

Dorset County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC050031
Inspection date	12/10/2009
Inspector	Paul Clark
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Dorset County Council, County Hall, Colliton Park, DORCHESTER, Dorset, DT1 1XJ
Telephone number	01305 251000
Email	
Registered person	Dorset County Council
Registered manager	Andrea Orchard
Responsible individual	Jackie Last
Date of last inspection	14/08/2006

© Crown copyright 2009

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

The adoption and permanence team is part of the resources section of the Children and Family Services Department of Dorset County Council. It is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) made up of 14 local authorities and three voluntary adoption agencies. The team is made up of a team manager, an assistant team manager and 12 social workers based in two offices one in Dorchester and one in Wimborne.

There is a service level agreement with Parents and Children Together (PACT) who assist with the assessment of inter country adopters.

The team recruits, prepares and assesses adopters; works with children's social workers to identify matches for looked after children and assist their placement; provides support and counselling for birth parents (both from within team resources and by contract arrangement with 'Families for Children'); provides a service to adopted adults and adult birth relatives(including a partial intermediary service). The team manager acts as the Registered Manager of the service and the Head of Children and Family Services acts as the Responsible Person of the service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The adoption and permanence team of Dorset County Council ensure that children are provided with good adoption placements. This is achieved by the good practice of a well qualified and managed staff team who are well trained and are supported by sound policies and procedures. Social workers make rigorous assessments of proposed adopters who they fully train to carry out the adoption role. An Adoption Panel oversees and ratifies these assessments and makes effective judgements and recommendations to an agency decision maker about the approval of proposed adopters, the suitability of children to be adopted and the way that children and adopters are matched.

Improvements since the last inspection

All of the recommendations from the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate's inspection of August 2006 have been addressed, apart from the modification of corporate job descriptions to be made specific for social workers in the adoption and permanence team. However, a task analysis is used to direct the specifications necessary for the post.

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 social workers in the adoption and permanence team are all professionally qualified, are members of the General Social Care Council and the majority of them have lengthy experience of child care work. They have access to extensive ongoing training in all aspects of their work, including the Post Qualifying Child Care Award which enables them to provide a professional service which safeguards young people using the service. All social workers undertake child protection training within their first year of appointment. All social workers are conversant with the Local Safeguarding Children Board child protection policies and procedures and there is a safeguarding unit within the council who they can contact for advice.

Social workers carry out comprehensive assessments on all prospective adopters who receive training to prepare them for adopting, including providing them with an understanding of the key issues involved in the caring of a child unable to be cared for by their birth parents. A health and safety checklist is carried out on prospective adopters households which include the latest British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance. BAAF guidance on adopters who smoke is also rigorously applied.

Identified social workers in the adoption and permanence team called 'family finders' have a responsibility for ensuring that young people and their adopters are appropriately matched and these decisions are ratified by the Adoption Panel who will make a recommendation to the agency decision maker who will make a decision about the appropriateness of the matching within five working days. The service can look at available adoption households within the consortium membership if suitable adopters are not available within Dorset or it would not be in the child's interests to be placed within Dorset. Family finders make matches in collaboration with the child's social worker who will also consult the birth parents about their views, wishes and feelings about the kind of household they would prefer their child to be placed in. The placing social worker produces the child's later life letter and life story book.

The manager of the adoption service is professionally qualified, she has a management qualification and has many years experience in child care, social work practice and management. All staff and managers of the service have been appropriately vetted to ensure that the safety of young people using the service is not compromised. All staff and Panel Members receive enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks and these are updated every three years. There were some gaps in the recording of personal reference checks in the personal files of independent panel

members.

The service has a complaints policy details of which are contained in the Statement of Purpose. The complaints information leaflet given out in the information pack to adopters still contains the contact details of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). This was addressed by the service during the course of the inspection. The Registered Manager stated that no complaints have been made about the service within the past 12 months.

An Adoption Panel meets fortnightly which is independently chaired by a professionally qualified person who has many years experience in adoption practice and management. The panel composition is appropriate. A legal adviser is identified who attends the panel to offer legal advice when necessary. A medical adviser sits on the panel who also has expertise in childhood disability. There are members with personal experience of having been adopted or who have adopted. There is a person with a teaching qualification. There is no member of the panel from a minority ethnic background although the panel have sought to address this. The panel has an identified person who they can consult on issues of ethnicity and diversity.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service operates an effective letterbox system whereby birth parents have a system of periodic written and photographic contact with their children and vice versa. This is effectively run and is well organised to protect the safety and wellbeing of adopted young people.

