

Borough of Poole Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Heather Chaplin / Sean White
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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

The Borough of Poole is a small unitary authority on the south coast of England. The adoption agency aims to meet the needs of children who have or may be adopted, their birth families and people who are or may become adoptive parents. The agency also provides a service to adults affected by adoption, who are seeking birth records counselling under section 51 of the Adoption Act 1976.

Poole operates within a strong ethos of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 18 approved adopters, 17 of whom are White British and one couple reflect a dual heritage of White British and Black Caribbean. Eight new prospective adopters have been approved in the last 12 months. The agency welcomes applications to adopt from all sectors of the community.

Through membership of two adoption consortia, the agency has considerably extended its resources and opportunities in terms of training, assessment and matching. There are strong links with other south coast authorities, with which it jointly provides some specific services. There are service level agreements with Families for Children, who provide independent birth family counselling and Parents and Children Together, who provide intercountry adoption services. There is also a service level agreement with Poole Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) to provide clinical psychological support and preparation training for adopters, as well as team and individual consultation.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a very positive announced inspection in which all outcome areas were found to be outstanding. Although there are some areas for development, the authority has identified these issues and is already working on them. There is one recommendation in relation to staff file auditing, but this does not impact on children's or adult service users' safety.

Poole is a small authority, but there are strong links with other authorities and agencies to provide an excellent, equitable all round service to children and adults. Within children and young people's services, the adoption team is seen as a much-valued resource.

Team members and administration staff were universally praised by adopters and social work colleagues for their commitment and professionalism. Two staff, a social work assistant and a member of the administration team, have received internal

commendation awards for the high standard of service they have provided. Adopters said:

'The team work hard for the children and are positive and motivated despite the obstacles they face on a daily basis. I have the utmost admiration for them and the difficult job they do.'

'We feel they have always been honest, open and fair and have been excellent through a process that feels never-ending. We were delighted with them, even when it felt like we would never get to the point of being a family.'

One colleague said: 'They are a dedicated and committed team who appear to work very well together to achieve the best outcomes for children and families'.

The management structure is clear and effective, providing strong leadership which is respected throughout the organisation. The authority also excels in terms of training, and staff commented that they had 'never been turned down for a course' and that the authority is very good at 'growing its own social workers' through a rolling programme of secondment.

A social worker from another authority said: 'Poole provides an excellent supportive service to their adoptive parents and children I have placed in the Borough. I have utilised their services for many years and am very impressed.'

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, five requirements were made. These are now termed actions, and they are no longer set for local authorities. However, all have been addressed, as follows:

The agency has effective written policy and procedural instructions governing the adoption panel and all aspects of the adoption agency work. Although the agency has not recruited additional staff, waiting times for assessment and the time taken to complete assessments have improved since the last inspection. When staff are unwell, extra resources cannot easily be provided, but the work is managed proactively to ensure that prospective adopters do not suffer undue delay.

Adoption records are now kept in a purpose-designed archive which provides excellent conditions for storage. The agency now has up-to-date records for panel members. Staff files have improved considerably. There is still some work to do to bring historical staff files up to the same standard as those for more recently appointed staff. The agency now holds all the requisite information about children for whom adoption is planned.

13 recommendations were made at the last inspection, and all have been addressed: The agency now has a written recruitment strategy which links adopters to the needs of those children with a plan for adoption. The adoption panel has a format for routine feedback in every case to highlight examples of good practice as well as

areas for development. Written references are now followed up and verified through telephone enquiries.

The agency has secured additional input from the clinical psychologist for the adoption service, and now has a written protocol for the role of specialist advisors. Birth parents have opportunities to see and comment on what is written about them before information goes to panel. Staff work hard to obtain information from birth parents and families, to help preserve the child's heritage. Much of this work is completed by the children's social workers, but the adoption team advise and support them.

The adoption manager has now obtained a management qualification equivalent to National Vocational Qualification at level 4 (NVQ 4). Lines of communication between managers and staff are now very clear.

Case files are now effectively audited. The computerised records system provides for supervisors' comments to be made and records supervision sessions where the case was discussed.

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 agency has a clear recruitment strategy. The team manager attends all permanency planning meetings and these inform the current recruitment priorities. The current focus is on children with complex needs and those from minority ethnic groups. As part of the South Coast Adoption Consortium and the South West Adoption Consortium, Poole works very effectively with other authorities to plan recruitment appropriately.

Families seen were all very well matched, and where they had adopted unrelated children, the children were well matched to each other. One adopter, who has a disability, was delighted to be accepted by Poole after being turned down by another authority. Poole have also approved an applicant approaching retirement age, by appropriately taking into account this person's youthful outlook on life and high level of fitness. Several professionals commented that the adoption team is able to 'think outside the box' in terms of assessment and matching.

