

Gloucestershire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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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

Gloucestershire County Council's adoption team is based in the city of Gloucester. The team shares premises with the fostering team and some other children and young people's services teams. Adoption and fostering teams are separately managed at team manager level.

The adoption service undertakes the full range of statutory adoption work. This includes assessment and preparation of prospective adopters, family-finding and matching, operating an adoption panel and supporting adoptive families.

Action for Children, a voluntary adoption agency, provides a service to birth family members. Until recently, Action for Children also provided intermediary work, but this work (not a statutory requirement) is no longer undertaken.

Services for those wishing to adopt from overseas are not provided directly by the county, but through a contract with Parents and Children Together. The service has positive links with other authorities through the South West Adoption Consortium. There is also a mentoring and training partnership with Clifton Children's Society, a voluntary adoption agency in Bristol.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

During the summer of 2010, the service appointed highly skilled and experienced permanent managers at team and head of service level. These managers have a clear vision and an excellent track record in local authority and youth justice services. This is a substantial change since the last inspection, when there were temporary and not always appropriately qualified people in positions of responsibility. The transformation of the team under the new managers has been impressive. Firm foundations and sound, sustainable practice underpinning these developments, have led to an overall outcome of good.

Although the service is currently being managed very effectively, there is a legacy of complaints and delays dating back to the time of the last inspection. The current managers are working hard to address this legacy and have already made a large number of significant improvements, but this situation had taken some time to deteriorate and changes were carefully considered prior to implementation.

Outcomes for children for whom a recent decision has been made that they should be placed for adoption, are generally good. Outcomes for children whose 'should be placed' decision dates back to the time around previous inspection, are less positive. None of the managers now in post, were involved during that period.

Robust measures have been put in place to help reduce the length of time that some of these children wait. There are some delays for prospective adopters, although again, those recruited more recently have usually been approved in a timely manner.

There is honest and transparent recognition that the service is not yet where it wishes to be and that there is still work to be done. However, progress has been so significant that a rating of good for this inspection is indicated.

Three new recommendations have been made. Two recommendations relate to ongoing delays for some children and some adopters; the third recommendation relates to the need for consistent quality of life story books.

Improvements since the last inspection

19 recommendations were made at the last inspection. The new leadership team, working with elected members, has started to raise the profile of corporate parenting. Staff confidence has improved and everyone involved in the adoption team has worked extremely hard to enable follow-on changes to take place. Consequently, the service has made considerable progress and although there is still some work to be done, all the recommendations have been addressed.

In the Staying Safe section of the report, adopters now receive full and accurate information about children to be placed for adoption. Requests for post adoption support receive a prompt response.

In the Enjoying and Achieving section of the report, adopters now receive good quality information about adoption allowances. The system for allocating allowances is much more equitable than in the past.

In the Organisation section of the report, the Statement of Purpose and the Children's Guide now provide all the information required by legislation. All service users are informed of their right to make representations and complaints, including informal concerns. Prospective adopters are given information about the Independent Reviewing Mechanism.

The adoption team manager is a qualified and experienced social worker who is about to undertake a recognised management qualification. There are clear arrangements in place for deputising in the manager's absence. Performance management systems are now in place, with a strong commitment to corporate parenting and clear lines of accountability. Good quality assurance systems operate throughout the service structure.

Administrative and social work staffing continues to experience some challenge, largely due to maternity leave, which is a temporary issue. However, creative strategies have been put in place to use existing staff from other teams to help the adoption team on a seconded basis. This has the added value of improving understanding and communication between teams.

Recording systems are much more coherent and records are well maintained. There is now an effective file audit system in place for personnel files. Written references are taken up for internal as well as external appointments. All independent staff have written contracts and the service can now attract and retain good quality staff. Regular appraisals are held to monitor performance and enable staff to further their professional development.

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 service provides good quality information and practical advice to enable adopters to create a safe home environment for their children. Adopters' training includes up-to-date safety advice; for example, a seminar on internet and social networking site safety is due to take place in the near future.

