceremonial and other weapons. Dogs and other pets are carefully assessed, and for dogs, this includes an external reference from a vet or animal trainer.

Devon formerly worked directly with those seeking inter-country adoption, but prospective overseas adopters are now referred to a voluntary adoption agency, PACT, under a service level agreement. The medical advisor to panel remains involved in the assessment of children adopted from overseas, and often sees these (and indeed, most other) children being placed for adoption personally. PACT respond to queries about overseas adoption and conduct the initial meeting. If the prospective adopters wish to proceed, they make those arrangements directly with PACT.

All adopters interviewed praised Devon's work on ensuring that high standards of equality and diversity are maintained through the whole recruitment process. One

adopter in a same-sex civil partnership indicated that they had received a very positive welcome, and this had not always been their experience with other agencies. A prospective adopter who has a physical disability said that the service worked hard to enable him to participate fully in the process, and facilitated his attendance at the preparation groups and at the adoption panel by holding the meetings in accessible premises.

Foster carers intending to adopt their foster child receive the same preparation and information as other prospective adopters. Devon has addressed the potential inequalities in financial support for adopters and foster carers, and has successfully addressed this through specific financial packages.

The county has developed a very successful Concurrency Scheme where children are placed in households with prospective adopters who are also simultaneously fostering the child. The process is linked to Care Proceedings and often involves significant levels of contact with the birth family and a great deal of working together with all parties to ensure that plans run smoothly and the child's best interests are maintained. Devon has now completed three adoptions through this scheme, and has received very positive feedback from the judiciary. The pilot programme has now been extended to the whole county.

Approved adopters are given detailed information about children with whom they may be matched. Although this information is not anonymised, the panel administrator uses a spreadsheet matching system to identify a shortlist of potential matches, and then detailed discussions take place between the family finder and the child's social workers. Only those adopters thought to be a strong possibility for matching are contacted, so the amount of information in circulation is kept to the minimum. All adopters are bound by a confidentiality agreement.

Approved adopters have access to the SWAC register of children awaiting placement, and they sign up to receive the magazine 'Be My Parent'. Prospective adopters are given detailed and accurate information to help them to understand the complex needs of children with whom they may be matched. The family finder is instrumental in ensuring that this information is provided.

Child Appreciation Days have been introduced, and these have proved very successful in helping to ensure that children's histories move with them into their adoption placements. SWAC hosts exchange days twice a year to help bring prospective adopters into contact with children's social workers to help disseminate information about children waiting. This has resulted in several successful placements.

During the matching process, the adoption team works with foster carers and the child's social worker to procure good quality information about children awaiting placement. Prospective adopters are asked to prepare a DVD portraying themselves, in addition to producing a 'family book'. Increased staff time has been made available to facilitate this work.

The service seeks agreement from adoptive parents that they will notify the service should their child die during childhood or soon afterwards, so that the service may inform the birth family.

Devon operates two adoption panels, geographically situated to cover the county. The Exeter adoption panel was observed on 27 May 2009, and the panel Chair and the medical advisor were interviewed. The panel also has a legal advisor and an educational advisor.

The panels operate through effective policies and procedures, and are properly constituted. The panel meeting observed was conducted in an efficient and businesslike manner, with all participants given ample opportunity to comment and ask appropriate questions. Although there are currently no minority ethnic members on the Exeter panel, there are some male members of this panel, and there has until recently been a black panel Chair in Devon.

The Chair confirmed that, where there is a difference of opinion on panel, the minority views are carefully recorded and passed to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). Cases are never deferred due to the agenda being full; if necessary, the panel will continue into the afternoon or will arrange an additional panel date. For example, an urgent situation was considered on the day of observation, involving concurrent planning for an unborn child.

The Operations Manager also acts as the panel advisor, and is aware, through the Practice Managers' monitoring, of the quality of reports coming to panel. If any report does not meet the required standard, the panel Chair confirmed that she would discuss this with the Operations Manager.

Prospective adopters are welcomed to the panel and are provided with a written introduction and photo of each panel member. Once in the meeting room, the prospective adopters are invited to offer their views about the assessment process before any questions are put to them by panel. Questions are clear and relevant, and panel members use friendly and appropriate humour to lighten the atmosphere and help to put prospective adopters at their ease. Adopters confirmed that, although they inevitably found the momentous nature of the panel meeting daunting, everything possible had been done to help them to relax and answer questions fully.

New members of the panel are recruited either by direct approach or by advertising. Panel members have CRB checks and receive induction training as well as the opportunity to observe a panel meeting. All panel members sign a confidentiality agreement.

