

South Gloucestershire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Registered person

Registered manager

Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

South Gloucestershire Council

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10/10/2008

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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 commissions the full range of statutory adoption work. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters and the matching and placement of children. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas, the agency commissions a specialist voluntary adoption agency to undertake this work.

Adoption support services provided include work with adoptive families, with adults affected by adoption and support to birth families whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. Therapeutic services for families, independent counselling for birth family members and intermediary work are commissioned from two local adoption support agencies.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

South Gloucestershire provides a comprehensive adoption service as part of the agency's family placement team. Many individual elements of the service are good. There are some significant shortfalls, mainly in areas which do not fall under the direct management of this team. These shortfalls have led to the overall rating.

The agency has recently restructured and has taken decisive steps to increase direct lines of accountability and streamline service provision. These changes were implemented in September 2011. Although it is early days, managers are confident that new ways of working are already on the way to becoming embedded.

South Gloucestershire's strengths include good outcomes for service users. Questionnaires were received from 21 service users and placing agencies. All were very positive about the service received. One adopter said that the agency is, 'friendly, empathetic, sympathetic and they treat you as a whole family'. This friendly approach prompted several adopters to say that they would recommend South Gloucestershire to others.

A placing social worker from an external local authority said: 'I would be more than happy to work with this agency again when considering placing children. This was a good experience with a good outcome for a child who was initially quite 'hard to place' due to her unknown future needs.'

There are excellent staff recruitment practices. There is a hard working, dedicated and very professional adoption team which provides all services with just 3.5 whole-time equivalent posts. There are impressive training opportunities for approved adopters and very good adoption support provision, including imaginative

commissioning arrangements. The authority is regarded as a nice place to work; it has good quality, modern premises and safe systems in place for managing records.

The service has, historically, remained relatively small in terms of numbers of adopters approved and children placed each year. This small size has some advantages, including the easy accessibility of even the most senior managers. The disadvantages of being a small agency include the limited numbers of permanent staff; for example, post adoption support is provided by one person. The only permanent full time member of staff engaged in assessment work is a newly qualified worker, so the scope of her work is appropriately limited.

Last year, staffing levels were tested because there was an increase in the number of children with a plan for adoption, but this has not resulted in any increase in permanent staff. For example, the service states in its self assessment: 'the number of assessments of applicants is limited by the workload capacity of the adoption social workers, although the number of assessments completed (in 2011) has increased...through the use of 'casual assessment' social workers'.

The service has not yet developed an education policy. There is no system in place for effective consultation with adopted children and young people during the process of monitoring and developing the service. Some amendments are needed to update several key documents which describe the service's functions.

The shortfalls in quality of child permanence reports has resulted in a recommendation under staying safe, but because of the importance of these documents to birth family members and the deficit in quality assurance processes, this has impacted on two other outcome areas of the report.

The head of service has plans in place to determine the optimum capacity and performance of children's services teams. Once complete, this piece of work will inform future business requirements, but the service does not yet have sufficient means to reliably assess its capacity to meet children's needs for adoptive placements.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two actions were made at the last inspection. The first related to the need to make provision for situations where there are allegations relating to abuse which took place some time in the past, which has now been addressed. The agency was also asked to develop safeguarding procedures for children being placed for adoption or using post adoption support services. This work is now complete.

The second action was to ensure that the application to adopt is taken before any assessment work commences with adopters. The service now ensures that this is the case.

Six recommendations were made at the last inspection, all of which have been addressed. The health and safety checklist for prospective adopters' homes now

contains additional information to help keep children safe. There is evidence on panel members' files that references and professional qualifications have been verified.

The agency was asked to develop a clear written strategy for supporting birth parents and ensure that a more targeted approach is taken in promoting the services available to birth parents and other people significant to the child. This work has been completed.

The fourth recommendation was to ensure that all life story books clearly explain the reasons for the adoption and are of a consistently good quality. The agency was asked to ensure that there is social work oversight of all of the letterbox contact exchanges to ensure the suitability of the content. This is now in place.

The agency was asked to ensure that adoption files contain all the information required. Files now contain an audit sheet which helps staff to ensure that they contain comprehensive information. Panel meeting minutes did not always have a list of attendees and their roles, but this has been fully addressed.

