

Gloucestershire 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

Gloucestershire County Council's adoption service undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption responsibilities for children and those affected by adoption. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency, Parents and Children Together (PACT).

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 and intermediary work. The service also manages direct contact arrangements and a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is also provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary agency, Action for Children.

The service is part of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) and is also forging links with other nearby local authorities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

The agency has acknowledged that there is a lack of permanence in the management structure from team manager up to Director level. This has impacted on the overall outcome for this service.

Although there has been some improvement since the last inspection, and many of the requirements and recommendations made at that time have been addressed, this inspection has resulted in a total of 20 recommendations, most of which are in the Organisation section of the report.

There are some encouraging signs that the service is in the process of improving. The quality of individual pieces of work can be high, and staff commitment to providing a good service is not in question. All the adoption team staff interviewed expressed a total commitment to their work and clearly strive to maintain high professional standards.

The Interim Director of Operational Services has appointed a specialist management team to help the authority build a robust structure for the future. The main issue is that the proposed structure has not had sufficient time to become embedded, and

hence it is not possible for the inspectors to predict how the service will be managed, or to report upon future plans which may not come to fruition.

This has resulted in the Organisation section of this report being rated inadequate with notice to improve, and although the other outcome areas have been rated Satisfactory, this rating of inadequate for Organisation has to determine the overall outcome of the inspection.

Two recommendations have been made for Staying Safe and three for Enjoying and Achieving. Four of these five recommendations reflect the variable quality of communication with adopters and the other recommendation concerns recruitment checks on internal applicants for posts.

No recommendations have been made for Making a Positive Contribution.

Equality and diversity has been rated Satisfactory within the Organisation section.

14 out of the total of 19 recommendations are in the Organisation section of the report. These reflect issues with the Statement of Purpose and Children's Guides, the impermanence of many of the management arrangements, some managers' qualifications and experience, corporate parenting, staffing, contractual issues, appraisals, case recording and auditing systems.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in July 2006, six statutory requirements and 23 recommendations were made. Since then, regulation practice has changed in that local authority adoption services cannot be made subject to requirements (actions), and only recommendations can be made.

A requirement was made under the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulations 15 and 31, NMS 5 (Staying Safe), concerning the need to ensure that assessments presented to panel were up to date. This has been largely addressed, and one recommendation has been made.

Two requirements were made under the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 14, NMS 7, 8 and 9 (Making a Positive Contribution), that birth parents be provided with an independent counselling service as soon as adoption has been identified as the plan for their child, and that their views should be recorded in all cases. Both of these areas have been addressed.

A requirement was made under Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003, Regulations 11 and 15, NMS 19 and 28, (Staying Safe and Organisation) that the agency must ensure that information is held and kept up to date in respect to all persons who work for the adoption service in accordance with Schedules 3 and 4. This applies to all staff, sessional workers and Panel members. The sample of staff files seen on the computerised records system and panel members' paper files contained all the required information on this occasion.

A requirement was made under the Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003, Regulation 9, NMS 1 (Organisation) that the agency must ensure that the child protection policy and procedures are in line with this regulation and with the statement of purpose. On this occasion, the child protection policy and historical abuse policy met the standard and regulation.

A requirement was made under the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 12, NMS 25 (Organisation) that the agency must ensure that comprehensive and accurate adoption case records are made and maintained for each child. Some children's case records seen were of an acceptable standard, but some improvements still need to be made.

Most of the 23 recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. Under the Staying Safe section of the report, recommendations were previously made under four National Minimum Standards. These have all now been addressed. There were four previous recommendations under the Enjoying and Achieving section of the report, all of which have been addressed. One recommendation was made under the Making a Positive Contribution section of the previous report, in respect of developing a robust monitoring system for life story work and the timeliness and quality of all such work. This has been addressed with the appointment of a specialist life story worker.

