

Somerset County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Sean White / Rossella Volpi
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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

This is a local authority adoption service that undertakes all statutory adoption work. This includes the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, placement of children, and support services. It is managed centrally but operates from different locations across the county.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a well managed service that operates from a standpoint that the needs of children requiring adoption placements are paramount and it is clear that this drives the strategic and operational activities.

The approach to recruiting and assessing adopters is firmly grounded in the principle that only the most appropriate people able to meet the needs of children needing placements are approved. The preparation and assessment processes are thorough and rigorous and matching is undertaken with great care and consideration. These ensure that only the most suitable people are chosen to provide children with good permanent life chances.

The provision of support is good in most areas and impressive in others. Placement support is well thought through, with a range of resources and training available that provides families with a strong, enabling network. Birth parents receive an almost bespoke service that has paid significant dividends in providing children with well recorded backgrounds, and in promoting respect and equality for everyone involved in the adoption triangle.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has made considerable strides since the last inspection. Strategic management has addressed all the issues raised in the last report, some of the most significant being in respect of support services, administrative structures and quality monitoring. The agency is also well positioned to continue improving.

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.

This is an agency that has a thorough and strong approach to recruiting families that are able to meet the needs of the children requiring adoption placements in the county. The strategy is clearly focused on addressing the needs of children waiting and recruitment activity is aimed at selecting only the most appropriate people. This is achieved through a range of initiatives and is well managed at all levels of the service, including senior managers.

When considering a match all relevant information is provided to the prospective adopters. The preparation and assessment process informs adopters fully of the need for careful matching, enabling them to understand the need for placing children with the most appropriate families.

The approach to preparing and assessing prospective adopters is thorough, well considered and is driven by the needs of children. Preparation groups are held regularly in different locations around the county and provide a solid foundation for the adoption journey. Although there are some minor inconsistencies in the production of assessment reports, assessments are thorough overall and people who are approved as adopters have undergone a process that is clearly aimed at judging their abilities as suitable parents. This ensures that children have the best possible permanent life-chances.

The adoption panel is governed by up to date policies and procedures that provides a sound framework within which it is managed and organised. The panels are chaired by an experienced professional and are conducted and managed in a thorough and consistent manner. The members of the panels are clearly committed to their roles and responsibilities and all perform their duties in a rigorous and appropriately challenging way. The administration and organisation of the panels is efficient and well managed, with well written minutes that are produced without delay. Decisions on the panel's recommendations are made in a timely manner and attendees are given the date on which the decision will be made.

The managers and staff of the agency are very experienced, suitably qualified and very knowledgeable about adoption issues, including both law and practice. They demonstrate considerable insight into contemporary adoption matters and have a commitment to best practice. They work closely with placing social workers to ensure that children's needs for adoption are identified at the earliest possible stage and thereafter to effect the most appropriate placement.

Recruitment practices are, in the main, robust but there is no formal system in place to track the three year interval between Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks; similarly, the systems in place to verify written references by telephone are not consistently managed.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency has a strong and developing approach to supporting and sustaining adoptive placements; this enables children to have optimistic futures with their families. A range of innovative and focused initiatives are in place to provide families and children with opportunities to cement the placement. There is a clear focus on attachment issues, supported by regular and frequent training in a particularly respected model. The commitment to sustaining adoptive placements is also demonstrated through a multi-agency approach that enables a wide range of agencies and professionals to have a role in the wider support network. The absence of any disruptions to placements in recent times demonstrates the agency's success in enabling children to settle in to their new families.

Good quality medical and legal advice is provided by suitably qualified people. The medical advisor sits on the adoption panel and is accessible to the agency to provide advice and assistance at all reasonable times; the legal advisor attends most panels and provides written advice whenever necessary.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a very well thought through approach to ensuring that birth families are as involved as possible in the planning for their children's adoption. This inclusive approach encourages greater levels of trust, a positive consequence of which enables children's histories and backgrounds to be gathered together.

It is clear that the agency encourages all stakeholders to work well to ensure that birth parents are treated with respect, their needs recognised and strategies put in place to try and meet them. Also to ensure that adopters fully embrace the importance of their children's need to reflect on their history, so as to develop a positive self-identity. Much emphasis was therefore given to contact arrangements, with some very sensitive work and innovative ideas being demonstrated.

An unusually high take-up of independent support and counselling demonstrates the agency's positive and proactive approach to providing assistance to birth families, a commitment that includes sensitivity to the wider birth family, including grandparents and siblings.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well managed agency, at all levels, which undertakes its responsibilities in a well considered and dynamic way. The Statement of Purpose outlines clearly the aims and objectives of the service and this is underpinned and informed by sound, clear, and focused policies and procedures.

Prospective adopters are well informed about the agency and how it undertakes its work through a well presented information pack; this provides clarity and understanding for families considering adopting a child, particularly in respect of the type of children needing placements.

The authority has a clear structure with lines of accountability and communication that are clear and logical. The managers demonstrate significant knowledge and understanding of services for children overall and adoption in particular; they also have substantial management expertise and insight. They undertake their duties with skill and enthusiasm, ensure that the service is organised and managed with the best interests of children in mind and provide a supportive framework within which workers can undertake their duties. The service is supported by a committed executive that is well informed about the work of the agency.

The arrangements for allocation and workload management are well organised and undertaken on an equitable basis; staff have manageable responsibilities and all undertake a range of adoption duties. It is a reasonably well resourced service, both in terms of numbers and skills, and has the capacity to undertake the amount of work referred to it. Workers are appropriately supported and enabled to carry out their duties, have regular supervision and are provided with a range of training opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. The authority has a clear framework within which workers are protected and encouraged to undertake their duties in a manner that supports a positive approach to diversity and inclusion.

The administration of the service is well ordered, efficient and provides a strong support structure for the workers in the agency. Resources are suitable for managing the efficiency of the service, procedures for arranging access to records are well established and there is a firm commitment to security and confidentiality.

Case records are maintained for all prospective and approved adopters, and there is an adoption file for all children who have been placed for adoption. These are well maintained, contain all required information and are audited by managers on a random 'rolling programme'.

Records in respect of staff and panel members are well maintained and contain most required information; there was no record kept, however, of who verifies written references when workers are recruited.

The service operates from several locations throughout the county which enables

people to have access to the agency in different areas. The premises are generally suitable although space can sometimes be problematic.

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):

- devise a system for checking that CRB checks are undertaken every three years. NMS 19
- develop a more consistent model for ensuring that, when recruiting staff, written references are verified by telephone in all cases. (NMS 19)