

South Gloucestershire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer
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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 agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, post adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages direct contact arrangements and a letterbox contact system. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency either allocates these cases to its own social workers or commissions the services of a qualified social worker experienced in this area of work. The agency has a contract with an Adoption Support Agency to provide independent support to birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption and for people wanting an intermediary service.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection all of the National Minimum Standards were assessed. The quality of the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents is good and ensures that children are placed in safe, stable and secure placements.

The support services to adoptive families are good and these help to maintain adoptive placements throughout childhood and beyond.

Social workers work with birth parents and relatives in planning for their child and an independent support service for them is available. For adoptees and birth relatives of adoptees using the counselling services some very skilled and sensitive work is carried out.

This agency is managed in an effective and efficient way by suitably qualified and experienced managers. Likewise the calibre of social work staff is good and a child-centred approach is taken to all of the adoption work; outcomes for children are good.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the previous inspection there were seven actions and seven recommendations made. Six of the actions have been addressed as have most of the recommendations. The action which remains has been partly addressed, staff are

now provided with safeguarding training, the part which has not been addressed relates to developing a safeguarding policy specific to children placed for adoption and receiving an adoption support service.

The agency has shown a strong commitment to the development of services and the following are examples of the progress made since the last inspection. The arrangements for the recruitment of staff are robust, the Statement of Purpose and policy and procedure documents are comprehensive and a children's guide to adoption is now in place. The adoption and fieldwork teams are all nearly fully staffed and additional time has been allocated to the adoption support post. The approach to recruitment of the right adopters is sound and child appreciation meetings have been introduced to help adopters understand the needs and background of the child. Panel policies and procedures have been developed and adopters are routinely invited to the panel for their approval and match with a child. The panel minutes provide a good record of the proceedings. Work is carried out to support children's educational needs especially during a child's move into an adoptive placement

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 agency takes a proactive approach in recruiting adopters and uses a range of means and activities to target those people who will be most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. The agency takes an inclusive approach to recruitment of adopters although the needs of the children are rightly considered above those of prospective adopters. The agency also offers a service to people who want to adopt a child from another country.

There are effective systems in place in respect to permanency planning for children with a robust approach taken to monitoring each child's situation. The arrangements for family finding are also effective and these systems ensure that children are not subject to unnecessary delay. Information about the needs of children waiting are fed back into the recruitment process to ensure the right people are being targeted. The agency has a strong approach to consulting with children and using their wishes and views in both their care planning processes and the development of services.

The agency provides a good quality preparation course for people wishing to adopt. Adopters confirmed that they found the sessions informative and well presented. The agency has recently begun to run a training session for people who are significant in applicants lives such as adoptive grandparents. This is good practice as it ensures that people who will be significant in the life of an adopted child are fully aware of

and understand the complexities of adoption. The formal application to adopt is not taken in a timely way. This means that applicants do not have access to the formal routes of appealing an adverse decision about their suitability from the point of the assessment commencing. The assessment process is in depth and child focused. The assessment reports are analytical and identify the capacity of the applicants to parent a children who have complex needs arising from their often complex histories. The health and safety checklists being used do not include consideration of the safe storage of dangerous weapons or any risks hanging cords on window blinds may present to a young child.

Adopters are provided with good information about the matching, introduction and placement processes. The agency ensures that adopters are provided with all known information about a child's needs to help them make an informed decision about whether they wish to proceed to a match. The agency run child appreciation meetings during which a range of people who have worked with the child meet with the adopters to share information. This is good practice as it allows the adopters to fully explore the needs of the child with people who know the child well. Where there are any medical issues the agency medical adviser meets with prospective adopters to discuss these and any implications they may have for the future. The assessment reports for children are of a variable quality although the quality assurance processes ensure that all assessments are at least adequate enough to inform the matching processes. Direct work with children is carried out to prepare the child for the move into their new family and children are provided with information about the adopters home and family.

There are clear policies and procedures which underpin the work of the adoption panel. Its operation and management is of a good quality prospective adopters attend panel and are well supported by their social worker during their panel attendance. The panel is properly constituted and the chair and its members have suitable qualities and experience in adoption matters. A range of specialist advice is available to panel including medical and legal advice. The adoption practice manager is the agency adviser to panel which can cause a conflict of interests when cases she has supervised are heard. Panels are convened regularly so as not to cause delay for children. Panel members undergo a robust recruitment process, although clear evidence is not being maintained as to the verifying of members references and members qualifications. There is an induction process and a good training programme in place which ensures that panel members are kept up to date in adoption law and practice. The administration of the panel is of a good quality including the minutes made of panel meetings. The process in place in respect to decision making is robust and decisions are made promptly. All relevant people are informed of the decision in a timely way.

The manager and staff working for the agency are all appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption matters. Staff recruitment procedures and practices are robust and ensure that people working for the agency are suitable people to work with children.