The agency did not have robust risk assessment and disaster recovery documentation in respect of archived files. There is now an effective risk management system in place.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The local authority works hard to ensure that all looked after and adopted children are kept safe from exploitation and abuse. There are effective corporate child safeguarding policies and additional procedures for the family placement team which include appropriate responses to allegations of abuse in the past.

The authority regularly runs comprehensive training programmes in child protection. This helps to ensure that staff and adopters understand how to respond to any disclosures that their children may make. There have been no child protection referrals over the past 12 months. Adopters are well aware of child safety issues; for example, they can undertake courses in e-safety, to help protect children from risks associated with inappropriate internet use.

Children's physical development and emotional health are promoted effectively through comprehensive preparation and post-approval training, which includes child development and attachment issues. One prospective adopter commented on the preparation course: 'The child development element was particularly informative and

interesting.'

Children seen during the inspection were too young to have a full appreciation of healthy lifestyles. However, adopters clearly understand the need for good nutrition and physical activities.

Children and adopters have access to very good medical advice through the panel medical advisor. She sees children prior to placement and often knows the children very well. This enables her to advise prospective adopters effectively, so that they have the fullest possible information about any complex health needs. Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account whenever possible, according to their age and understanding.

The local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) will fast-track children living away from home who need urgent assessment, but they have no involvement in the matching or preparation process for adopters.

Children generally benefit from stable and well-matched placements. Arrangements are firmly in place to share the family-finding process between the child's social worker and the family placement team, although not everyone throughout the service fully understood the arrangements. This system helps to ensure that there are no delays in family finding. Harder-to-place children are identified at an early stage, so that the service can be proactive in finding a placement.

The agency tries hard to ensure that children are placed with siblings whenever possible, which is good practice, although examples were seen where one sibling had to wait for the second sibling, which had inadvertently delayed the placement. In such cases, a balanced view has to be taken about the best interests of the children and overall, the agency exercises very sound judgements.

This is reflected in the low disruption rate; there have been no disruptions in the past 12 months. One child placed with a sibling suffered a disrupted placement since the last inspection, which was handled appropriately. The agency has assimilated important learning from this difficult experience; for example, the need to balance the quality of relationships with an exact ethnic match.

There are clear policies in place about referral to the National Adoption Register, to help reduce delays for prospective adopters and children. The agency endeavours to work constructively with birth family members as soon as a plan is made for adoption.

Prospective adopters' reports seen are of high quality and this reflects the good standard of practice and quality assurance within the family placement team. They identify adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities to help promote effective and safe matching.

Some child permanence reports seen are very good, with clear analysis and a detailed picture of the child's needs. These reports are a valuable tool for matching

and also to provide the child with important information later in life. Sometimes this is the only information the child receives, so it is crucial that it is accurate, but there were significant shortfalls in some other child permanence reports seen. These should, in theory, be quality assured within the teams which prepared them, but this does not always happen effectively.

This means that sometimes, reports are presented to the adoption panel which fall well short of the standard required to demonstrate appropriate respect for the panel and to enable the agency to proceed with plans for the child. For example, some reports show a lack of effective assessment and analysis, poor quality photographs, incomplete chronologies, a lack of evidence of meaningful consultation with birth parents and significant clerical errors, including evidence of copying and pasting from one report to another.

Consequently, the adoption panel spends time performing a basic quality assurance role which detracts from the resources available to perform higher level functions. This issue has already been identified by the recently appointed head of service and it is on the agenda for improvement, but as she has had to respond to more pressing priorities in the short time available, there is as yet no mechanism in place to effect this.

The agency does not assess intercountry adopters. If any referrals are received, these are passed on to Parents and Children Together, who provide a specialist service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service provides a very good level of post adoption support to families and children, which is well supported through effective commissioning and funding. Consequently, there is an extensive programme of group work and individual work which provides very good outcomes for children, coupled with an excellent programme run jointly with another authority, of post adoption training.

Examples of resources available to adoptive families include access to a charity which supports foster and adoptive families, a quarterly newsletter, individual training and development plans for adopters, online training and a number of helpful and valued groups and social functions for adoptive families. Approved adopters are given two years' membership of Adoption UK, an adoption support agency which provides very good links and support for adopters.