The Operations Manager provides panel members with up to date information about any changes to legislation and guidance before the main business of the meeting. Panel members receive regular training days, often run in conjunction with neighbouring authorities' panels. The Chair confirmed that she meets with other panel chairs; the medical advisor also meets with other medical advisors to share practice and ensure that they are aware of current issues.

Panel minutes are detailed and accurate. The Chair checks the content of each minute immediately after the recommendation is recorded. The Chair conveys the recommendation immediately to the applicants, and the Operations Manager often takes the recommendations the same or the following day to the ADM. These are confirmed in writing promptly. When the ADM is absent, arrangements are made for the Head of Service to cover this role.

The Operations Manager is a highly experienced qualified social worker who holds a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at level 5 in Operational Management. He also holds a Masters degree (MA) in social work and is registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

The county has clear written staff recruitment and selection procedures. All candidates are interviewed and telephone enquiries are made to verify each written reference. The inspectors discussed the advantages of retaining this evidence on the main staff files, as opposed to in a separate location.

All staff who have direct contact with children are subject to CRB checks, and these are updated every three years. All social workers hold a professional qualification and are registered with the GSCC. They are highly experienced in adoption work. Staff who are not qualified social workers perform appropriate tasks and are directly supervised by qualified staff.

The Criminal Records Bureau advised the local authority that they could not legally CRB check administration staff and they have complied with this advice.

The staff team is very well qualified but, to date, no social workers have yet attained the Post Qualifying Childcare Award at level 2 (the Childcare Award), although most hold the preliminary award at level 1 and some already hold at least a first degree. The service is addressing this, and one member of staff is due to embark on the Childcare Award in 2010. This does not directly impact on outcomes for children being placed for adoption.

Medical, legal and educational advisors are appropriately qualified and skilled in working with children and young people as well as with adoptive parents. The service enlists the services of two adoption support agencies to provide adoption support services under service level agreements, and the staff working for those agencies are suitably qualified and experienced.

Devon County Council has a robust Child Safeguarding Procedure in conjunction with the neighbouring authorities of Torbay and Plymouth, which ensures that staff have access through the intranet to full information about how to protect service users from any form of abuse, exploitation or discrimination. There is specific provision for responding to allegations for historical abuse, and the county also has an effective Vulnerable Adults policy which could if necessary be invoked for adult service users.

All adoption team staff are trained to a high standard in safeguarding children, and

further training is planned to Safeguarding level 4 (Serious Case Reviews). There have been two child protection investigations affecting prospective adopters, both of which were followed up promptly, and led to the removal of the child from the family prior to the Adoption Order being made.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The county has sound policies and procedures which accurately reflect the statutory responsibility to provide post-adoption support, not only for Devon adopters but for those living within the county who adopted elsewhere. The adoption support team provides a skilled and highly professional service based on many combined years of experience backed up by sound management support. Family Support Workers are used to help on a practical level within families who are struggling with their children's behaviour, to give parents confidence and work alongside them to empower them in parenting their children.

Social workers with adopted adults obtain their views on what would have helped them when they were children, and this is fed back to colleagues working with adoptive families to target resources and provide support in the most effective way.

Adoptive families may access counselling services through service level agreements with registered adoption support agencies, The Consultancy and Catch Point. Families may also be referred to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), and, although the waiting list can be long, the adoption service managers do everything they can to expedite good communication between the two services and adoptive families.

The adoption service runs half day workshops across the county in response to specific demand, providing a forum for adopters to meet together. Topics include life story work, massage and relaxation, transition to secondary school, and attachment and behaviour. There are also social events where adoptive families and children can get together informally, and an annual conference in November with a nationally known speaker. Over 100 adopters have attended this each year.

The foster carers' training programme is also open to adopters. Adopters confirmed that they receive regular newsletters and updates on training and support available. Social workers and several adopters recently attended a 'Theraplay' course to help them to play in a therapeutic way with children.

Adopters are given one year's free membership of Adoption UK after approval. Foster carers who adopt the fostered child continue to receive their fostering allowance for two years after adoption, after which the payment is means tested and paid in relation to the child's needs. In some exceptional circumstances, it may be paid until the child reaches the age of 18 years or longer if remaining in full-time education.

Adopters may be eligible for a settling in grant of £400 to help with necessities. The

Head of Service also heads the Fostering Service, which facilitates coherent decision making across the two services. As a result, funding has been made available for the Concurrency Scheme. This directly supports foster carers who become adopters under the scheme, as, unlike non-foster carers who adopt children, they do not qualify for adoption leave or pay. This enables families to participate in the scheme who could not otherwise afford to do so.