The agency is clear about the need to ensure that children live in a healthy environment. Adopters are well aware of the need for healthy eating and plenty of exercise. The agency has an effective policy on smoking. Adopters confirmed that they had succeeded in giving up smoking before their child was placed.

The service has access to excellent medical advice. The medical advisor provides social workers, families and the adoption panel with comprehensive information about genetic and other conditions. She is in close liaison with other medical specialists in order to obtain the best quality, up-to-date information about medical issues that may impact on a proposed placement. Adopters are all offered an appointment to meet with her to discuss their child's medical history. Adopters confirm that this involvement is highly valued. The medical advisor helps to ensure that they have the best possible quality of information to maximise the chances of a successful placement.

A new contract with the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) provides prompt professional consultation to adopters, social workers and other staff working with adoptive families. Although there has not been sufficient time to appraise the benefits of this new service, it is already in place. The new service will ensure that adoptive families in need of help are fast-tracked into the CAMHS service if necessary.

Although children coming to the service now, with a decision that they should be placed for adoption, receive a focused and timely service within the 12 month target time, the current managers of the adoption team inherited massive delays from the

very difficult period in the service's history. Consequently, there are currently 27 children who have waited for more than 12 months since their 'should be placed' decision, many of whom have very complex needs.

The service's managers are acutely aware of the problem and are addressing this backlog assertively, through a range of measures designed to find placements for every child waiting. For example, delays caused by the courts have been addressed by the panel advisor and panel chair meeting with representatives from the judiciary. The service has commissioned a reassessment of every child's needs. Recruitment of suitable adopters is now much more robust and includes the help of a professional media specialist.

Child Permanence Reports and matching reports provide very detailed, clear information about children's health needs. Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account when they are of sufficient age and understanding to express a view. Adopters' files show that there is a clear agreement regarding responsibility for medical treatment prior to the adoption order being made.

Adopters confirm that they were happy with the pace and manner of introductions. They receive good quality information to help them to prepare for the placement. Some adopters have produced excellent quality introductory books to help children to become acquainted with them before they meet.

Intercountry adoption services are provided through PACT, which provides good quality information and a comprehensive assessment service. The adoption team receive initial enquiries and social workers in the looked after children's teams conduct statutory visits.

The service has robust safeguarding procedures. The panel advisor has strong links with the safeguarding service. All members of the adoption team have received updated safeguarding training, which is also available to panel members. The adoption panel has a monitoring role with regard to any safeguarding issues, but none have arisen in the past 12 months.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The adoption team managers have radically reviewed post-adoption support to provide a sustainable, fair and equitable service. A good range of services for adoptive families includes individual support, groups for children and parents, a family fun day and training seminars. The effectiveness of this service is evidenced by a low rate of placement disruptions. CAMHS offers consultation sessions for adoptive families and staff, to provide a psychological perspective to challenging situations and help to prevent family breakdown.

Children enjoy a wide range of healthy, constructive and imaginative activities to help them grow and develop in their adoptive homes. Adopters support their children

in school and ensure that they receive sufficient support from the education service. The adoption team provides an excellent guide for schools to advise teachers about the issues affecting adopted children. The guide is informed by a comprehensive consultation process which included adoptive families, to ensure that it accurately reflected issues that are important to parents.

There is a 'virtual school' with a very proactive headteacher, which provides a link between corporate parenting and education services, to improve communication and understanding. There are effective links between schools and the CAMHS service. The adoption team manager is soon to meet with headteachers to talk about issues affecting adopted children in schools. This helps to ensure that schools are equipped with the knowledge and skills to support adopted children effectively.

Children live in comfortable, safe homes which reflect a wide range of styles and facilities. All are homely and appropriately furnished. The adoption team ensures that homes are free from avoidable hazards though a comprehensive risk assessment process. Pets seen during the inspection had all been assessed as being reliable with small children.

Birth records summaries for adopted adults requiring support and counselling are provided by members of the adoption team. Adults affected by adoption receive a comprehensive service which meets their needs, provided through Action for Children. Those service users who responded to questionnaires, said that the service has been very positive. Intermediary services are no longer provided, but prospective service users are now signposted elsewhere. Some people expressed concern about this development, but the service has, like many other authorities, responded to the need to focus funds on statutory work.