One adopter explained that there is a meals service for adopters with new placements, to support the family. This was started by the adoption support worker, but is now self-running. There is also a bi-monthly adoption support group and a therapeutic re-parenting group run with a child psychologist. Post adoption support relies on the commitment and dedication of one social worker. Although the current service is of a very high standard, it has some vulnerability due to there being no

clear contingency for providing a service should that person have to be absent for any reason.

The family placement team has effective consultation with CAMHS, with whom there is a good relationship. CAMHS provides a range of therapeutic resources including art therapy, psychotherapy and child psychiatry. However, this service is not crisis led, and although there is some involvement in training for approved adopters, it is not, due to contractual limitations, in a position to support every aspect of the family placement team's work, such as matching.

The agency has very good commissioning arrangements with two locally based adoption support agencies, the South West Adoption Network (SWAN) and Catchpoint. SWAN provides birth family members with independent advice and support. They also provide a counselling service for adoptive families. Catchpoint provides a specialist support service to adoptive families where children have significant attachment issues, based on a trauma and recovery model. Both agencies achieve good outcomes for service users (Ofsted reports, 2011).

All children seen during the inspection have access to a wide range of age-appropriate activities. Activity-based groups have been run in the recent past, with further plans to do so again in the future. The service has strong organisational links with the education department, reinforced by the recent restructuring arrangements. This helps to create a more accountable and joined-up approach to meeting children's educational needs.

The service commissions excellent advocacy and training for schools on adoption issues, through Catchpoint. This service is very effective in helping to increase understanding of issues affecting adopted children in education. It helps to improve outcomes for children by reducing the chances of them being excluded from school. However, South Gloucestershire does not yet have an education policy in place to help protect the interests of adopted children, so although good work is taking place, there is nothing substantive underpinning this.

Children live in a variety of well-maintained and attractive homes which have the space and facilities to support their development. The agency has a good health and safety procedure to ensure that homes do not present any unnecessary hazards to children.

Adults and children receive a thorough assessment of their adoption support needs. All adopters interviewed understand what is available to them; this is achieved through effective input on their preparation training. Adults affected by adoption say that they are welcomed to the service and dealt with compassionately and fairly. The service has a clear, joined-up approach which has been supported by the restructuring of the department. Although this is still work in progress, the benefits of restructuring are already apparent in the good links between different parts of the service for children and families. Feedback is sought from service users using adoption support, to establish the effectiveness of each provision and review the service accordingly.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has good systems in place to consult with looked after children, but these systems have not yet been extended to encompass the views of adopted children. The agency's managers are aware that more work is required to ensure that children's views are considered at all levels, including the monitoring and development of the service.

Child permanence reports vary in terms of how well they reflect the early life of the child and the birth family's history. Some were detailed and comprehensive, providing the child with a clear view about the reasons for their adoption. Others would be insufficient to provide children with accurate and full information in later life. Some child permanence reports also reflect a lack of consultation with birth family members. Social workers are clear that every effort is made to engage the birth family. However, when some birth family members choose not to cooperate, there is not always sufficient explanation in the report about the efforts made to engage with them and reasons for their lack of involvement.

It is important for young people reading the report in later life to know that the social worker tried hard to seek their birth parents' views. The through-care team manager has plans to engage social work assistants to help birth family members to participate more effectively.

There is a suitable children's guide to adoption support, which contains up-to-date contact details for agencies that can help children. However, the children's guide to adoption has not been updated for some time. It contains contact details for Ofsted or the Office of the Children's Rights Director which are no longer current.

The agency uses two advocacy services for looked after and adopted children, but the contact details for these are also not in the children's guide. There is a special website for looked after children, where they can raise concerns and seek help, but managers said that this site may not be accessible once young people cease to be looked after. It is unclear, in the absence of accurate written or electronic information, how adopted children would access the information they might need to seek independent advice.

The service has an effective corporate complaints procedure which is fully accessible to adults and young people. No complaints have been received relating to the adoption service.

The service is effective in obtaining important information relating to the child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to keep treasured items. Foster carers and adopters are encouraged to collect material which could contribute to the child's life story, to help children establish a clear sense of identity.

Some good examples of life story books were seen. Although life story work is monitored in review meetings, it is rarely brought to the panel. The service does not yet have a formal quality assurance mechanism to ensure that the life story books are delivered in a timely manner, but there were no complaints about any delay in this respect. Placing social workers commented on how difficult it can be sometimes to write later life letters, but some good examples were seen on children's files.

