

Southampton City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

Unique reference number	SC056862
Inspection date	11/12/2008
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Mike Stapley
Type of inspection	Key

Setting address	Adoption Service, Marlands House, Civic Centre Road, SOUTHAMPTON, SO14 7PQ
Telephone number	023 8091 5700
Email	adoption.services@southampton.gov.uk
Registered person	Southampton City Council
Registered manager	Pauline Pearce
Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	13/12/2005

© Crown copyright 2008

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 Southampton adoption service is part of the Children's Services and Learning Directorate, and is based in a city centre location. It provides a comprehensive adoption service in line with its statutory responsibilities as a Local Authority adoption agency. This includes matching and placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families, both for domestic and inter country adoptions; providing assessments for, and a variety of, post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth families; assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records; assistance with indirect and direct contact arrangements and court reports on non-agency adoptions. The agency does not currently provide intermediary services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection.

The agency has a strong awareness of the families required to place children appropriately and has developed strategies to enhance the recruitment of these families. The assessment and approval process, including the adoption panel, is thorough, ensuring that the safety of children is promoted within families who meet their needs.

The agency provides good support to families and is developing these services through a recently established post adoption support team. Social workers are committed and available to adoptive families, which engenders confidence that support will be provided when it is needed.

The agency works well with birth parents to facilitate their involvement in planning for their children and providing information to maintain their child's heritage. It undertakes good quality, direct work with children to help them move on and life story books are of a good standard and provided in a timely way.

Staff are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced and are supported and enabled to provide a professional service by experienced managers. There are shortfalls in some documentation and the lack of suitability of the premises in which the adoption team are based, but these do not comprise the safety or well-being of children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency had one action and three recommendations from the previous inspection. These have been completed.

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 agency has good systems in place to ensure that there is a clear awareness of the children who need adoptive families; this enables appropriate recruitment of adopters and prompt family finding to take place, prevents drift and ensures children are placed within families who meet their needs without undue delay. There is a written recruitment strategy which identifies resources needed and processes to be followed and the agency demonstrates a commitment to attract more applicants from black and ethnic minority communities to meet the needs of the children. Good liaison between the adoption team and the supporting children teams facilitates early awareness of children who may need adoptive families and prompt allocation of the contingency worker and family finder to progress the plan. The evidence indicates that children are placed without undue delay, sibling assessments are undertaken and a formal matching process ensures cultural, religious and other needs are addressed.

The agency has a formal, thorough process for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. However, the agency currently takes the formal application after the preparation training which is contrary to the guidance. There is also evidence of delay between the initial enquiry and approval. Very thorough checks and references are taken, including all former partners, employers and a large number of personal referees, and a second opinion visit is made as a routine practice. If applicants have a pet, the safety is thoroughly assessed and documented. Assessments of applicants are thorough and analytical. Adopters spoke very positively about their experiences with the agency, saying social workers were well informed, knowledgeable, approachable and professional. They found the preparation groups useful and very informative.

Once adopters are approved, they are well-supported by their social worker during the linking, matching, introduction and placement process. They are assisted in analysing information about possible children and social workers are pro-active in obtaining up to date and comprehensive information. Although life appreciation days are not held as a general rule, adopters are enabled to meet relevant people who have been involved with the child such as foster carers, nursery workers and the medical adviser.

The adoption panel is governed by comprehensive policies and procedures which underpin its operation. This is supplemented by clear and thorough panel advice, provided by the agency's adoption adviser, who demonstrates a very clear understanding of the role. Applicants are invited to attend for both approval and matching; although this is described as daunting, they are well prepared by their social worker, are provided with a booklet of photographs and basic information about panel members, and made welcome.

The two adoption panels are appropriately constituted with members who have a range of personal and professional experience of adoption. New members have a thorough induction and all members receive regular training, which enables them to carry out their role effectively. The independent chair is very experienced and knowledgeable and the well structured yet sensitive chairing enables all members to contribute appropriately. The minutes are extremely thorough and give a good and accurate account of the meeting including the reasons for the recommendation. They are prepared in a timely way which enables the decision making process to be carried out quickly and efficiently. Adopters receive written notification of the decision but not all birth parents receive this in the recommended time and the letters are not appropriately worded to reflect the decision making process accurately, placing more emphasis on the recommendation of the panel.

The appointment process for the managers and staff ensures that safe recruitment practices are followed and that everyone working for the purposes of the agency are suitable to work with children. This includes good recording of telephone verification of references and a newly established system for the renewal of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks.

The safeguarding procedures include historical abuse and make reference to children placed in adoptive families. Some staff have had recent safeguarding training but this is not universal amongst the adoption team, some of whom had such training some time ago.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adoptive families both following placement and post adoption order. Although it is a developing part of the service, and a small team (of two) has only recently been established, adopters expressed a great deal of satisfaction with the support they receive and a confidence that this will continue to be there for them when they need it in the future. A number of initiatives have already been established; these include a newsletter, support meetings and social events. There are further plans to establish links with other members of the consortium and with the fostering service to share training and support events and develop a buddy scheme.

A range of resources are used to support adoptive families, following an assessment

of needs. These include financial allowances, the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), both Saucypan and the Behaviour Resource Service (BRS) and the family centres. Adoptive families spoke highly of the work of the family centres and commented that their support had been instrumental in keeping the family together. There are good relationships between agencies, such as education and health, but these arrangements are not formalised. Social workers are clearly committed to supporting their families; one adopter said: 'I have only got to pick up the phone' and another: 'I have never had a problem getting services - they are responsive, helpful, supportive and follow things up'. This engenders confidence in the service and enables parents to support their children effectively.