Financial support is very child centred, for example, payment for a loft conversion for a London family adopting a group of four Devon siblings, and creative planning to finance a move to a larger property for foster carers planning to adopt their profoundly disabled foster child. An exceptional level of ongoing financial and practical support has been negotiated for this family by the Head of Service and the PCT. The service may also offer time-limited resources to enable new parents to stay at home until child reaches school age, and practical advice for all adopters about sources of financial support.

A high level of Educational Psychological support is available, with this service being involved with over 50% of cases open to the adoption support team, and 50 other adopted children in the past year. The Educational Psychologist confirmed that she supports parents to find the best school for their child and liaises with schools to help them to understand the implications of adoption and how to respond to sensitive issues that may arise. Devon has a 'virtual headteacher' who assists families and children until the Adoption Order is made.

The Panel Medical Advisor is always willing to help families after adoption with any emerging medical issues, including the very sensitive task of explaining the implications of a birth family member's diagnosis or the result of a genetic test. The service also has access to a legal advisor, who was present at panel, and has a protocol in place on the use of advisors.

The service is able to tailor provision to meet individual needs, and all service users interviewed confirmed that they have been treated fairly and with respect. Counselling provision for adults affected by adoption is an area of growing demand, in particular there is an increasing number of young people under 26 years old who were adopted from care rather than having been relinquished for adoption, and whose needs can be very complex.

The increased public access to the internet has also put pressure on birth records counsellors, because information moves around the world at great speed and sometimes overtakes due process. Birth records counsellors, both part time, do an excellent job but have high caseloads, so there may be some difficulty in meeting demand for this service if it continues to grow at the present rate, unless additional resources can be provided. The Operations Manager has requested more social work hours.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Devon provides an in-house support service for birth family members, with dedicated staff time of 2.5 days per week across the county. The counsellor is employed by Devon but is supported by external supervision and is independent from the locality teams who would have been involved during Care Proceedings. Access to the service is through a dedicated mobile number, and parents may also contact a Devon-based voluntary adoption agency, Families for Children, for help and support.

The counsellor tries very hard to reach out to birth family members through seeking referrals when their child's case goes before the adoption panel. She works through family centres to meet parents and gain their trust to try to improve take-up of the service. Social workers thought that there might be some inherent difficulties in achieving high levels of take-up, because the service, although almost independent, is not completely independent of the local authority. One birth family member interviewed praised the service and thought it had been extremely helpful.

The quality of the work with birth relatives who do respond to this approach is very good, with 26 new referrals in the past year, 15 of whom receive ongoing support. Most service users are seen individually but group work is also provided, ranging from counselling and support groups to relaxation and yoga sessions. Group sessions for grandparents and siblings are planned and quarterly meetings were begun in May 2009.

However, staff would like more time to promote and develop the service to its full potential equally across all areas of the county, and to provide birth parents with additional support during contact and Court proceedings. A business case has been made for additional staff time. Birth parents are made aware of other sources of help such as NORCAP (a registered adoption support agency) and the Natural Parents' Network.

The agency has addressed previous issues with the timeliness of life story work by appointing two full-time community care workers, who provide support and advice to locality social workers and undertake some direct life story work themselves. There have been significant improvements and any delays are now with external placing authorities, who are assertively pursued until the work is completed. One social worker said, 'we never give up... we have just received work from... (another authority) after a year and a half, with a lot of help from the practice manager.'

All the social work staff also work directly with children to help them to maintain their heritage. Staff work individually at home with children and their parents on life story work, and run training events for adopters on this sensitive subject. Children are provided with important information about their past. The team works together to ensure that messages from adult service users are taken into account when planning services for children, so that there is continuing learning. Some very good examples of life story books were seen, with straightforward but sensitive language. They are

professionally constructed with high quality colour photographs and laminated pages to ensure that they will last for many years.

Good examples of Later Life letters were seen on the electronic records system. These are written by locality social workers, some of whom find this difficult because they have not been specifically trained to do this sensitive work. The adoption teams are sympathetic to this and help the locality staff whenever possible.

The adoption support team is justifiably proud of its excellent work in helping young people to maintain their personal identity and to preserve a vital part of the young people's heritage from their birth family home. Four birth parents have died in the past year, and when the service became aware of this, they responded quickly, and were able to obtain treasured items from the parent's home just before it was cleared. They also supported two young women to attend their birth parent's funeral, liaising with birth family members and the adoptive parent to ensure that they would be well supported in managing this very difficult situation.