The agency is a member of New Family Social, an organisation which supports gay and lesbian people who are interested in adoption. One same-sex couple who were interviewed said 'we were dealt with very fairly and equitably. Poole has a very high profile for equality and diversity issues'.

Adopters all praised the adoption social workers' support during the matching process. Social workers consider each possible match in detail. They assist the prospective adopters to look at all relevant information and analyse the content for suitability and optimistic, positive outcomes. One adoptive couple said:

'We were given all the paperwork, a DVD and photos. We met the children's social worker, foster carer and significant adults. We were encouraged to talk to the foster carer before matching and placement. All our questions were answered (and we had loads!). We were able to make an informed choice.'

Applicants attend a preparation group, which ensures that they are fully equipped with as much knowledge as possible before they embark on the assessment interviews. Preparation groups are run once a year in Poole. The other consortia members also run groups, which Poole applicants may attend. These are held at convenient times and venues.

Following application, six references are taken up, and all other statutory checks completed.

During the assessment, prospective adopters have the opportunity to meet birth parents and existing adopters who are parenting children at various life stages. Attention is given to the nature and impact of abuse, attachment disorders and the applicants' own attachment styles. The clinical psychologists who work with the adoption and fostering teams have designed an adapted attachment style questionnaire. Social workers have been trained to administer the questionnaire. They discuss the outcomes with the psychologists, who provide specialised input into the interpretation of the results.

The authority uses a detailed health and safety checklist which includes the risks posed by blind cords, guns and ceremonial weapons. Pet assessments are always completed. Adopters were extremely positive about the assessment process:

'We felt very well prepared, as right from the start we were advised about attachment issues. The social workers were always very honest and we had a lot of homework about this during the home study, as well as about our childhood, our relationships and our expectations'.

Some historical delays in reaching panel, which were due to staff shortages, have been addressed through positive management. Some adopters highly commended staff who stepped in to help and avoid any delay, when the assessing social worker had to be absent from work for a period. The team works exceptionally well together to minimise delay to assessments and matching processes.

During the matching process, adopters were pleased with the very detailed and comprehensive written information they received. The agency's teamwork approach ensures that all the prospective adopters are well-known to the team. This depth of knowledge proves very helpful:

'As it is only a small agency, all the staff have got to know us. The matching process was expedited by our social worker really knowing us and understanding us, so that when our children came along, she just knew that this would probably be good.'

Adoption panel meetings are held monthly. Venues have changed, but currently, meetings are held at a large country house in pleasant and relaxing surroundings. The panel is guided by clear policies. There is effective provision for the appointment of the chair and the vice chair.

The chair is highly experienced and is part of the British Association for Fostering and Adoption's (BAAF) chairpersons' group. She has strategies in place for responding to the unexpected, any declarations of interest, ensuring that the panel is quorate and managing any rare disagreement issues. The panel will meet in an emergency if necessary. Prospective adopters are welcomed to panel and are encouraged to express their views.

The adoption panel is properly constituted and has always been quorate. The members have considerable depth of experience. There are currently no representatives from minority ethnic groups, but the agency is keen to address this. There is a good gender balance on the panel.

All new panel members have the opportunity to observe a meeting and all are subject to stringent checks before they take up their duties. The South Coast Consortium offers appropriate induction training. There is also a joint training day with social work staff. Panel members receive training on equality and diversity, and on legislation regarding overseas adoption. All members receive an annual appraisal, including the chair. There are plans to ensure that their professional development includes spending some time with the social work teams.

There is a consistent and effective system for conveying information about the quality of assessments and reports back to the panel advisor and down the line management structure. Panel meetings are businesslike, but are conducted in as relaxed a manner as the situation allows. The chair keeps members focused and allows each person time to express their views. All social workers interviewed praised the robust and thorough nature of the panel. They value this as part of the checks and balances in place to ensure that children's needs are met.

The adoption panel members do not receive papers until four or five days before the panel meeting, which has caused some members difficulty in the past. The agency is well aware of the issue but it is not within the direct control of the adoption team. The chair highly praised the adoption team administrator who had worked well beyond the call of duty on occasion, to copy papers that had not been delivered to her in time.

Panel minutes are of a very high standard, with sufficient detail but no superfluous information. The discussion and reasons for the conclusion are clear. The agency decision maker has very considerable experience and is well-qualified for the role.

She always reads all the minutes before reaching her decision, and has on occasion returned a matter to panel for a further piece of work to be undertaken. Her role is objective and provides an important quality control measure.