The adoption service provides ongoing support to adopters following placement. This support includes giving adopters three year, free membership of Adoption UK. A non-means tested, setting-up grant, up to a maximum of £500, is payable to approved adopters prior to placement. A buddying system is in place to link newly approved adopters with experienced adopters and to support adopters following their initial approval.

There are three self-help groups within the county where adopters can get peer group support. Foster carers who adopt children in their care have arrangements in place to ensure that the adoption allowance matches the fostering fee. This is paid until the adopted child is 18 years old.

There is a service level agreement with Parents and Children Together (PACT) to support and assess adopters wishing to adopt children from overseas.

The majority of social workers in the adoption and permanence team have undergone training on recent research on adoption theory, for example, birth trauma and attachment and loss. A specialist social worker within the adoption and permanence team offers therapeutic support to adopters and young people placed. This is based on her particular training, knowledge and skills which are specific to supporting adoption placements and reducing potential disruption. Adopters can

access psychologist and psychiatric assessment and support via the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. A clinical psychologist attends the preparation training and informs proposed adopters about the impact of early years experiences on young people's lives. They also offer ongoing support to adopters. The service can draw upon the resources of the educational support team for looked after children for support with the educational needs of adopted young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The support that the team give to birth parents and adopted adults is briefly spelt out in the Statement of Purpose. A service is provided to adopted people who are tracing their birth families by the provision of two social workers. There is a support group for adopted adults which these workers facilitate. There is also counselling support available to them and to all birth relatives affected by adoption. Adopted adults using this service felt well supported.

Birth parents are supported by being given a set of information about available services to support them. The adoption service has a service level agreement with 'Families for Children' who offer counselling, advice and information and who organise a support group for 'Non-Relinquishing Birth Parents'. Birth parents are supported with travel arrangements to attend these groups. A member of the adoption and permanence team is also available to support birth parents.

Parents are consulted about a proposed placement by the locality social workers and their views about the placement are taken into account as far as possible.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. This is evidenced by the composition of the Adoption Panel, including members who have expertise in disability, having been adopted themselves, and having available to them a person who can be consulted on issues of racial diversity. There is also evidence of the approval of same sex and single adopters. Apart from the assistant team manager, all members of the adoption and permanence team are white female. The council have a Equal Opportunities Policy and the Adoption Panel have a statement on diversity contained within its Adoption Panel Member Handbook.

The council has a website page on adoption which gives comprehensive details about the service including its policies and procedures and an online form to register an interest in adoption. There are also written copies of all policies and procedures. The service has a clearly written Statement of Purpose which contains clear guidance for all stakeholders about the service and which is appropriately reviewed and updated. There is a children's guide which is produced in a format suitable for younger children. There is no guide produced in a format that may be easier to read for children with learning difficulties. The information packs given out to prospective adopters are full and comprehensive. The service holds information evenings every two months for people interested in adopting where clear and open information is given. The service holds three preparation groups per year for suitable prospective adopters to receive more detailed knowledge about adoption before making a formal application to be considered for adoption. These groups also serve as part of the assessment process.

The Registered Manager of the service has a professional social work qualification, an appropriate management qualification and is a member of the GSCC and has many years experience in child care management and practice. Social workers are regularly supervised within recommended frequencies and regular team meetings are held. A policy manager provides internal monitoring and reports on necessary areas of development.

Social workers are appropriately qualified and experienced and are members of the GSCC. They are supported through supervision, team meetings and ongoing training. All staff also undertake an annual Performance Development Review which identifies their ongoing training and development needs. The ongoing training needs of Adoption Panel members are identified by an annual review carried out by the Agency Panel Adviser and the Chair of the Panel.

The agency maintains personal records on its own staff and on the Adoption Panel members which contains job descriptions, a record of their qualifications and experience, a record of their training and items of the vetting carried out on them before appointment. The personnel files on service managers and social work staff are not sectioned and do not have a front sheet to indicate when the various vetting clearances have been received. There is also no evidence on the centrally held personnel files that written references have been followed up by verbal enquiry. However, it was stated by the human resources officer that a record of this evidence is made and kept by the team manager responsible for appointment. The agency keeps the archive files of adopted people under well organised storage conditions to preserve their longevity. The arrangements for the safekeeping of these archive records are subject to a written risk assessment carried out by the policy manager.

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 all information documents given out to adopters about making complaints contains the contact details of Ofsted (NMS 24)
- ensure that there are records kept of the personal references that the adoption service have received on Adoption Panel members (NMS 11.3)
- include a front page on staff personnel files to indicate when vetting items have been received, section files and the central files to show evidence that written references have been followed up verbally. (NMS 27)