

Southend on Sea Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC057823
Inspection date	26/01/2012
Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	05/09/2008

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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 agency undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters; the family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work; post adoption support to relatives of adoptees and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. The agency also manages direct contact arrangements and a letterbox contact system. Those who wish to adopt a child from overseas attend the preparation delivered by an agency that specialises in this work and then the agency carries out the assessment and support work.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Children's safety and welfare is promoted by the agency. This is achieved, in part, through ensuring that children are placed with prospective adopters who have been through a thorough preparation and assessment process. This applies equally to those adopting a child from this country and those adopting a child from overseas. Children's health and educational needs are met to a good standard and this ensures that children thrive despite their, often adverse, early life experiences. The arrangements for safeguarding children when a concern arises are sound; these include minimising risks posed through contact with or from birth family members via social networking sites. However, the safeguarding policy does not include the arrangements for children receiving an adoption support service. This has the potential for staff to be uncertain how to proceed should a concern arise when carrying out this work.

The arrangements for supporting families and children placed by the agency are good. Support services provided by this agency to adoptive families are of a good quality. This support helps to maintain the child's placement into adulthood and beyond. However, while formal support planning is good for children more recently placed, the arrangements for those coming back for a service are less well developed. This means that there is a lack of formal planning for this work.

The wishes and feelings of children are not obtained consistently; this mainly relates to younger children and means that younger children do not always have the chance to influence plans made for them. However, some skilled work is carried out with older children to establish their wishes and feelings and to help them understand their situation. The agency works hard to support birth parents in the planning for their child and to obtain information from them for the child for the future. However, the information gathered is not always presented in reports, life story books and

later in life letters in a sensitive way. Additionally, the books and letters are not always provided in a timely way. This means that not all children have the benefit of having good quality information that will help them understand their situation in a timely way.

Birth parents are well supported and encouraged to become as fully involved in the planning for their child as possible. Even though some birth parents find it difficult to engage with the agency they are supported at every stage of the process and beyond adoption to come to terms with their situation. The agency provides a sensitive approach to supporting all parties to remain in contact, where appropriate, and this ensures that children maintain a sense of their heritage and birth parents are reassured that their child is progressing well.

The service to adults returning to find out about their adoption or a birth relative is of an excellent quality. It is sensitively undertaken by skilled practitioners who ensure that each person's welfare is promoted.

This is an agency that is managed and staffed by committed and child-centred personnel. The quality of the work is good and the services provided overall achieve positive outcomes for children and adults. Staff are supported well and there is a shared responsibility between managers and staff to ensure that the best service possible is provided to all who use it. The arrangements for ensuring those children who will benefit from an adoption plan, the approval of adopters and matching children with adopters are strong. There is a strong approach to promoting equality and diversity and this ensures that people's individual needs are respected and met to a good standard. The Statement of Purpose does not detail the arrangements for assessing people coming back for a service and the panel minutes do not consistently record the reasons for any delay a child or adopter has experienced; these issues have no direct impact on children.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has addressed the recommendations made at the last inspection. These related to: the stage at which formal application to adopt was made; expanding the health and safety assessments of adopter's homes; including some further detail in the panel minutes; monitoring and reviewing the strategy for supporting birth parents; ensuring written entries in records are signed and dated; developing a disaster recovery plan which relates to the provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records.

These improvements mean that: applicants now have recourse to using the Independent Reviewing Mechanism; the health and safety of prospective adopters' homes are comprehensively assessed; the panel minutes are more detailed; the support to birth parents has improved; records are of an improved quality; there are clear arrangements to ensure the work of the agency continues in the event of an emergency.

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.

Children's welfare and safety is promoted well by the adoption agency and their adopters. There is a strong culture within the agency of teams working together in the best interests of children. There are also sound arrangements with other agencies that ensure inter agency working is strong. These arrangements mean that all those involved with a child work closely together to promote his or her safety and well-being.

Adopters are fully assessed through the assessment processes that include taking up all the statutory checks that are required. Very good attention is paid to the analyses of referees' comments. The assessments clearly identify prospective adopters' parenting skills and any areas that may need support in the future are identified. This work ensures that only suitable people are approved as adopters and that families are supported to provide the best possible care for children.

Children's medical needs are carefully assessed and met throughout the process. Children's individual needs in relation to health are communicated to adopters so that they are fully aware of any implications these may have. Some children have especially complex needs that relate to a disability and the agency is especially good at ensuring children with a disability are matched with people who can meet these needs to a high standard. After an adoption order has been made adopters are proactive in ensuring their child's health is promoted to a good standard and they act as advocates to ensure children get the services they need.