The practice in relation to safeguarding children and vulnerable people is sound but

the safeguarding policies and procedures do not relate to children placed for adoption or those receiving a support service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

This agency shows a strong commitment to supporting adoptive placements in a flexible way so that children are in safe, stable and secure placements. The effective preparation of adopters means they are well prepared to parent a child with complex needs. Adoption support is planned in advance of the child moving in and this plan is subject to review. Post adoption support is provided by the post adoption support worker and this role supplements the wide variety of support services and activities to which all are welcomed. The services available include further training, social events, group work, social work support and paid membership to a national Adoption Support Agency and access to two other support agencies which are all registered and inspected by Ofsted. Adopters responses on questionnaires were overall positive about the support provided to them and a placing social worker commented that the post adoption support services provided are 'valuable in supporting adoptive placements'.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advice including medical, legal and educational advice. The arrangements for accessing the local children and adolescent mental health service have just been improved as they had not been effective for children who are placed for adoption.

In the event of a disruption of a placement occurring all parties are supported to end the placement in as positively as is possible. A meeting is held to consider the reasons for the disruption and the plans for the child's future. The findings from these meetings are used to inform future practice.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the life-long implications adoption has on all parties. While there is not a written plan in place in respect to supporting birth family members some good work is being carried out. Social workers work hard to establish birth family members views about adoption and their wishes for their child and ensure that these views are recorded. Birth parents have access to counselling, advice and support via an independent Adoption Support Agency, which is also registered and inspected by Ofsted. Children are provided with information about their background and the reasons why they cannot live within their birth families. This is via direct work done with them, life story books developed with them and later life letters written from their social worker. The quality of this work is variable.

The well-managed letterbox system supports birth families in maintaining the child's heritage. Contact arrangements are planned and agreed, while the system is very

efficiently administered there is no social work oversight of the letters and information sent to ensure the suitability of the content.

The agency provides birth records counselling. This work is very sensitively handled and people are treated with respect whatever their circumstances. The agency does not undertake intermediary work itself but does refer people needing this service onto a registered support agency. This work ensures that people affected by adoption, be they a birth family member or an adoptee of any age, are supported in understanding their situation.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well-managed agency which achieves good outcomes for children. The agency has a range of detailed policies and procedures which underpin its detailed Statement of Purpose. Children are provided with information about adoption including a written guide to adoption. Applicants are provided with a comprehensive range of information about adoption through, the information evenings and preparation groups, written information which is given to them and via the website. This ensures that both children and adopters are well informed and prepared for becoming an adoptive family.

The managers of the agency are appropriately skilled, qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare work. There are clear lines of responsibility throughout the agency and staff feel well supported not only by their immediate managers but also by the senior managers. Supervision is seen as a priority, staff meetings are held and managers encourage staff to access training. Communication across teams is good and a seamless service is provided to children and adoptive families.

There are systems in place to determine and prioritise caseloads and in general staff feel their caseloads are manageable. While a minority of adopters reported some delays at various stages of the process overall people progress through the system in a timely way. Adopters, children and placing social workers are provided with a good range of expertise via the adoption team. Comments from adopters about individual social workers are very positive. One stated of their social worker that she is 'wonderfully supportive and bends over backwards to support us'; another stated that their social worker is 'very professional and made us feel supported' and went onto say that the agency is 'very inclusive' and that the process is 'child centred'.

The arrangements for the administration of the agency is adequate although some social workers felt they were spending time doing administrative tasks, therefore,

taking time away from social work tasks. The agency has arranged training for some of the 'front desk' administrative staff in basic sign language skills in order that they are confident in communicating with people who have a hearing difficulty.

There are good monitoring systems in place at all levels and this is an agency which is good at identifying shortfalls through these systems and also ensuring they are addressed. The agency also demonstrated, in a number of areas, that it uses service users views to develop services and there is a strong culture of reflective practice across the agency.

The agency maintains comprehensive case files for adopters which are subject to audit. The adoption files for children are of a reasonable quality but the contents are not as comprehensive as they should be, for example, copies of birth certificates are missing on some files, photos are not always named and dated and panel minutes do not all contain a list of attendees. There are written policies and procedures in place in respect to case recording and clear policies in place in respect to access to records. There are well ordered, well-maintained personnel files kept in respect to staff employed. These evidence a robust recruitment process has taken place.

The premises the adoption team work from are secure and well-equipped. The IT systems are password protected and backed up on a daily basis. The arrangements for retrieval of archived files are efficient, however, the storage arrangements have not been subject of a risk assessment and the disaster recovery plan does not specifically relate to the safeguarding or back-up of these records.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
1	develop Safeguarding Procedures to include children placed for adoption or using the support services and to include situations of allegations about historical abuse (The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 Regulation 9)	01/12/2008
4	ensure the application to adopt is taken before any assessment work commences with adopters. (The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 Regulation 22)	01/12/2008

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that any risks in prospective adopters' households in relation to issues detailed in the main body of the report are excluded (NMS 4.6)
- place on panel members' files evidence to show that the references have been verified and where the member is a professional evidence of the relevant qualification (NMS 19.3)
- develop a clear written strategy for supporting birth parents and ensure that a more targeted approach is taken in promoting the services available to birth parents and other people significant to the child (NMS 9.1)
- ensure all life story books clearly explain the reasons for the adoption and are of a consistently good quality and ensure that there is social work oversight of all of the letterbox contact exchanges (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that adoption files are comprehensive in content (MNS 25.1)
- ensure that the risks of damage to archived files are acceptable and that a disaster recovery plan is in place for these files. (NMS 29.5)