

Hampshire 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 is a local authority integrated fostering and adoption service that undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory responsibilities in respect of the adoption of children. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and supports people who adopt children from this country; it makes arrangements with a registered independent agency in respect of those wishing to adopt a child from overseas. The agency provides, or makes arrangements for the support of anyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults. The service is a member of a consortium of local authority and voluntary adoption agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The adoption service actively recruits, prepares, assesses and supports adopters to provide the best possible life opportunities for children who need to be adopted. The service has experienced and well qualified practitioners who receive ongoing training and who are well supervised and managed. The health and educational needs of adopted children are supported by effective systems of necessary intervention.

The areas for improvement arising from this inspection are the detail of vetting arrangements for panel members and the timeliness of adopters assessments.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service now has systems in place, and a disaster recovery plan which ensures that adoption records are held securely. There are now written policies in place which give guidance for staff on the correct child protection procedures to be followed for children receiving adoption support services. The service has developed staff training in life-story work, and has also commissioned an adoption support agency to carry out life story work. This now ensures that children have a full history of their backgrounds as early in their placements as possible.

The service has produced children's guides that meets the needs of all ages of children whose plan is for adoption.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not the subject of adoption inspections.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

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. There is also an appropriately formatted young person's guide to adoption support services which gives information on where children can get help and advice.

Children whose safety will be best secured by adoption are identified by locality social workers and this will be made known to specialist social workers within the adoption service. These workers will produce child permanency records which detail children's needs 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. Because this work is undertaken by specialist adoption social workers child permanency records produced within the authority are generally of a high quality. This helps adopted children to have clear and accurate information about the circumstances of their adoption.

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 adoption disruption in the past 12 months and this was resolved by appropriate action being taken by the 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. There are good quality monitoring systems which ensure that the assessments of potential adopters are of a good quality. A significant number of adoption assessments take longer than eight months to be considered by the adoption panel. Potential adopters receive full information on how they may make complaints about the service. Two unsuccessful adoption applicants had their panel decisions reconsidered by the independent reviewing mechanism who found in favour of the adoption 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.

The adoption panel and the 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 Hampshire or an authority of the adoption consortium of which Hampshire is a member. Children are also placed on the national adoption register if a match is not found locally. Of the children placed for

adoption within the past 12 months, 83.7% of those children were placed within 12 months from the time when they were considered by the panel to be in need of an adoption place. This timely provision has a positive impact on children's sense of security and permanency. The numbers of children who wait longer than 12 months is largely due to delays in court proceedings and in placing those children who have more complex needs. The service has a marketing and recruitment section which actively seeks potential adopters who are able to care for children with more complex needs.

Potential adoption households are appropriately checked to ensure that they do not present any health and safety risks to children. The adoption service has a number of written policies to further protect children. These include policies on firearms, potentially dangerous dogs and on adopters who smoke. Adopters who smoke cannot adopt a child under 5 and the policy takes further steps to discourage adopters from smoking and to promote a healthy lifestyle. Adopters receive training, advice and guidance on promoting children's healthy lifestyles. The adoption service has a medical advisor who carries out a medical examination of all children before they are placed and who adopters can consult for advice and guidance on children's health and related issues.

The council has established a service agreement with a health trust which allows adopted children to be directly referred to a child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about children's mental health or related behaviour. Additionally, the council has its own educational psychology team members who have specialist skills in adoption work. Educational psychologists offer drop in guidance sessions for adopters and will conduct individual work with children or families, sometimes involving video analysis of family interaction, where they can identify 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.

Managers, 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. There are systems in place which ensure that all necessary authorities are notified of significant events relating to the protection of children if issues arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

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 the educational psychology team within the council. As previously stated, families may also consult professionals in the local CAMHS teams. There are good systems in place for

ensuring that there are educational plans in place for adopted children and these are appropriately reviewed at regular intervals. The authority have delivered training programmes for teachers to inform them about the particular educational needs of adopted children. This includes 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. There is a written corporate education policy in place that promotes and values adopted children's education.

The service actively plans and provides the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being agreed. Adoption support social workers meet with adopters on a frequent basis at the early stage of placement 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 which are held after three months and six months. Adopters benefit from a good range of ongoing support services which are not time limited and which may be identified in a new adoption support plan constructed several years after an adoption order has been made. This may include financial support. This ongoing assessment of children's needs, and the delivery of services to meet them is indicative of a good 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 may be given a 'setting up' grant to cover immediate essential items and expenses, based on adoption support needs. Foster carers who go on to adopt children who are placed with them will receive an adoption allowance based on levels of need. These levels of financial support help to ensure that children live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources.

Approved 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 periodic 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. There are currently no forum meetings held for adopter's birth children. There is a support group for adopted adults which meets twice annually and which provides them with a good level of emotional support.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

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. There are properly formatted, age-appropriate children's guides. These contain the contact details of the Children's Rights Director.

Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds by the provision of good quality life story work and later life letters. This is achieved by adoption social workers being responsible for this work and being linked with children at an early stage of the adoption process. 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 adopters. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the well-being of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. Birth parents are offered the opportunity to receive counselling and other support services from an approved agency with whom the adoption service has a service level agreement. This support for birth parents helps to maintain positive links between birth children and their 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. They will be referred to a specialist agency if they wish to conduct tracing searches of birth family members. 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.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not the subject of adoption inspections.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The way that the service promotes equality and diversity is good. 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 Hampshire and the service will consult with practitioners within the authority for advice about racial or cultural issues when required. All publications and online materials display the promotion of a diverse range of adopters. 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, religion, disability and age discrimination.

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 who will give further information. Interested applicants submit a formal application to be considered for adoption to enable references, Criminal Records Bureau and medical checks to be carried out. Potential adopters are invited to attend preparation groups at an early stage of the assessment process. 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 do not undertake inter-county adoptions but will refer prospective adopters to an appropriate agency. Providing potential adopters with this full range of information at an early stage of the adoption process enables them to be clear about their commitment and helps children to be linked with adopters who are informed about their general needs. Adopters receive a good level of assessment by specialist workers in the adoption team. The quality of these assessments is effectively monitored. Second opinion visits are conducted by other social workers within the team if aspects of the assessment require further scrutiny. The service arranges a minimum of six preparation groups a year for adopters, these groups introduce potential adopters to the key areas and realities of adoption. Adopters undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for aspects of adoption. Approved adopters are given one years free membership of Adoption UK where they can access further information on adoption. 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.

The registered 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. Approximately 81% of social workers in the adoption team have the Post Qualification Award in Child Care the remainder are attending courses. Social workers receive monthly supervision and there are monthly team meetings. All management, practitioners and panel members undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. Apart from the need to follow up written references on panel members with telephone enquiries, 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.

Independently chaired panels meet four times each month and will make recommendations to the agency decision maker about adopter approval, children's suitability for adoption and the matching of children with approved adopters. The panels are 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 adoption place.

Case records of adopters and adopted children are comprehensive, up to date 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 records are securely stored in a purpose built building and in a manner which ensures their security and longevity so 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 on 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 assessments of prospective adopters are considered by panel within eight months of receipt of their formal application (Chapter 3 Adoption Guidance Feb 2011, Adoption and Children Act 2002)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee of panel members to verify written references. (NMS 21.1)