The service operates a highly effective and sensitively managed letterbox contact system, based in Totnes. The member of staff who operates this service is well trained and is also involved in the preparation groups for prospective adopters. She received a Customer Care Award in 2007-8 after being nominated by a birth family member.

The birth family counsellor also sees all the letterbox referrals, and, if the administrator reports that a family is not engaging with the service, she goes out to discuss this with them, which helps to ensure that contact takes place as agreed.

The Operations Manager monitors the levels of service provided to all service user groups very effectively. A large number of referrals were received during the past financial year from adopted adults and from birth relatives of adopted people, approximately in the proportion of three enquiries from adopted people to every one enquiry from a birth relative.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The service goes to considerable lengths to recruit adopters from a range of backgrounds and lifestyle choices, and ensures that children with profound disabilities and groups of siblings have the opportunity to be part of a permanent family. The adoption support team works extremely hard to meet the needs of a wide range of service users; they have

met rapidly growing areas of need with existing resources, for example, providing a service to young, vulnerable adopted adults, and they recognise that there is more work to be done.

The agency has a clear statement of purpose which covers all the matters required by Regulation, and produces children's guides that contain all the necessary information in a format that children can understand. All prospective service users are welcomed without prejudice and they are able to access information readily in a variety of formats, including the internet. All adopters spoken with said that the authority had provided good quality information throughout the process.

All the managers within the adoption service are very experienced and competent, with considerable knowledge of adoption practice and legislation. All staff commented on the very strong and inspirational leadership provided by Practice Managers and the Operations Manager. There are clear lines of accountability, with one of the Practice Managers covering for the Operations Manager when necessary. The adoption service is very well supported by senior managers and Elected Members, who take an active part in establishing extensive packages of care for children with complex needs.

Staff are very knowledgeable and experienced. They are extremely well supported and were full of praise for the commitment and expertise of their managers. Supervision takes place monthly and is well recorded, with supervision decisions recorded on file and signed. There is ongoing training and development. The monitoring of work and quality assurance systems are sound. Practice Managers and the Operations Manager ensure that reports and assessments are of high quality, and they bring a wealth of experience to the task.

The agency provides very good training for staff with one major external course for each staff member per year, and ready access to courses provided by CAMHS as well as internal training. The county operates an effective appraisal and review scheme.

There is a Corporate Parenting Forum which includes representation from young people. The adoption service manager prepares reports twice a year for the Committee, although they tend to be submitted annually due to the enormous amount of council business that must be transacted on each agenda.

There are just sufficient staff in post to meet existing levels of demand, and there have been recent appointments to the adoption support team to further improve the quality and timeliness of life story work. This team has identified, and is concerned about, increasing demands on resources in some areas, in particular young adults formerly in care or adopted, many of whom are extremely vulnerable and have complex needs, coming to the service for records counselling. The manager has made a business case for an additional social worker, although this has not yet been agreed.

The county is regarded as a fair and equitable employer. There is a whistle blowing policy in place, and former issues with inequalities of pay amongst social work staff

have been resolved.

There are good administrative procedures; prospective adopters are dealt with promptly and courteously, and there is access to any advice needed to meet the needs of all service users. Records for all children and prospective adopters are kept to a high standard. The county is in the process of transferring its records system to electronic files. Both the paper files and the electronic records are well maintained. The local authority has a clear policy for service user access to records in line with data protection legislation, and special rules apply where an adoption is concerned. Complaints are recorded and fully investigated, with outcomes recorded and any action required.

Files for panel members contain all the required information, although they do not all contain identity information. All employees have written contract and a job description, and the contract is not issued until all the necessary checks are in place. Staff files contain all the information required by Schedules 3 and 4 of the Local Authority Adoption Regulations 2003, apart from CRB checks on members of the administration team discussed under Staying Safe.

Two of the premises used are suitable for public access, including safe access for people with disabilities to at least part of the buildings. There are sound IT systems, and the Operations Manager has designed his own very useful databases for aspects of the adoption support work, including the letterbox database, the matching spreadsheet and other software to ensure that the service has the data it requires to operate effectively. Previous issues with staff not having sufficient access to IT equipment have been addressed, although some staff say that a laptop would help them to work more efficiently whilst at different locations around the county.

A Disaster Recovery Plan is in place to provide appropriate guidance on action to be taken to conserve damaged records in the event of an emergency, such as fire or flooding, and how to continue with operations in the event of office accommodation becoming unsuitable.

Records are safely and securely stored in the County Hall archive, which is a safe environment of robust construction. Suitable risk assessments are in place to acknowledge and address potential hazards.