At the last inspection, adoption support was seriously under-resourced and there was no mechanism in place to seek service users' views. There has been considerable improvement over the past 18 months. Qualified and experienced staff have been brought in from other areas of the service to drive forward improvements. They are well supported by social work assistants and other colleagues in the adoption team.

The adoption team provides written information to advise prospective service users about the range of adoption support available. Detailed adoption support plans must be presented to the matching panel to ensure that all prospective placements are properly supported. There was a historical issue with unrealistic adoption support plans, but this has been fully addressed. All plans made now are fair and sustainable.

Because Special Guardianship Order applications have increased considerably, one member of staff has been designated to focus on special guardianship to enable colleagues to concentrate on adoption. Detailed assessments are provided to ensure that children in need of support receive a joined-up service, linked with work provided by the other children's services teams.

Work continues to improve the robustness of adoption support services. For

example, everyone who receives an adoption allowance has now been surveyed to seek their views. This information will inform the next phase of service development.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service provides an excellent children's guide to adoption, which contains all the information required to ensure that young people can understand the process. The guide provides contact details to help young people raise any concerns or obtain advocacy services.

Child permanency reports provide good quality information from birth family members to help ensure that the child has access to cultural and historical details about their birth and early life. Adopters are well prepared to support the child through the process of learning about their identity. They explained that they look after treasured items and life story books for their child.

Life story books are completed by the social workers in the looked after children's teams, who know the children well. The adoption panel insists on seeing the life story book at the matching stage, which helps to ensure that it is prepared in a timely manner. Life story books are generally of good quality, with some excellent examples seen. However, a small number of examples contained grammatical and spelling errors. Later life letters seen were also generally good, but some contained professional terms that would not be easily understood by a young person.

Adopters receive considerable input during training and preparation on the importance of positive contact for their children. Contact arrangements are very well supported. This may involve direct supervision, although this is not always necessary if all parties feel comfortable with unsupervised contact. There is a good letterbox exchange system in place. Young adults are offered the opportunity to continue with this arrangement for some years after they reach 18, to help to ease them into adulthood without having to manage potentially very sensitive situations themselves. The adoption team staff provide very good support for birth relatives using the letterbox, for example by helping them to write appropriate letters.

The agency has a contract with Action for Children to provide a counselling and support service to birth family members. This charity has a lot of experience and a sound track record of providing an accessible service for this group of people. There are currently approximately 40 new referrals per year for counselling. Although there is no percentage figure available on take-up rates, the charity's statistics show that a significant number of people are benefiting from the service at any one time.

The service values the contribution made by birth family members and has in the past, welcomed them to the adoption panel in certain circumstances. Birth relatives have access to information leaflets from Action for Children, which provide an outline of the service provided.

Adopted adults receive a good quality birth records counselling service from experienced, qualified staff. They receive appropriate information and guidance to assist them in their search. Intermediary work has been undertaken in the past and has been highly valued. The service is no longer providing intermediary work, as it is not a statutory requirement. Service users are signposted to other agencies who can assist.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service welcomes all prospective adopters and other service users, regardless of individual differences. Adopters have been approved from all minority groups. The authority's literature promotes diversity effectively through positive images of people from a range of backgrounds. Minority ethnic groups and men are represented in the workforce, including at management level. They are also represented on the adoption panel.

All adopters interviewed said that historically, there had been some delays. Adopters interviewed were all recruited during a very difficult period in the service's history, but they all commented on the good quality of the social work provided. They enjoyed productive working relationships with the assessing social worker and felt confident in their judgements.

The service has engaged in a fundamental rethink about how it delivers all its services. External agencies are no longer used to conduct assessments of prospective adopters, because in the past, the quality of the work was too variable. Adopters recruited now, are assessed by members of the adoption team or a small number of trusted and experienced independent social workers. Adopters are now assessed in a timely manner and they do reach the adoption panel stage within eight months of their application.