Eleven recommendations were made concerning the Organisation section of the report. These included amendments to the Statement of Purpose (now improved) and the Children's Guide (this still requires amendment). The recording of enquiries from prospective adopters has now improved. While communication about how to complain has improved, some adopters remain unclear about certain aspects of the procedure. Some improvements were evident in the monitoring and quality assurance systems, with further work still to complete once the management systems are fully operational. Some staff training has taken place to address a recommendation made at the last inspection, but recording of assessment visits remains variable. An access to records policy for the adoption service is now in place. Further work is needed to ensure that all files, including staff files, are audited. The agency now has a disaster recovery plan in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a good commitment within the service to providing the best outcomes for children who need a permanent home through adoption. Staff demonstrate

considerable dedication to their tasks and responsibilities, with a child-focused approach that fully recognises that the needs and wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process. There is a good focus on matching children with adopters who best meet their assessed needs, and this is reflected in the low rate of disruptions of adoption placements. Comments from adopters about the matching process included: 'We felt a lot of care was taken during the matching process. The staff genuinely care about the children' and 'Our overall experience was positive. We are extremely happy with the result as we have been well matched and our daughter is wonderful. The child's interests are put first.'

The agency adviser now quality assures reports due to be presented to adoption panel to ensure that information about children is accurate and up-to-date. Also, since January 2009, matching applications being presented to panel have to be accompanied by the child's life story book. This has improved the quality of information about children made available to prospective adopters. However, there are recent instances reported by adopters where they felt that they had not received full information about the child, or were still waiting for the child's life story book to arrive. The service has recruited a full-time permanent life story project leader as a county-wide resource to coordinate and monitor life story work and oversee the direct work undertaken by community family workers to ensure that life story books are of a suitable quality and produced in a timely way. This person is due to take up the post in September 2009, after the inspection, so the impact of this on the quality of the service being provided could not be assessed.

It is now an expectation that a Child Appreciation Day is held for all children being placed for adoption, which is good practice. Adopters who participated in these said that they had found them useful experiences. However, in at least one recent case, no Child Appreciation Day was held and the adopters were uncertain as to why it had not happened, so practice remains inconsistent. A new contracting arrangement with the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) to chair these days has been agreed with the aim of ensuring consistent practice in this area.

The service recently reviewed and updated its written plan for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally. This aims to recruit adopters for specific sibling groups of children waiting to be matched and to increase the pool of approved adopters to meet the anticipated rise in the number of children needing permanent placements. A part-time marketing coordinator specifically for the adoption service has been contracted, in the short-term, to coordinate and extend adoption recruitment strategies.

However, the service also needs to ensure that currently available resources are being used to their best advantage. Some approved adopters have waited a significant amount of time, for example, up to two years, to be matched with a child. Some approved adopters feel that the service needs to give them better information about children waiting for placements both those within county and nationally. Approved adopters awaiting placements commented, 'Post approval there has been less communication from the agency, which is a little disappointing. I would have

hoped that the agency would have given us some idea of what children are available to us in County' and 'Post approval - there was deadly silence - no communication at all. It was as if we had been forgotten about until we were invited to a family finding event. We do not receive regular explanations about what is happening'.

However, adopters report that the service works efficiently and effectively once a match has been identified. For example, adopters said, 'Once the potential match was identified the speed and efficiency was very good/impressive' and that the service works 'at speed when a match is made'.

The preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough and of a good standard. Assessment reports are well-written, cover all necessary areas and include good analysis by assessing social workers. Adopters reported that the preparation programme for prospective adopters is helpful and informative. Some comments from adopters about the preparation course included: 'The 3 day preparation course was very good. Reflecting back I realise how important it was. Meeting with other couples going through the same 'emotional journey' is essential', 'We found the course extremely useful. It gave us good insight into the behavioural problems adopted children face, attachment and related issues. It was very useful to hear from parents who had already adopted', 'Extremely interesting and informative and made us think and discuss areas that we had not considered' and 'Very helpful in determining whether adoption was right for us. Though parts were emotionally draining it gave a very good insight into why children need adopting and the issues they may have and how different issues can be dealt with'.