After a recommendation has been reached, the chair goes to speak with the prospective adopters in person. Adopters said that they found the process of imparting information to be appropriate. They receive written confirmation of the decision in a timely manner.

The agency is managed by a highly experienced and well-qualified team manager. She has been awarded the equivalent of NVQ at level 4 in leadership and management and is now going on to complete her masters' degree. The manager is a most suitable person to be in charge of an adoption team. She is very well supported by a very knowledgeable senior practitioner, who is also the adoption support services advisor.

The agency has robust staff recruitment practices which help to ensure the safety of adult and child service users. The manager has an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) certificate, as do all the staff. CRB certificates are renewed every three years, and all written references are confirmed by telephone conversation to verify authenticity. Panel members, including the elected member of the council, are recruited in a similar manner and the same checks are undertaken.

All social workers are fully qualified and are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Most hold the practice teachers' award and two have attained the childcare award. All hold the post qualifying award in social work at level 1. Team members are seen by other teams as valued colleagues who are always willing to share their knowledge and skills with others. There are often students in the team and they are extremely well supported.

All therapy staff hold the qualifications appropriate to their profession. There is a very experienced and skilled social work assistant in the adoption team who operates the letterbox system. This work is supervised by the senior practitioner. Adoption team members who work with birth families have the necessary skills in this field.

Poole Borough Council has a clear and comprehensive child protection procedure which covers the possible need for any future allegations of historical abuse to be investigated. As a local authority, there are clear guidelines to staff for reporting allegations and specialist staff manage the safeguarding process very effectively. There have been no child protection referrals relating to the adoption team's work in the past year.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adopters praised the service for the high levels of understanding and support shown to them throughout the adoption process:

'Staff are very helpful and supportive. I know I can always speak to any member of the team'.

The foundations laid during the assessment period build excellent relationships which enable adopters to ask for help at a later stage. All adopters interviewed said that they were made aware at an early stage of post adoption support services they might access in the future. They are kept well informed of social and training events which may provide opportunities to meet other adopters and learn. The summer picnic and Christmas party also enable adopted children to meet with each other.

Adopters are well aware of issues around racism and other forms of discrimination, and are helped to address these issues with their children. Staff emphasise the importance of identity and help prospective adopters to look at this during the assessment stage.

Only one placement was disrupted during the past year. In this instance, staff worked very effectively with other agencies, and the disruption meeting was independently chaired. Adopters who have been through a disruption are offered independent counselling.

The agency has a clear written protocol and access to an excellent range of specialist advisors, including two clinical psychologists who are contracted to provide individual sessions for adopters as well as intensive training on attachment and staff consultation. Family therapy is also available through Poole CAMHS. There are two specialist nurses for looked-after children, and the panel medical advisor provides excellent, independent and clear advice to prospective adopters as well as to panel members. The panel also has access to legal advice and specialist input on intercountry adoption issues.

The agency welcomes all service users equally and provides good quality information about what it can and cannot provide. The team manager manages all referrals into the team and ensures that services are offered equitably. Adult service users seeking information about their birth family receive a service provided by suitably qualified, experienced and well supervised staff.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a clear strategy and a strong commitment to providing services for birth relatives, including siblings and older family members. Four authorities in the Dorset area have joined to form Independent Birth Relative Services. Birth family members are referred to this service, unless they request otherwise, in an attempt to facilitate a good take-up of support. One professional said:

'This demonstrates an innovative and positive response to Poole's responsibilities in relation to birth parents affected by adoption'.

Birth relatives are encouraged to participate in the adoption process from an early stage in the permanency planning process. Their views are clearly recorded and they have the opportunity to read what has been written about them in child permanency reports. Birth relatives meet the post-adoption contact scheme coordinator at an early stage. This helps them to understand the process and take part in planning positive contact.

An independent agency, Families for Children, offers a support service for birth family members who have recently been through contested care proceedings. Birth family members who have been involved with the agency for some time and who have moved on from the initial feelings generated by court proceedings, may access a historical group run jointly by the two team managers from Poole and Bournemouth.

Staff from all teams work hard to obtain helpful information from birth family members about the family and the child's life prior to matching. Although there is some variation in the quality of life story work, there is very good quality specialist training available. Inspectors saw some excellent examples of practice. Adopters confirm that issues about identity and the importance of heritage are explored thoroughly with them, and that they are well aware of the necessity to keep children's special items safe for them.

Staff throughout the agency, and all the adopters interviewed, clearly understand the importance of promoting constructive contact with birth family members after adoption. One adopter said that they have:

'Contact arrangements three times a year with siblings, one of these to be in the presence of birth parents. We are happy with this, because it will encourage the children's sense of identity as they grow.'