The adoption team has access to a professional media specialist to help recruit suitable adopters. She targets the media effectively, for example through local links and national advertising. The recruiter also attends regular tracking meetings, as do senior managers, which helps to ensure that children's needs are kept to the forefront in planning.

Adopters all said that they found their preparation very useful and interesting. The service has increased the number of information evenings and preparation groups considerably, to help reduce delays for prospective adopters. This strategy has already proved to be effective.

All reports are carefully checked for quality before submission to the adoption panel. Recently, this work which was done by the panel advisor, has been reassigned to team managers to help to ensure that ownership of reports resides within the teams.

The adoption panel is well constituted and sound. There is an excellent panel advisor who has considerable experience in adoption. Panel members are appropriately thoughtful about their recommendations and take their responsibilities very seriously. The panel is very well chaired and is conducted in a manner which helps to put prospective adopters at ease. Most commented on the daunting nature of any adoption panel, but valued the chair's work to make them feel welcome. The adoption panel has access to very knowledgeable specialist advice. Social workers receive constructive feedback from the panel chair and this is considered to be very helpful. Panel minutes are of a high quality and are produced in a timely manner. The agency decision makers respond promptly to recommendations. Their decisions are communicated to adopters and birth family members well within time limits, to ensure that they are not kept waiting.

The service has a good Statement of Purpose which contains all the information required by regulation. There is a very good children's guide, available for children of different ages. If a guide is needed in a special format, this would be commissioned for the individual child concerned.

Senior managers of the service are all qualified social workers, with considerable experience of managing high quality services. The head of service came to the role with a strong track record of transforming previously failing provisions. The team manager is a very experienced social work manager who has yet to gain a management qualification, but he has enrolled on a postgraduate degree course in leadership and management.

Staff files are electronic and those for staff in post when the files were scanned, are can be time consuming to access. The team manager has therefore set up his own paper files which contain most of the information required to ensure that safe recruitment has taken place. A small number of minor omissions were corrected during the inspection. Panel members' files were in good order, to ensure that they are suitable people to be on the adoption panel.

Social workers are well qualified and experienced. They are pleased with the training on offer and talked about some recent courses they had attended. The mentoring arrangement with a voluntary adoption agency in Bristol has brought about some new training opportunities. Staff can attend external training when required and they cascade the information to colleagues to ensure that there is 'added value'.

Staff all commented favourably on the high quality supervision available to them. Supervision is regular, well organised and supportive. This helps to contribute to the staff's overall view that the authority is a fair and competent employer. They view the new management arrangements with relief and value the calm professionalism and expertise of the management team. Adoption panel members receive annual

appraisals. The service's managers said that they have worked hard to improve communication throughout children's services and with other agencies, for example, CAMHS and the education service. Sharing offices with the looked after children's team is a clear example of this. Evidence of improved communication was clear throughout the inspection.

The appointment of very skilled and experienced permanent managers has been a pivotal factor in helping the service move on from a difficult past. There are clear lines of accountability and robust quality assurance. Managers are very clear that there is still much to be done, but to drive improvement at this pace whilst nurturing and inspiring staff to be a part of it, is a considerable achievement. The managers also complimented the staff on some exceptionally good work done.

Elected members enthusiastically champion corporate parenting to the other councillors. They receive twice yearly reports from the adoption service and are very committed to ensuring that the service has the resources it needs for the future. There is still work to be done to raise the profile of corporate parenting further, but good progress has been made.

File records seen were all of good quality. The service is to have a new IT system which will meet its needs more effectively in future, for example by obtaining better quality management monitoring information.

The adoption service has access to good premises which are partially accessible by disabled people. File storage is secure and safe from flood and fire. The archive is very well managed, with a disaster recovery plan in place to help ensure prompt safeguarding of any records that should become damaged in the future.

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 work continues to find placements for all children within 12 months of a decision that they should be placed for adoption (NMS 13.1)
- ensure that the language used in later life letters is appropriate to the child and that letters and life story work is quality assured (NMS 2.6)
- ensure that work continues to place prospective adopters' applications before the panel within eight months of their application, in every case. (NMS 17.7)