Medical and legal advice is available at every panel and their advice is available to social workers when required. The medical adviser is said to be excellent and very committed to children. She is available to adopters to help them understand the medical implications of caring for specific children and provides a written report so everyone is clear about her advice.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrates a strong approach to involving birth parents in planning for their child and providing information for the future. This is effected by the allocation of a contingency worker from the adoption team at an early stage, whose role is to work alongside the child's social worker, become involved with the birth parents, gain their cooperation and obtain information for the life story book. The contingency worker also writes the Child Permanence Reports (CPR) and placement order application, which enables an expertise in providing appropriate information to develop and gives a consistent approach. The CPR, which are of a reasonable standard, are shared with birth parents and their views recorded where these have been given. Social workers offer to arrange an independent support service to birth parents but this is not a specific service with formalised arrangements, which makes it difficult to make an informed choice about which service a birth parent would like to access. Current arrangements are ad-hoc, although work well in many instances; for example, workers at the family centres are used and form good relationships with birth parents, as does the contingency worker and other staff in the adoption team.

The agency is committed to maintaining a child's heritage and providing good information about their birth family. A number of very good life story books were seen and these are prepared in a timely way. Children are well-prepared to move to adoptive families and a variety of resources are used by social workers. The Adoption Information Exchange facilitates indirect contact, and although this is a long-standing arrangement, the recent appointment of a social services assistant (SSA) to manage the exchange has developed and improved this. Arrangements are robust and improvements are planned in relation to database information and a pro-active reminder system. Guidance on letter-writing is provided and assistance given; this is made more accessible by the new arrangement whereby the SSA meets birth parents when the contract is set up. Direct contact arrangements are also supported.

The post adoption workers are developing leaflets about their service and will be offering intermediary services, birth relatives initiated contact and reunion work. The only service currently undertaken is birth records counselling which is shared between all social workers in the team. There is no waiting list for this service, which is commendable.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose, which has been recently reviewed, and a clear set of policies and procedures for all aspects of the service. The Children's Guide is suitable for older children and the agency recognises it needs to develop a variety of formats to address the differing needs of all children.

The written information which is sent to enquirers is informative and this is supplemented by regular information events which offer the opportunity to speak to adoptive parents and staff. This gives enquirers a good understanding of the process and the children who may need an adoptive family. The agency has an inclusive approach and the material used reflects different types of families from different backgrounds in a positive manner.

The agency is well managed, both strategically and operationally; all managers have appropriate qualifications, skills and knowledge and demonstrate commitment and enthusiasm for the adoption task. There are clear lines of accountability, delegation and communication and the managerial duty system ensures managerial oversight is available at all times. The executive side of the Council also have good oversight of the work of the agency; they receive an extremely informative report every six months in addition to regular briefings with senior staff.

The adoption team is staffed by people who are qualified, experienced and knowledgeable; some are long-standing members of staff but recent additions to the team have contributed different skills and knowledge and provide a good balance. Staff are supported and enabled to provide a good and professional service to families and children through regular supervision and training opportunities. Currently, the service has a vacancy for a senior practitioner which has impacted slightly on the arrangements for supervision as the agency manager has had to take on responsibility for this in addition to her other, more strategic focus. However, staff felt they were supported and managers were available. There is good access to training and the agency encourages staff to enhance their professional development.

The adoption team is developing its role by providing a direct service to children, both by working alongside children's social workers but also by taking on the case management role in some instances. This has an impact on the service it offers to adults and there is evidence that some adopter assessments have been delayed. The agency is also intending to broaden its post adoption role by offering an intermediary service, which may have a further impact on other services.

The social workers comment that the administrative staff are 'brilliant but overworked'; a succession of temporary, agency staff and two moves of premises in the last year has impacted on their roles. Nevertheless, they provide a good service, are extremely committed and knowledgeable and very good at direct contact with members of the public and service users.

Case records on both adopters and children are mainly electronic; they contain all the required information and include records of case supervision. The manager described a clear system for case file audit but the evidence for this was not readily accessible on the files seen. Documented procedures are in place for access to records and confidentiality and the arrangements for archiving are secure. The records in respect of panel members and staff contain the required information, or evidence that it has been seen.

The premises which are used by the adoption team are not suitable for the purpose. The interview facilities which are available within the building are not appropriate, particularly in relation to birth records counselling, as they are not welcoming or sound proof. Managers do not have easy access to private space which compromises confidentiality if they need to discuss staffing issues or speak to staff in confidence. The office space is extremely cramped and noisy; staff spend time looking for somewhere to sit or do not come into the office as much as they used to, all of which has lessened opportunities for informal learning from other team members and has impacted on staff morale and team cohesion.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The managers and staff demonstrate a strong awareness of the issues and are actively pursuing improved recruitment of a range of adopters and a more diverse staff group.

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
13	ensure that adopters and birth parents receive appropriately	31/03/2009

	worded notifications of all agency decisions within the appropriate timescales (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 19, 27 and 33).	
--	---	--

Recommendations

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

- take the application to be assessed as an adopter prior to the preparation (NMS 4)
- ensure all staff in the adoption service receive on-going training in safeguarding (NMS 32)
- ensure that birth parents are offered a real choice in relation to support by someone independent of the child's social worker (NMS 7)
- develop a range of Children's Guides which address the varying needs of children being placed for adoption (NMS 1)
- keep the staffing of the agency under review to ensure that developments to the service are properly resourced (NMS 21)
- reconsider the location of the adoption team, to ensure that the premises are suitable for their purpose (NMS 29).