The agency maintains an excellent, efficiently run letterbox system. The social work assistant reads all the correspondence and works closely with the senior practitioner to respond to any inappropriate letters. Birth family members who would like help with writing their letters receive direct support, and are signposted to an independent agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. There is a strong commitment throughout the organisation to anti-discriminatory practice, with equality impact assessments in place for all the authority's activities. Staff and adopters receive training on diversity issues. Adopters interviewed reflect several different minority groups. They say that staff respond to them equitably and fairly at all times, irrespective of racial origin, religion, culture or sexuality:

'We felt valued and supported. We were treated as individuals. It is clear that they care deeply for the best interests of the children and work to do what is right in the long term'.

The agency has a well-constructed and comprehensive statement of purpose. The statement includes all the areas required by Regulation 2 (1) and Schedule 1 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. This document is freely available on the authority's website.

Two children's guides are in use; both are appropriate and accessible. Specialist staff can help children access these through Makaton, British Sign Language and other communication systems. The authority commissions translation services to assist any members of the public whose first language is not English. There is also a well-constructed information sheet for schools on what it means to be an adopted child.

Adopters receive a wide range of information of exceptionally high quality. The information pack is clear and inclusive. It presents a good all-round picture of the work done and what applicants can expect from the process. The agency also has a range of books and other resources to help staff engage with children and adults.

The agency is exceptionally well-managed at all levels. The head of service, principal officer and team manager provide strong and knowledgeable leadership. The head of service retains a clear overview of the service and also has considerable operational knowledge. The agency has clear arrangements covering the use of the Adoption Register for England and Wales.

The agency has performed very well against national performance indicators: the percentage of children looked after for more than six months, who were adopted or became subject to a Special Guardianship Order was higher than the national average. All children were placed within 12 months of the decision to adopt. There are excellent quality assurance measures in place, including regular adoption tracking meetings. This helps to avoid 'drift' for looked after children for whom adoption is the plan. There are quarterly quality assurance meetings, where any complaints are also reviewed.

The authority is strongly committed to its corporate parenting responsibilities. Elected members of the council, who receive relevant training on children's services

issues, are presented with twice-yearly reports on the conduct of the adoption service. This helps to ensure that the quality of service is monitored throughout the leadership and management structure.

Staff time is effectively managed to ensure the best possible service is delivered. Like many local authorities, the adoption team has to juggle scarce resources. Workloads are managed assertively and social workers use their time to support colleagues in other teams as well as providing a highly professional service to adopters, adults affected by adoption and to children.

Social workers and students receive regular supervision, and also support each other. With several practice teachers on the staff group, the team welcomes students and shares knowledge willingly through the department.

Adopters, staff and the panel chair universally praised the level of commitment and professionalism shown by administration staff. Examples were given of staff going above and beyond the call of duty to prepare panel papers at short notice, and one of the administration staff, as well as the adoption team's social work assistant, have been presented with awards within the authority for exceptional service.

All staff interviewed agreed that Poole is a fair and competent employer. The authority offers three secondments a year to social work training courses. Some staff said that there was so much training that it was not always possible to fit the courses on offer into their hours. Staff work very hard, but morale, goodwill and commitment are high.

Paper records are kept to a high standard, and the authority is in the process of converting these to computer based records. Many service user records are now on computer, and although the database is relatively easy to use, not all records have been fully transferred to the database. This is 'work in progress', and the inspectors were told that the system had improved following feedback from the adoption team. File records seen, on computer and on paper, are well recorded and contain evidence of supervisory decisions. Paper records are kept securely in modern, purpose-built storage systems.

Panel members' files are well-kept and contain all the required information to help promote safe recruitment. The most recent staff files generally meet the requirements of Schedule 3 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003. Full employment history is recorded, all have two written references and staff who work directly with the public have CRB certificates. An excellent personal history record for all employees, as well as for prospective adopters, provides additional safeguards.

However, two out of three adoption social work staff files lacked any photocopies of qualification certificates. It is clear that staff are qualified, because their GSCC registration certificates are on file, but there is no direct evidence to support this. On two out of four adoption team files sampled, proof of identity has not been retained.

The premises are part of a secure and safe building, which houses a day centre and other social work teams. The building is accessible to disabled people. It is suitable for its purpose and provides sufficient space for the agency's administrative activities. Other premises are used for groups and for the adoption panel meetings. There is an excellent archive facility, supported by relevant risk assessments and a disaster recovery plan.

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 staff files contain all the information required by Schedule 3 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 (NMS 28).