

Somerset County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

This local authority adoption service undertakes all statutory adoption work. This includes the recruitment, assessment, preparation and approval of adopters, the placement of children, and post adoption support services. The service who will support adopted adults with intermediary work in tracing their birth families. There is a letterbox system in place which oversees agreed written contacts between birth families and their adopted children. The authority has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency to provide birth parent and family counselling. The service will refer those people interested in inter-country adoption to an approved agency. The adoption team is managed centrally but operates from different locations across the county. The service is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This inspection found that children are kept safe by adopters who are properly assessed and who are well prepared and supported. This support is ongoing and is of a high quality. The educational support of adopted children is particularly notable. The adoption team is well managed and the practitioners are well trained and supervised. There are excellent support systems in place for birth families affected by adoption and for adopted adults tracing their birth records. The service must ensure that children are placed with an adoptive family within 12 months of the time that their need for an adoption placement is identified.

Improvements since the last inspection

The authority now has a system in place to ensure that Criminal Records Bureau checks on staff are updated every three years. There is now a staff vetting checklist in place which ensures that written references are followed up verbally.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not looked at in adoption inspections.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children are helped to feel safe through the provision of a range of information documents explaining the adoption service and where they might go for help if they do not feel safe. There are two children's guides for younger and older children which are produced in age appropriate formats and which contain the contact details of the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted. These written materials are of an extremely high quality. Children are consulted about their feelings of proposed placements at various stages of the adoption process. If they are of an appropriate age, children are seen alone by their social worker during the early weeks of placement and asked if they feel safe and are happy in the placement. Children enjoy stable placements with adopters who can meet most of their needs. There has only been one potential adoption disruption in the past 12 months and this was resolved by appropriate action being taken by the service which resulted in the child and adopters being reunited. Achieving stable adoption placements for children is indicative of an outstanding level of service.

Children benefit from thorough assessments of potential adopters which are carried out by the well trained and experienced social workers in the adoption team. Children are kept safe by the appropriate counselling out of unsuitable applicants. This is achieved by good quality monitoring systems which ensure that the assessments of potential adopters are timely, accurate and of a good quality. Potential adopters receive full information on how they may make complaints about the service. There is a clear system for recording complaints and the actions taken in response to them. Actions taken by the service to address complaints are appropriate.

Placing social workers produce child permanency records which detail children's needs for safety and how these will best be met by adoption. These, together with written expert opinions are presented to the adoption panel for consideration and recommendation. The authority has a system in place to ensure that a social worker from the adoption team acts as an advisory link to each of the field work social work teams. This advice includes informing field social workers about the necessary content and depth of child permanency records, thereby helping to ensure that they are of a good quality. The adoption panel and the link workers within the adoption team ensure that children are suitably matched with prospective adopters. In the first instance, an adoption place for a child will be looked for within Somerset, or with a member authority of the South West Adoption Consortium, of which Somerset is a member. Children are also placed on the national adoption register. However, of the children placed for adoption within the past 12 months, 24% of those children waited longer than 12 months for an adoption place and this may negatively impact on their sense of security and permanency. This is due in part to delays in court proceedings and in placing children who have more complex needs.

Potential adoption households are appropriately checked to ensure that they do not present any health and safety risks to children. The checks will be undertaken by the

health and safety officer of the council if there are complex issues to be considered. The adoption service has a number of written policies to further protect children and to promote a healthy lifestyle. Adopters receive training, advice and guidance on promoting children's healthy lifestyles. A looked after children's nurse is available to offer adopters advice and guidance on children's health and related issues up until the time of the adoption order. Children will be referred to the local child and adolescent and mental health services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about their mental health or related behaviour. Additionally, the service employs the services of a sessional therapist with specialist skills in adoption work to conduct individual work with children or family work where there are complex emotional issues that need to be addressed. These various sources of scrutiny and intervention help to ensure that adopted children receive an excellent level of physical, emotional and psychological health care.

Social workers in the adoption team and potential adopters receive training on safeguarding children and are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. All social workers have access to the safeguarding children procedures produced by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Senior managers of the service have undertaken advanced training in safeguarding children. Children are protected from the risk of abuse by the appropriate vetting of social workers, panel members and potential adopters. The service has chosen to notify Ofsted of all significant events relating to the protection of children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children's educational needs are well identified and supported. Adopters experiencing problems in dealing with children's educational development or challenging behaviour, whether this be at home or in school, can consult a consultation for children in care and adopted children service which the council has set up. The service includes access to an educational psychologist who is a member of the Council's education department and who also serves as a consultant for the post adoption support team. Members of this team are social work assistants who will carry out direct work with children and their adopted families, some of which includes directed educational support. There is also an adopted parents consultation group to whom adopted parents can go for advice about any concerns about the educational progress of their adopted children. The adoption service have developed a recording and planning system specifically designed to support the educational needs of adopted children which stands as an educational plan for adopted children and these are appropriately reviewed at regular intervals. These plans can be constructed at any time for an adopted child. In the past year the authority have delivered training programmes for teachers; these have informed them about the particular educational needs of adopted children and have included training on attachment and loss theory as it may affect adopted children. These various levels of involvement provide an excellent level of educational and behavioural support for adopted children.

The service actively plans and provides the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being agreed. Adoption support plans are constructed by social workers in the adoption team and these clearly identify the help that adopters will need in providing the best care for children. Adoption support social workers meet with adopters on a frequent basis at the early stage of placement. This is to monitor how the plan is being applied and to gain an awareness of any potential difficulties that might be arising and how to deal with them. These will also be raised and dealt with at the review meetings chaired by the independent reviewing officer. Adopters benefit from an excellent range of ongoing support services which are not time limited and which may be identified in a new adoption support plan; this may be constructed several years after an adoption order has been made. This ongoing assessment of children's needs, and the delivery of services to meet them is indicative of an outstanding service provision.

