

Swindon Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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 adoption service in Swindon Borough Council is part of the family placement team, which is part of the service for children in care. There is a head of service, who is identified as the responsible individual, a team manager, who is the Registered Manager, and an assistant team manager with direct responsibility for the adoption service. There are 2.8 full time equivalent social workers involved in the recruitment, training assessment and support of adopters, and they also have a responsibility for fostering work. Also, two children's social care workers assist with the letterbox contact system and give direct support to adopters.

There is an independently chaired adoption panel which meets monthly.

There is a service level agreement with South West Adoption Network (SWAN) for the provision of help and support to children, adopted adults, birth parents and birth families and adopters. Support to adopters is provided through an adoption support agency, Adoption UK. Swindon is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC). The service has links with the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). There is a special education advisor and a health adviser for looked after children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The adoption and permanence team of Swindon Borough 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. It makes effective judgements and recommendations to the 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. Birth families and adopters are well supported by the provision of extensive resources.

Improvements since the last inspection

All necessary actions and recommendations from the previous Commission for Social Care Inspection report have been met.

Key improvements are as follows:

Staff training now ensures that assessment reports on proposed adopters, general

report writing and child permanency reports on children are now clearly written and comprehensive.

Staff and panel member's personal records contain all information required by regulations.

The Statement of Purpose has recently been reviewed.

The adoption service now adheres to the Local Safeguarding Children Board child protection policy and procedures.

The adoption service now has a written recruitment policy.

The health and safety checks of adopter's households now includes checks on window blinds.

Preparation group training is now compulsory for approved adopters wishing to be considered to adopt another child.

The adoption service's policies and procedures are in line with the national minimum standards.

Support for birth families is now being promoted.

There is now a clear induction process for new staff.

Social workers have received training in later life letters and life story work.

A complaint's folder is now in place.

A disaster recovery plan, called the business continuity plan, is now in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

No national minimum standards apply to this outcome group.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Social workers are well qualified and receive extensive ongoing training which enables them to carry out comprehensive assessments on all prospective adopters. They also ensure prospective adopters receive extensive training to prepare them for adopting. This includes 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. Prospective adopters files show that written references have been followed up

verbally and by direct interview.

Health and Safety checks are carried out on prospective adopters households, which include the latest British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidance. BAAF guidance on adopters who smoke (that is, smokers will not care for children under five years of age) is rigorously applied, although this is not enshrined in policy.

The social workers in the family placement team are all professionally qualified, are all members of the General Social Care Council, and the majority of them had lengthy experience of child care work before appointment. They have access to extensive ongoing training in all aspects of their work, including the post qualifying child care award. This 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.

Social workers undertaking adoption work in the family placement team have a responsibility for ensuring that young people and their adopters are appropriately matched and decisions are ratified by the adoption panel. The panel makes recommendations to the agency decision maker who will make a decision about the appropriateness of the matching within five working days. The social workers in the team make matches in collaboration with the child's social worker who also consult the birth parents about the proposed households. The placing social worker produces a child's later life letter and life story book and they have been trained in this skill.

The manager of the adoption service is professionally qualified 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 adoption panel members receive enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks, which are updated every three years.

The service has a complaints policy, details of which are contained in the Statement of Purpose. The service has a record of complaints received and actions taken. These responses are appropriate.

An adoption panel meets monthly, it is independently chaired by a professionally qualified person with many years experience in adoption practice and management. The panel composition is appropriate. The panel have members with legal, educational and medical expertise. There are members with personal experience of having been adopted or who have adopted. There are members of the panel from minority ethnic backgrounds. The panel makes well considered recommendations about the approval of adopters, the suitability of adoption for young people and the matching of adopters and young people. The agency decision maker's responses are timely and recommendations are subject to in depth scrutiny.

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 contact with their children and vice versa. This is effectively run and is organised to protect the safety and well-being of adopted young people. Adopters are supported in preparing a young person's information to be submitted to birth parents.

The adoption service provides ongoing support to adopters following placement. This support includes giving adopters two year, free membership of Adoption UK. A non-means tested setting-up grant, based on need and decided by the manager of the adoption team, is payable to approved adopters prior to placement.

A buddying system is in place via Swindon Borough Council's partnership arrangements with Adoption UK to support adopters following their initial approval. Adopters have access to an adoption support agency where they may be offered counselling support. Adopters will be referred to the local child and adolescent mental health services team for consultation and advice. The adoption service will also refer adopters, where necessary, for specialist creative attachment therapy through music and play.

There is a regular group meeting set up where adopters can get peer group support, including a meeting for single parent adopters. It is intended to set up a group for male adoptive parents. Foster carers who adopt children in their care have arrangements in place to ensure that the adoption allowance matches the fostering allowance. This can be paid until the adopted child is 18 years old.

The council have a holiday caravan available which foster carers who adopt can continue to use. There is an activities programme for adopters and children which includes a discussion forum for young people. Activities within the programme have included trips to a local farm and going to a pantomime. There is a periodic newsletter for adopters to keep them informed of events and developments within the service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The support that the team give to birth parents and adopted adults is spelt out in the Statement of Purpose.

Birth parents are supported by being given information, the birth parents pack, about available services to support them and an explanation of the letterbox system. The adoption service is able to arrange, through an adoption support agency, counselling, advice and information to all those affected by adoption. This service has a 50% take up by birth parents. The service can support birth parents with transport costs to attend counselling sessions and birth parent groups.

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.

The service offers birth parents annual free membership of the Natural Parents Network for help and advice.

Adopted adults tracing their birth parents are supported by the service in applying to the General Registration Office to access their birth records and will be offered a link with the adoption support agency to undertake intermediary work.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

No National Minimum Standards apply to this outcome group.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is evidenced by the composition of the adoption panel membership including members who have been adopted themselves, and having members from various minority ethnic groups. There is also evidence of the approval of same sex, disabled people and single adopters. The service have included in their recruitment campaigns attendance at gay and different cultural festivals within Swindon. The council have an equal opportunities policy, and a equality and diversity team to scrutinise policy and practice. There are social workers within the team with responsibility for undertaking applications and assessments on proposed applicants who wish to undertake inter-country adoption. Posters displaying information about the adoption service reflect the ethnic diversity of the service and its commitment to supporting people who are disabled.

The council has a website page on adoption which gives contact information details about the service. There are comprehensive written copies of all policies and procedures. Application forms for prospective adopters can be obtained by telephone enquiry or by email. The service has a clearly written and comprehensive Statement of Purpose which contains clear guidance for all stakeholders and which is appropriately reviewed and updated. There are written British Association of Adoption and Fostering guides in place for children about the adoption service.

The information packs given out to prospective adopters are full and comprehensive. The service holds regular information events where clear and open information is given about adopting. The service holds preparation groups three times a year for suitable prospective adopters to receive more detailed knowledge about adoption. Attendance at these groups is part of the assessment process and this is made known to those who attend.

The Registered Manager of the service has a professional social work qualification, a

management qualification and is a member of the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Also, they have many years experience in child care management and practice. Social workers are regularly supervised within recommended frequencies and regular team meetings are held.

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 appraisal which identifies their ongoing training and development needs. Adoption panel members ongoing training needs are identified by an annual appraisal carried out by the panel chair and the panel advisor.

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 agency keeps the archive files of adopted people under well organised storage conditions to preserve their longevity. The arrangements for the safekeeping of premises, documents and archive records are subject to a written risk assessment and are included business continuity 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 the service adopts BAAF policy guidance when placing children with adopters who smoke. (NMS 4)