Adopters are well aware of the importance of contact with birth family members. All adopters interviewed had clear contact arrangements in place for their children. All were also aware of the potential for harmful contacts through the internet.

There is an effective letterbox exchange system in operation, potentially up to the age of 21 years, which is good practice. This service meets the needs of children and birth family members well, but again, the leaflet describing the service is out of date and has been amended by hand.

The letterbox exchange does not permit the exchange of photographs, in case they are posted on social networking sites and otherwise misused. This is an example of good safeguarding practice.

The agency has a positive view of birth family members, reflected in effective commissioning arrangements with SWAN. This agency provides a flexible, supportive counselling service and has a good take-up rate.

Adult service users who were adopted are very positive about the service provided. File records confirm that identity is always verified before birth records counselling work begins. The initial work is completed by the adoption service but thereafter, the service user is referred to SWAN.

One service user commented: 'I had a very kind and thoughtful lady who came to visit me. I felt very informed by what she had to tell me.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service welcomes staff and adopters from a wide range of backgrounds, reflecting differences in ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and marital status. The family placement team does not have any male staff at present, but men are represented in other children's services teams. The adoption panel is ethnically diverse and there are plans to recruit men onto the panel's central list.

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy to recruit sufficient prospective adopters to meet the current needs of the service. The agency has temporarily increased staff resources to facilitate the recruitment of 15 prospective adopters in the last year.

The agency was also able to provide placements for 35 children from other authorities last year, which is good. The number of placements provided to external authorities will impact eventually on post adoption support services resources, which currently rely on one person who appears to be working above capacity.

Prospective adopters are welcomed without discrimination, including same sex couples and single people. Although there are relatively few people from minority ethnic groups in South Gloucestershire, the service has been able to recruit a small number of adopters from Black African Caribbean backgrounds.

There was a discussion with the service's managers about development of the website to maximise its potential for assisting with recruitment. At present the website does not fully support the work of the family placement team, although adopters who commented were happy with the information provided on the site.

Prospective adopters reported swift responses to their initial enquiries. Helpful information evenings and preparation training courses are held twice a year. Adopters unanimously said that their preparation training was of a very high standard. They all said that they enjoyed well-facilitated training and that they had learned a lot from input from existing adopters and foster carers, as well as from the agency medical advisor. One adopter said: 'At both the open evening and preparation course both foster and adoptive parents came to talk to us about their experiences. This was brilliant and put me at my ease...with the knowledge that you do not have to be perfect.'

Adopters were also very complimentary about the assessment process. One prospective adopter said: 'From the manager to my social worker, all have been supportive and a huge amount of progress has been made. Every time I meet my social worker, she has everything ready and has completed all that she said she was going to do...the most important thing for me, is that I feel challenged along the way. I could not ask for anything more from my social worker.'

Prospective adopters' reports are always signed off by the team manager. This ensures consistent quality. All prospective adopters' reports provide a clear and accurate description of the person or couple, to facilitate the matching process and help meet children's needs.

The service has an effective, well-managed and highly professional adoption panel. The agency is in the process of developing a small central list of suitable panel members to reflect the diversity of the community.

The adoption panel provides an effective quality assurance service. Social workers

confirm that they find the panel to be 'excellent' and a constructive process. Senior managers have identified that lower level quality assurance processes need to be strengthened within the agency itself, rather than relying on the panel, which also has to fulfil an important executive role.

Panel administration is very well managed. Panel meetings are conducted in a businesslike and professional manner, with adopters welcomed and supported effectively. The minutes are clear and factual, easy to follow and present a full picture of the proceedings. Minutes and agency decisions are delivered in a timely manner.

The agency ensures that applications are taken at an appropriate time, before the preparation training commences. Recent applications to adopt have been assessed and taken to panel within eight months of application, which is within timescales. Where this process has exceeded the eight-month deadline, this has been at adopters' request; for example, due to house moves and other personal commitments.

Some of the children from South Gloucestershire who were placed for adoption in the 12 months between January and December 2011 have experienced delays. However, numbers involved are small, commensurate with the size of the agency. When each case is examined individually, there have been valid reasons for the delay. Legal processes, foster carers' applications to adopt and the need to consider the needs of siblings who should be placed together have all contributed. In one instance there were complex immigration issues which were outside the control of the agency. All children who were subject to delays last year are now placed with adopters or long-term foster carers, so they have a clear plan for permanence.