Permanency planning and the family finding processes ensure that children are matched and placed with adopters who are best able to meet their needs. Generally this is achieved in a timely manner and delays are either due to issues beyond the control of the agency or are in the child's best interests. For children with complex needs the agency works hard, often with success, to identify a suitable adoptive placement for them. This means that all children, despite their diverse needs, have an opportunity to experience permanence through adoption.

Children are placed with families that know how to keep children protected from harm and promote their physical, emotional and psychological health. Children are supported by their families to take age appropriate risks that enable them to grow and develop.

Adopters are well prepared and supported through the assessment and matching process in understanding the difficulties children may have experienced in their lives.

Adopters are clear about how these adverse experiences may have impacted on their child's: self-esteem; ability to form secure attachments; overall development and behaviour. Adopters accept and love their children for who they are and support them to overcome their past adverse experiences. Adoptive placements are appropriately monitored by social workers before an adoption order is made; this ensures that any difficulties are picked up in a timely way and are addressed. As a result placement stability is good and disruption rates are low.

The agency has sound arrangements in the event of an allegation or suspicion of abuse arising. There are clear reporting procedures that staff are aware of. The Local Children's Safeguarding Board procedures are available to all electronically and, with the exception of children receiving an adoption support service, detail the arrangements for dealing with concerns in relation to children placed for adoption. They also detail arrangements in respect of a concern arising in respect of an issue alleged to have taken place in the past. The agency has been responsive to the advances in relation to social networking sites and the risks these can pose to children in terms of unwanted or unsafe contact. Adopters and staff are made aware of these dangers and support children and other significant people should this arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

On placement each family is assessed in relation to support needs and an adoption support plan is developed. These plans are well thought through and focus on supporting the needs of the child and family so that placement stability is best assured. Children are supported well, by their adopters, in developing their emotional, social and creative skills and in trying new and interesting activities that broaden their horizons. For example, the homes children live in provide them with a stimulating environment and the child is supported by their family to take part in a range of interesting and stimulating activities.

There are strong arrangements for preparing and supporting prospective adopters to help the child develop positive relationships and behaviour. This is achieved in a variety of ways. A real strength of the agency is the therapeutic work adoption social workers carry out with families. In addition the agency has introduced an initiative group for adoptive mothers and younger children. The aim of this group is to support adopters to help children to develop trust in them and secure attachments to them. Additionally these groups provide an arena for friendships to develop between the adults and the children attending; this provides a good level of peer support between people who are in similar situations.

The various groups and social activities the agency provides, such as a summer outing, a Christmas party and training events help to ensure that families continue to be supported both formally and informally. Social workers are skilled at picking up emerging issues during these events and this means that support is provided before issues become too problematic.

Children are well supported in meeting their educational needs. The strong links between the virtual headteacher and the corporate parenting board means that individual progress is closely monitored and issues are addressed. There is an education liaison officer who is alerted about children with a plan for adoption. The officer provides support to prospective adopters and schools to ensure children have smooth transitions when changing schools. Work is done within schools to help teachers understand the complexities of adoption and the needs that children may have relating to their adoptive status. Adopters are good at ensuring that when there are difficulties in school these are addressed and that the child's best interests are upheld.

The agency provides support to people coming back for a service who may be previously unknown to them. While some skilled work has been carried out with these families the lack of formal written assessments means this support is not underpinned by clear and transparent planning. However, these families are informed about all of the activities and training the agency provides.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

For those children whose wishes and feelings have been obtained, these are taken into account in the planning for the child and are clearly recorded. There is some very good work carried out with some children via their own social workers or the adoption social workers and the family centre that works closely with the agency. However, this is not the case for all children as some children have been deemed to be too young to express their views. However, the adoption service has identified this as an issue and is working with the children's social workers to address this.

There are good arrangements that provide birth parents with support from the time adoption is identified as a plan. They are encouraged to access this support throughout the adoption process and after the child has been adopted. The agency is active in trying to get information for the child from the birth family about their background; this is an ongoing commitment. The work continues long after the adoption order has been made. The birth parent drop in centre and the support provided to parents in respect of the letterbox contact are used to support parents and to try and get information for the child. This means children can continue to learn about their backgrounds. However, the information gathered for the child's permanence report is not always presented within the reports in a sensitive way. This means that for some children this information will not be appropriate for them to read in later life. Additionally, while the agency has made good progress in addressing the timeliness and quality of life story books and later in life letters, in some cases the timeliness and quality of these remain variable. This means that not all adopters have the resources to help children understand their situation in a timely way.