Children of an appropriate age are visited by placing social workers at the early stage of placement and are seen alone and asked if they are happy with their living environment. Adopters are given a £150 per child setting up grant to cover immediate essential items and expenses. Foster carers who go on to adopt children who are placed with them may continue to receive the fostering allowance or receive an adoption allowance. These levels of financial support help to ensure that children live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources.

Adopters are given one year's free membership of Adoption UK where they can access help and guidance about adoption. The service has a resource library of adoption material which adopters are encouraged to access. Adopters can access advice and counselling from an approved counselling service that the council have a service level agreement with. Adopters have access to a range of information materials and events which inform them about national and local developments in adoption. The service circulates a quarterly information newsletter and arranges forum meetings for adopters which are both recreational and informative. There is an information page on adoption on the council's website. The service organises occasional social or leisure events for adopted children which gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children of an appropriate age are informed about their rights and where they can go to get help. They receive useful advice about adoption and their rights as adopted children. Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds by the provision of good quality life story work and later life letters. This is achieved by placing social workers receiving training and support from link social workers from the adoption team. The council has a policy that life story work and later life letters will be in place by the time that a child is placed with adopters. This is an example of an outstanding service. Prospective adopters are informed in their preparation training about the importance of maintaining birth family contact for children's awareness of their personal history.

Birth parents are consulted about their views of the proposed matching with prospective adopters. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the wellbeing of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to receive counselling and other support services, including support groups from an approved agency which the adoption service has a service level agreement. There is a high take up of this service by birth families, which is of a high quality and of an unlimited timescale. This support for birth parents helps to maintain positive links between birth children and their adopted children which in turn will provide better outcomes for adopted children.

Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court. The adoption service has an effective letterbox system in place to facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. Birth parents generally have a high regard for this service. Adopted adults are well supported in accessing their birth records by a specialist worker within the team who will also conduct tracing and intermediary work. This latter service is also provided for birth family members tracing their adult relatives who were adopted as children and with whom they have lost contact. This work is of an extremely high quality and very much valued by the adopted adults who have used this service.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not looked at in adoption inspections.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The way that the service promotes equality and diversity is outstanding. There is a gender balance both within the social work team and within the adoption panel. There are few people from black and minority ethnic groups either within the social work team or the adoption panel. However, this is reflective of the general population in Somerset. The service will consult with the Black and Minority Ethnic Consultancy Group which exists within the authority, for advice about racial or cultural issues. All publications and online materials display the promotion of a diverse range of adopters including minority ethnic groups, single sex and same sex carers. The adoption service has approved applications from single and same sex adopters. A member of the adoption panel is an adopted person. There is a corporate policy in place on Equality and Diversity which includes the council's position on dealing with sex, race, religious, disability and age discrimination.

Members of the adoption team have specific responsibility for the recruitment of potential adopters with particular focus on meeting the needs of those groups of

children who may be more difficult to place. Potential adopters expressing an interest in adoption are sent an information pack within five days and are invited to attend an information evening where they receive further information. They are then visited at home by a social worker within two months. Interested applicants submit a formal application to be considered for adoption to enable CRB checks to be in place by the time they are invited to attend preparation groups. Children, adopters and other stakeholders benefit from a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which clearly sets out the aims, objectives and priorities of the service and which details the composition of the management and workers within the adoption team. This statement is reviewed annually. The service does not undertake inter-county adoptions but will refer prospective adopters to an appropriate agency.

Adopters are appropriately assessed by specialist workers in the adoption team. The quality of these assessments is effectively monitored. The service arranges a minimum of three preparation groups a year for adopters. Adopters are prepared, assessed and approved within acceptable timescales. The manager of the adoption service is a professionally qualified social worker who is registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). She has many years experience in child care management and practice, and has an appropriate management qualification. Social workers in the adoption team are all professionally qualified and are members of the GSCC. At least 50% social workers in the adoption team have the Post Qualification award in Child Care. Social workers receive monthly supervision and there are fortnightly team meetings. All management, practitioners and panel members undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. Potential adopters attend a preparation group which introduces them to the key areas and realities of adoption. They undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for their role as adopters. Approved adopters are given one year's free membership of Adoption UK where they can access further information on adoption. The vetting and recruitment practice for staff, panel members and potential adopters is appropriate and this reduces the likelihood that children will be cared for by inappropriate people who may present a risk to them.

An independently chaired panel meets on a twice monthly basis to make recommendations to the agency decision maker about adopter approval, children's suitability for adoption and the matching of children with approved adopters. The panel is properly constituted from a central list of members. It is well administered and the recommendations and decisions are made in a timely manner both by the panel and the agency decision maker. This ensures that adoption plans for children are well thought out and reduces the time that children wait for an adoptive placement.

Case records of adopters and adopted children are comprehensive and clearly written and are stored in a manner which ensures their confidentiality. Effective file auditing ensures that files are extremely well ordered and up to date. Archive files of children's adoption files are securely stored in a purpose built building and in a manner which ensures their security and longevity; this means that they will be available to adopted adults who may wish to trace their adoption records in the future. A disaster recovery plan is in place to support the storage of important case

records.

The service conducts a report of the adoption service every six months which details its effectiveness in meeting its service aims and objectives and identifies necessary areas of development. This report is presented to the corporate parent group of the council. Internal review of service provision helps to improve the quality of children's care.

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 children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency decision maker that they should be placed for adoption. NMS 13