Adopters also commented positively on the assessment process. For example, 'Our experience of the approval process was very good. Our social worker supported and communicated with us, and made us feel confident. On the day, the Chairman was very friendly and welcoming, putting us all at ease. The whole experience was not half as traumatic as one may have expected', 'Was detailed and within the time frame and felt like it was at a comfortable speed. We knew exactly what was happening at each stage and were able to ask for clarification if we were unsure' and 'The Home Study assessment was a very positive experience for us'.

However, some adopters said that they experienced delays at this stage of the process due to staffing issues and difficulties with the processing of paperwork. Comments from adopters included, 'There was a delay in going to Panel because the paperwork was not in order which was disappointing at the time' and 'delayed to approval panel by 4 weeks due to paperwork delay' and 'there was a delay of two months before our social worker commenced her home visits'. This indicates that management oversight and quality assurance processes were not sufficiently robust for this part of the adoption process. Although some of these examples date back to 2007, some relate to instances within the past 12 months. The service has improved its quality assurance processes recently, so the issue of unnecessary delays is being addressed.

Since the last inspection, the service has separated the roles of agency adviser to the panel and adoption team manager to prevent any possible conflict of interest. This,

along with the introduction of a dedicated adoption panel administrator role, had had a very positive impact on the work of the adoption panel, and the adoption service as a whole.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted and well managed. Applicants are invited to and made welcome at panel meetings. A separate room is now available for panel attendees, giving more privacy for persons waiting to be called into panel. 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 is taken without delay. All information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation are taken into account before a considered and professional decision is made.

There is a monitoring system in place to ensure that written notifications are sent out within the required timescale. At the matching stage, adopters are provided with the opportunity to meet with the panel's medical adviser 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.

Staff recruitment practices are generally satisfactory, and the computerised staff files sampled contain the required information. However, the inspectors were told that only verbal references are obtained for internal appointments, which is not satisfactory.

There is an effective safeguarding policy and procedure in operation.

There have been a number of changes to the management of the service since the last inspection. An interim operational manager has just been appointed as the nominated manager of the service. This is a temporary arrangement while the current restructure is proceeding.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. The service provides good support to adopters through the matching, introductions and placement processes. Comments from adopters include: 'We had plenty of support from both the child's and our social worker. Our social worker particularly went out of her way to attend meetings out of county, and to support us when we had attended meetings she was not present at, she always visited or rang to make sure everything was going to plan. She helped us to ask the right questions of the child's social worker. We were very well supported and informed about the process', 'Plenty of support available. Our old social worker will still contact us if we need to speak to her' and 'Extremely good at supporting us,

particularly in the early stages of placement'. Our social worker was excellent and overall we were very pleased with the way the adoption team took us through the process'.

Most adopters said that they are satisfied with the support they receive after a child is placed. Adopters are clear about contact arrangements and feel that these are well managed. Adopters are provided with an adoption allowance to support placements where there is an assessed need for this. Some good examples of this were seen. However, one-third of the adopters who responded to the pre-inspection survey said that they had not been given written information about adoption allowances. The 'Family Fun' day, adoption support group, Under 5's group and annual seminar organised by the service are all valued by adopters and viewed as good means of support. The service is also reinstating the fathers' group, which had lapsed. However, recent changes to the post adoption team, with the loss of experienced and qualified staff is a concern. This has had an impact on the level of support that the team can offer as there are currently no qualified social workers in the team. The remaining members of the post adoption support team show admirable commitment and dedication to maintaining the same good level and quality of service but there are signs of strain showing. For example, one of the groups has had to be cancelled next month due to a shortage of staff and the 'buddying' system is not operating at present. A few adopters expressed some dissatisfaction about the response they received from the adoption support team following a request for support. For example, 'one issue has not been followed up by adoption support' and 'We had good support until the children were adopted. Once the adoption was complete, post adoptive support was non-existent'. The service is working to improve support provided to adopted children in education by establishing links with the virtual school.

