

Bournemouth Borough 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

The Bournemouth local authority adoption agency is part of Bournemouth Borough Council's Children and Families Services Division. The adoption team recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, provides post adoption support, places children with adoptive families and provides birth records counselling for adopted adults. The agency also deals with enquiries and applications in respect to stepparent adoptions. There are service level agreements with an Adoption Support Agency to provide counselling support to birth parents and with another agency who conduct inter-country adoption. The agency is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC).

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This local authority adoption agency provides an outstanding level of service for children who require adoption to ensure their safety and wellbeing and for families and individuals who wish to adopt. Adopters are properly prepared and supported by a well trained team of professionals who are themselves well managed, supervised and supported. There were no recommendations to be made from this full inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The authority now have a policy in place to ensure that they retain the recruitment and vetting details of staff appointed for at least 15 years. Also, all written references received are followed up by telephone verification.

The service now produces a report about its function and areas for development every six months. These reports are presented to the council's corporate parenting group.

There is now a policy in place on the way that the service must deal with allegations of historical abuse.

All photocopied documents contained within an adopter's assessment file are now signed and dated as to when the original documents were seen.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Not judged

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 properly formatted, age appropriate children's guides. These contain the contact details of the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted.

Children whose safety is felt to be best secured by adoption are identified by the social workers in the safeguarding and permanence teams and these children are made known to the adoption team. The adoption panel consider if the social worker's view that a child is in need of adoption is valid and a recommendation is made to the agency decision maker. Early communication between the responsible professionals is achieved and assisted by the adoption and locality teams being located within the same building. Social workers are also assisted by adoption team workers in producing good quality child permanency records which detail children's needs and how these will best be met by adoption. These records are appropriately quality monitored by managers. These measures help to ensure that children's needs are properly assessed and that adopted children will have clear and accurate information about the circumstances of their adoption should they wish to see these records at sometime in the future.

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. Social workers complete a suitably formatted report on the wishes and feelings of the child about their placement and this is submitted to an independent reviewing officer for consideration at review of placement meetings. Children enjoy stable placements with adopters who can meet most of their needs. There have only been two adoption disruptions in the past 12 months and these have involved children being placed with other authorities. Careful analysis by the service has followed each disruption and learning points have been identified and made known to managers and practitioners. Practice has been seen to have improved in these identified areas. Careful analysis and the implementation of measures necessary for the improvement of practice helps to reduce the likelihood that such disruptions will occur in the future.

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 high quality. Adoption assessments are considered by the adoption panel within eight months of formal application to be considered to adopt. 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.

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 Bournemouth, or with a member authority of the adoption consortium of which Bournemouth 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, 79% 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.

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 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 service will refer children to the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about children's mental health or related behaviours. Additionally, the council has direct access to a clinical psychologist who has specialist skills in adoption work and who provides a wealth of support to all areas of the service. These various sources of support 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 regular training on safeguarding children and are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. There has been additional training for social workers which looks specifically at the dangers of social networking sites and its effect on adoption. All social workers have access to the safeguarding children procedures produced by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Potential adopters are introduced to the safeguarding policies and procedures during their preparation groups. There are systems in place which ensure that all necessary authorities will be notified of significant events relating to the protection of children should they arise.

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 are well supported by

the service in accessing educational support. They can also consult the clinical psychologists who work within the adoption service for advice on behaviour management and other issues where adopted children may need support. As previously stated, families may also be referred to, and can consult professionals within 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. 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 team 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 chaired by the independent reviewing officer. 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 which may be 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 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 'setting up' grant of £250 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 for two years following the adoption order being made. These levels of financial support will help to ensure that children will live in homes that provide adequate facilities and resources.

The service has a resource library of adoption material which adopters are encouraged to access. Adopters have access to a range of information materials and events which inform them about national and local developments in adoption. The service circulates regular information newsletters 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 systems of support in place for adopter's birth children. There is a support group for adopted adults which meets regularly and which provides them with a high level of emotional support.

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. 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 team 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 of their child 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 from an approved agency with whom the adoption service have a service level agreement. There is a high take up of this service. This excellent 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 social workers within the team. Adopted people 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.

Not judged

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.

Although there are few people from black and minority ethnic groups either within the social work team or the adoption panel, the balance is reflective of the general population in Bournemouth 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 both in terms of race and ethnicity and in single or married status. The adoption service has approved several applications from single and same sex adopters. A member of the adoption panel is an adopted person. Several members of the panel have personal experience of disability. 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. Applicants for social work positions have completed submissions on how they will address issues of anti discriminatory practice. The Registered Manager conducts an annual Equality Impact Needs Assessment of the service. This range of measures helps to ensure that the promotion of equality and diversity is foremost in the practice of the service.

Adopters are well informed about the practicalities of adoption and the impact that it will have on their lives from the outset. 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 Criminal Record Bureau references and medical checks to be carried out. Potential adopters are invited to attend preparation groups at an early stage of the assessment process. Assessments are rigorous but timely. Of the adopters approved within the last 12 months only two waited longer than eight months to be approved.

Children, adopters and other stakeholders benefit from a comprehensive statement of purpose which clearly sets out the aims, objective 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 a 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 the social workers in the adoption team. The quality of these assessments is effectively monitored. Second opinion visits are conducted by the Practice Manager, or the Team Manager in the team. The service arranges one or two preparation groups a year for adopters and adopters can access groups held by other members of the consortium to avoid delay. These

groups introduce potential adopters to the key areas and realities of adoption. Adopters undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for all aspects of adoption. Adoption support plans are of an excellent quality. These are constructed by social workers in the adoption team and they clearly identify the help that adopters will need in providing and sustaining the best care for children.

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. Several of the social workers in the adoption team have the Post Qualification Award in Child Care and the remainder are attending courses. One practitioner has a Masters Award in therapeutic work with children. 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. 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.

An independently chaired panel meets each month and makes 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 placement.

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 purpose built cabinets 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 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. The service actively promotes self analysis and there are numerous developmental programmes in place which aim to improve the service provided for children, birth parents and adopters. Ongoing internal review of service provision helps to improve the quality of children's care.