South Gloucestershire, in common with many other authorities, has experienced an increase in children requiring placements for adoption. There are currently approximately 23 children in the authority area who have a plan for adoption. Although not all these children will progress to an adoption placement, the agency's current staffing level of 2.5 whole-time equivalent social workers conducting assessments, suggests that there may be significant challenges in providing sufficient adopters to meet the needs of all these children within timescales.

The head of service considers the current resourcing and management of the increase in children requiring placements is appropriate. However, the piece of work to identify the team's capacity has not yet been completed, so ongoing trends are not yet monitored in relation to the team's capacity. This means that there is currently insufficient management information to enable the service to plan effectively for any anticipated need for resources.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose. This is subject to annual review and is signed off by the elected members of Council.

The family placement team manager is qualified in social work. She is a very experienced and skilled manager who holds a management qualification at an

appropriate level.

The authority has exceptionally good staff and panel recruitment practices in place, in line with safe recruitment principles. Criminal Records Bureau checks are renewed every three years to ensure that they are regularly updated. There is an effective system for safe storage and access to staff recruitment information for those authorised to do so.

There is an effective staff training programme in place for social workers on the family placement team, although social workers in other teams have not yet received training in preparation of child permanence reports. All social workers are appropriately qualified. The family placement team has one full-time social worker who is newly qualified. She receives good levels of supervision and support in keeping with her level of experience.

Panel members receive a thorough induction and are able to observe the adoption panel in operation before commencing their duties. The agency decision maker is a highly experienced senior manager who holds a social work qualification.

Staff confirm that South Gloucestershire is a fair and competent employer. They enjoy the ambience and facilities in their new building and say that they are very well supported and supervised. Social work and administration staff all receive annual appraisals, although they do not find the current format particularly helpful. Social workers have access to specialist advice from CAMHS. The service has good medical and legal advice available. Social workers commented that the medical advisor is extremely approachable and helpful.

The authority has restructured in September 2011 to provide improved, coherent lines of accountability. This system is still in the process of becoming embedded. Managers say that the family placement team structure, which was finalised in December 2011, is already well established.

The impact includes direct supervision and support to staff provided by practice managers. This enables the family placement team manager to take on a more strategic role. The new structure appears to be having a positive effect so far. Staff morale is reported to be good, although staff do feel under pressure at times. The major advantage for children is that the timing of case transfers is much improved. In the past, this coincided with family finding. Now, cases are transferred earlier from the localities to the 'through-care' team.

The family placement teams provides six-monthly reports to the executive to ensure that there is full accountability to the authority's decision makers. The service has very committed elected members, one of whom sits on the adoption panel. There is effective rigour and challenge in the management structure of the service to help ensure positive outcomes for children.

The new head of service, who has been in post for only five months, has already reviewed the timing of legal interventions and she has clear plans for improving

monitoring systems. There are regular management meetings to monitor performance and targets, but she would like to improve systems to provide management information in between reports to the executive.

The service has effective policies and practice in relation to record keeping and file maintenance. Recording is appropriate and clear. Family placement team files are sometimes over-full and this makes them difficult to access. Records of complaints were not seen because there have been no complaints relating to the family placement team.

Records are kept securely in facilities which are well suited to the purpose. The agency's archive is very well managed to ensure that archived material is kept safe from damage. There is a business continuity plan and risk assessment in place on archived records.

The service has effective information technology systems in place, using the integrated children's system. Printing arrangements in the building are managed by secure swipe card, so that material is only printed when the member of staff responsible is there to collect it. This helps to preserve confidentiality.

The premises are new and purpose built to house the local authority's corporate processes and centralised children's teams. Although staff car parking is an issue, excellent public facilities are available, including full access for disabled people.

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 child permanence reports presented to the adoption panel are of consistently good quality to assist the panel in its functions and to help meet individual children's needs (NMS 13.4)
- develop and implement a written education policy that promotes and values the education of adopted children (NMS 7.4)
- ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of adopted children are taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure that children's guides provide accurate and appropriate information which includes the contact details for the Office of the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 18.5)
- continue with plans to develop additional management monitoring systems, including assessment of the agency's capacity to respond to increased demand for adopters, placements and post-adoption support services. (NMS 25.2)