The service has access to specialist advisers and services appropriate to its needs. Some of these are well established. For example, the Medical Adviser to the panel has been in post for a number of years. She liaises well with children's social workers and meets with most prospective adopters to try to ensure that adopters are provided with all necessary information about specific health issues of children. There is a legal adviser available for consultation by staff and the adoption panel. Liaison with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) has improved. A primary mental health worker employed by Gloucestershire National Health Service (NHS) is now based part-time at the adoption service office and is available every morning to talk to professionals about any child.

Generally, people affected by adoption are receiving a satisfactory service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need and they are given clear information about the service they can expect to receive. One half of adopters who responded to the pre-inspection survey said that they had not been told by the agency how to make a complaint. Also, one-third of adopters said that they had not been informed about the Independent Reviewing Mechanism.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

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.

The service has contracted Action for Children to provide independent adoption support services to birth parents before and, more recently, after adoption. After the second Looked After Child review meeting where permanence through adoption is considered to be an option for the child, a system of 'twin-tracking' is used to minimise delays. A social worker from the Looked After Children's team social worker is allocated to work with birth parents to prepare the Child Permanence Report and present this to the adoption panel. The child's social worker in the Children and Families team continues to be responsible for care planning and working with the child. Looked After Children's social workers feel that it can be difficult to engage birth parents in the adoption process while they are focussed on contesting the care order application.

Birth parents are encouraged to meet with adopters where appropriate. Adopters who had met with birth parents see this as being helpful to them in maintaining the child's heritage. The service operates an effective letterbox scheme for the exchange of information post adoption. Adopters and birth family members who use this service are provided with appropriate advice and guidance.

Birth parents and birth families are supported 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 in order to maintain the child's heritage after placement. It is clear that the competing priorities of their responsibilities does, at times, place a strain on their ability to manage this aspect of their work in a timely way. The service has recognised the need for further support in this area and has taken action to improve direct work with children being placed for adoption and the production of life story books through the appointment of the full-time life story project leader who takes up post in September 2009. The service has taken other measures to improve the timeliness of this information reaching adopters. It is now generally established practice within the service that the child's life story book is presented at the matching panel.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The agency has a written statement of purpose, which was revised and approved on 5 May 2009. It sets out the aims and objectives of the adoption service. However, it does not indicate who has been appointed as the adoption support services adviser (ASSA) for the service. The children's guide to adoption used does not contain information on how to contact the Children's Rights Director.

People who are interested in knowing more about becoming adoptive parents are given clear written information about the process and the needs of children who are requiring an adoptive family.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

The County Council is undergoing a complete organisational restructure following the last Joint Agency Review (JAR). Currently there is an interim management team in place to manage the changes and provide leadership of services until the revised management structure is agreed and permanent managers can be appointed. The interim management team has clearly identified areas of strength within the service and areas of underperformance and concern. External analysis of the operation of the adoption service was commissioned from a national organisation with expertise in the adoption field to assist with this process. The interim head of service has been an active champion for improvements in the adoption service since his appointment in October 2009. Because he also has responsibility for areas of work undertaken by children and young people's teams, he has been able to bridge the gap between children services and the adoption teams and promote significant developments in the service, such as the introduction of new quality assurance systems for the presentation of reports to adoption panel and the revision of policies and procedures in relation to adoption. A further development is the creation of the post of a full-time, permanent life story project coordinator to improve the quality and timeliness of life story work for children being placed for adoption. This post is not yet operational so the impact of it on the quality of service provision cannot be judged.

A number of interim management arrangements have been put into place to address operational issues identified in the adoption teams, such as a previous lack of effective leadership caused by a number of changes in senior management, the long-term absence of the adoption team manager due to sickness and the loss of experienced, qualified staff from the adoption service. Not all staff are receiving regular appraisals, or have a written contract of employment. Also, there was a gap in management cover in the post adoption team earlier this year, for a significant period, when the adoption team manager, who was covering for the deputy team manager who had resigned, went on sick leave again. Referrals to the service were not adequately managed at this time, although the team took an active role in trying to deal with this themselves. The team are uncertain as to the reason why the deputy team manager's post was not advertised, although the outgoing post-holder had given several months' notice. The team report that they are now receiving

regular supervision and have managers readily available for consultation under the current interim management arrangements. However, the team does not have any qualified social workers at present and current team members feel that this detracts from the overall effectiveness of the service. Staff reported that the level of administrative support they receive is not sufficient to enable them to carry out their duties in an efficient and effective manner. The adoption service is heavily reliant on staff subject to temporary contracts to undertake assessments of prospective adopters and post adoption support. Staff, both permanent and temporary, demonstrated high levels of dedication and commitment to their roles so that the best outcomes for children can be achieved throughout this period of transition and change.