Parents who are considering relinquishing their child to adoption are helped to think through the options for their baby and the implications adoption will have on the

child and on them in the future. If they decide adoption is the best plan for the child they are supported to continue to maintain their child's heritage in a way that benefits the child.

Contact arrangements are clearly focused on the children's needs and other birth family members and adopters are supported and encouraged to fulfil these. Clear written agreements underpin the contact arrangements and make sure that all parties are clear about the expectations. Adopters understand the importance for the child of them fulfilling contact arrangements. Birth parents are enabled to remain in contact with their child, where appropriate, and are supported to develop a clear understanding that contact is to benefit the child not the adults involved. The birth parent drop in centre is a good source of support for parents who may not be confident about what to write in their letter.

The work carried out with adults affected by adoption is a real strength of the agency. The birth records counselling service is undertaken with due sensitivity to an adoptee's needs. They, and other adults using the service, are supported to understand the potential impact a reunion may have on them, their family and the birth relative being contacted. This ensures that the work is carried out in a sensitive way with particular regard to the safety, welfare and wishes of all involved.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The policies of the agency cover all areas of difference and transfer into day-to-day practice. Social workers are aware of children's needs in relation to diversity. They consider and promote these when matching children with adopters and in planning for support services. There is good attention paid to considering and placing children with needs relating to a disability and ensuring that their needs are met; there is a good level of success in this area. The agency accepts applications from couples and single people who are likely to be able to parent a child waiting for a placement and it does not discriminate on any basis; people using the services are treated with respect.

The agency, through the consortium arrangements, ensures sufficient adopters are recruited to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement. Enquirers are provided with good quality information and this provides them with a good initial understanding about adoption and the needs of children waiting. Further information is provided should an enquirer decide to progress their application to adopt and this ensures that they are able to make informed decisions. The application to adopt is provided at the correct point in the process and this means that prospective adopters

have access to the Independent Review Mechanism should a qualifying determination be made by the decision maker.

The preparation of adopters is thorough and effective in preparing them to parent a child from the care system. They have an opportunity to attend any of the three consortium members' groups to avoid delay in their preparation; adopters' feedback about the preparation is positive.

The assessment reports on prospective adopters are of a good quality. Adopters are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe way that meets a child's developmental needs. The approval and decision-making processes are effective. The arrangements for the panel are efficient and effective in making sound recommendations to the decision maker. The decision maker makes well considered decisions that are based on all the information available. There have been delays for some adopters at some stages of the process. However, these have been addressed recently and the new arrangements are closely monitored to ensure timescales are met consistently. The minutes of the panel are of a good quality and clearly show the reasons for and the recommendations of panel. However, they do not always include the reasons for delays in cases being heard.

Interested parties are informed about the services provided through an informative Statement of Purpose; this document does not contain the arrangements for assessing support needs for families coming back for a service long after adoption.

The agency is well managed by skilled, experienced and qualified managers who show a strong commitment to improvement; this is despite the management team being interim. Social workers providing an adoption service to adults and children are also qualified, skilled and most are experienced in this work. Newly qualified workers are well supported to develop their skills and experience in adoption work. The social workers are fully committed to providing a good quality service to children to ensure they have the best chances in their lives. Social workers are very positive about the support they receive from the agency; this support includes good quality supervision and very good training opportunities. This agency invests in supporting staff in their professional development.

Overall there are effective arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency. There is a strong commitment from managers and the lead member to ensuring that the agency operates in the best interests of children at all times. The lead member works hard to ensure that all members are aware of their responsibilities as corporate parents.

The arrangements for maintaining and storing records are sound. Apart from some shortfalls previously discussed, records for children provide a realistic account of their lives that they can access 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 the written policy which is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect includes children receiving an adoption support service (breach of Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 as amended Regulation 9 1 (a))
- carry out an assessment of a person's needs for adoption support services and prepare a written report of the assessment (Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 Regulation 14 (1) and (2) (b))
- ensure that no child is assumed unable to communicate their views (NMS 1.3)
- ensure that the information obtained for the child is clear and appropriate; this is with particular reference to the content and quality of the child's permanence report (NMS 2.1)
- ensure that the child's life story book and later in life letter are passed by the adoption agency to the prospective adopter on the dates agreed and that they are well presented and written in a simple and age appropriate style (breach of The Adoption and Children act 2002 Regulation 35 schedule 5 (8) Children Act 2002 Statutory Guidance (48))
- ensure that when timescales have not been met, the panel records the written reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting (NMS 17.9)
- include in the Statement of Purpose the procedures for assessing needs for adoption support; this is with specific reference to families either previously unknown to the agency or who adopted some years ago. (breach of Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 as amended Regulation 2(1) Schedule 1 7a)