There has also been drift in the development of the service. For example, work that had previously been undertaken on the adoption development plan had ground to a halt, or had been lost, as no-one at a senior enough level was driving this forward. It is unclear who was undertaking the role of the nominated manager of the adoption service and the role of ASSA within the service at that time. The interim head for adoption and fostering who was covering the role of nominated manager in the months prior to the inspection does not have the relevant qualifications for this role, although her extensive management experience and skills and good leadership qualities have undoubtedly helped the service during the time she has been in post. While an interim operational manager with suitable qualifications and experience has just been appointed as the nominated manager of the service and ASSA, it remains unclear what the overall structure for this service will be, so despite recent improvements and the positive impact of the interim management team on the development of the service, organisation is judged as inadequate at this time. The new management structure will need to ensure that team managers responsible for the day-to-day running of the service are not overstretched dealing with strategic issues and policy development.

The executive of the council receives appropriate information about the performance of the service although a recent election has brought about significant changes to the elected membership, which means that at the time of the visit, new members were in the early stages of developing their brief. However, there have been problems with management of data, which has impeded proper scrutiny of the operation of the service.

Case file management and administration is generally good, with all required information in place. However, not all adopters files contained full recording of social workers' assessment visits, which was a recommendation made at the previous inspection.

There is a good system in place for recording and dealing with formal complaints. However, the management and recording of complaints that do not reach the formal stage is inconsistent.

Comprehensive personnel files are maintained for staff members and members of

the adoption panel. Staff files are now held electronically. There is no system of audit in place. The management of adoption members file is excellent.

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 effective communication is maintained with adopters at all times and that full information is available to them in respect of any child who may be placed for adoption (NMS 5)
- ensure that written references are taken up for internal as well as external appointments (NMS 19)
- ensure that prospective adopters are provided with clear information about adoption allowances (NMS 6)
- ensure that systems are in place to respond promptly to requests for post-adoption support (NMS 33)
- ensure that service users are informed of their right to make representations and complaints and that they are helped to do so if this is required, in particular ensure that prospective adopters are given information about the Independent Reviewing Mechanism (NMS 33)
- ensure the Statement of Purpose gives clear information about the appointment of the ASSA and that the Children's Guide contains contact details for the Office of the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1)
- ensure that anyone appointed to manage an adoption team holds the necessary professional qualifications in social work and management and has experience in childcare, adoption law and practice (NMS 14)
- ensure that there are always clear arrangements in place to identify the person in charge when the manager is absent (NMS 16)
- establish a robust, permanent management structure, with clearly defined roles for managers, to provide effective leadership for the adoption service (NMS 16)
- ensure that high quality performance management systems are established across all aspects of the service (NMS 17)
- continue to promote a strong sense of Corporate Parenting and responsibility within the executive and robust oversight of the effectiveness of the adoption service (NMS 17)
- review the provision of clerical and administrative support to ensure that an effective service to all service users is maintained at all times (NMS 20)
- ensure that all independent staff are provided with appropriate written contracts (NMS 20)
- ensure that there is an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the adoption agency and that they are appropriately supported and assisted in providing a service (NMS 21)
- review staff recruitment and retention policies to attract and retain suitably

- qualified and experienced permanent staff for the service (NMS 21)
- ensure that all staff receive regular appraisals (NMS 23)
- ensure that a consistent approach to case recording is maintained, in particular the recording of social workers' assessment visits to adopters (NMS 25)
- ensure that effective recording systems for the management of informal complaints are in place (NMS 27)
- ensure that an effective staff file auditing system is in place (NMS 28)