

Brighton and Hove City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Dancer / Diane Thackrah
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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

Brighton and Hove adoption service consists of an adoption team which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current adoption legislation and regulations. These include: the recruitment, preparation and assessment of domestic adopters; family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; birth record counselling to adults; and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. Some of the support work is carried out through contract arrangements with registered adoption agencies. Inter-country assessments and approvals are carried out by a voluntary adoption agency specialising in this work. The agency service is a member of Adoption South East Consortium, which broadens the choice of adoptive families available to children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

People wishing to adopt from another country are referred to an agency specialising in this work for assessment and approval; they can then access Brighton and Hove for support. There have been no assessments or approvals for over three years therefore this aspect of the agency's work was not assessed on this occasion.

This is an agency that provides a good service overall. There are two areas that are judged as outstanding, these are in relation to helping children to enjoy their lives and achieve and in helping them to make a positive contribution. There are also some elements of excellent practice in staying safe and organisation. However, there are some shortfalls in the safeguarding procedures and in evidencing robust staff recruitment processes. There is also a shortfall in providing the decision maker with finalised minutes when he is considering his decision. The shortfalls relate to policy and procedural issues and therefore do not have a significant direct impact on the care of children.

The agency works hard to place children in a timely way with adopters best able to meet their needs. The family finding processes are well coordinated and support a timely placement for children. The matching, introduction and placement processes are very good and ensure that safe, secure placements are made. Children's health and education needs are met to a high standard and there are integrated services for supporting children and adoptive families that ensure these needs are met.

The support to adoptive placements is of a very high quality and there is strong focus on supporting adopters to help their children develop secure attachments; this is a real success of the agency.

The arrangements for ensuring children's wishes and feelings are obtained and acted upon are excellent and this demonstrates that this is a child-focused agency. Information for children about their adoption is of a good quality and the work developed since the last inspection in relation to later life letters and life story work is of a high quality.

The work with adults affected by adoption is very sensitively undertaken and ensures that people are fully supporting in understanding their background. The work with birth parents is also sensitively undertaken and birth parents can access support whenever they need it. The arrangements for assessing and supporting contact are excellent; this is an agency that understands the lifelong implications adoption has on all parties involved.

The agency is well managed overall and staffed by committed individuals who want to provide the best service possible to children. Adopters are well prepared to parent a child from the care system and the assessments of prospective adopters are of a high quality. The arrangements for the approval of cases are overall sound; there is a strong panel effectively chaired and ably supported by the agency adviser to adoption.

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency was asked to improve the work in relation to providing children with later in life letters and life story books. These matters have been fully addressed and this means that children have useful information about their early life and how they came to be adopted; this helps them understand their situation.

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 by the agency and within their adoptive placements. Adopters are clear about their child's specific vulnerabilities and know how to keep children protected from harm. Children settle well into their adoptive placements and this, and the low disruption rates, evidence that children feel safe. Placements are appropriately monitored by independent reviewing officers, the adoption and the children's social workers; this means that any difficulties are picked up and addressed in a timely way.

There are a full range of checks carried out as part of the assessment process. The assessments clearly identify prospective adopters' strengths and any areas of vulnerability. These are shared in an open way with prospective adopters and feed

into support planning. The references sought in relation to prospective adopters are thorough and very good attention is paid to giving weighting to each reference. This work helps to ensure that children are placed with suitable people.

The arrangements for ensuring children's health needs are identified and met are well coordinated. There are excellent arrangements for promoting children's health via the medical adviser, a senior nurse consultant and there are good joint working relationships with school nurses and health visitors. This ensures that children's basic and more complex health needs are identified and met. Prospective adopters are fully informed about the health needs of a child they may be considering. The medical adviser and their social worker supports them to consider any implications these may have for the child and them as a family. An adopter stated, 'There were a number of health issues and our social worker liaised with the other local authority to make sure we had all the plans.'

Permanency planning for adoption is effective. Clear plans are developed for those children unable to live within their birth families. Adoption is considered as an option for all children however complex their needs. For a small number of children adoption is achieved via well-established concurrency placements. These children are placed at a young age and this provides them with the best opportunity to develop, at an early stage, secure attachments to their potential adoptive family. The arrangements also mean that, should the final plan be for adoption, disruption to children's lives is minimised.

The agency has good arrangements for family finding for children and these help to ensure that children are placed in a timely way. While not all children are placed within recommended timescales the reasons for this are clearly documented and are purposeful. The careful matching processes ensure that children are placed with prospective adopters who are the best match for the child. The prospective adopters' and child's vulnerabilities are carefully considered during the matching processes and these guide the development of the support planning. A panel member said, 'I am impressed by the careful thought and planning that goes into each match.'

The arrangements for the introduction of children to their prospective adopters are well thought through, planned and supported. Children are prepared well for the transition to their adoptive placement by their social worker and their foster carer. A child confirmed that their social worker had told them about adoption and their new family. Prospective adopters prepare child-friendly information for children about themselves; this means children begin to become familiar with them and the new surroundings they will be moving to. While the needs of the child are paramount, the agency also ensures that prospective adopters are comfortable with the arrangements. The attention paid to introductions ensures that children's transitions to their new family are as smooth as possible; this helps children to settle well with their new family. A panel member commented, 'transition planning is comprehensive and child focused.'

Practice in relation to safeguarding children is sound and staff are trained in responding to issues relating to safeguarding children. However, the procedures for

safeguarding children placed for adoption and those receiving an adoption support service are disjointed. They are spread across internal documents and the Local Safeguarding Board Procedures. They are not easily accessible to all relevant parties and do not detail how staff, prospective adopters, children and anyone receiving an adoption support service can contact Ofsted should they have a concern about the welfare and safety of a child.

Children are supported well by their adopters to use social networking sites safely. There is clear guidance about the risks of social networking sites and about how children can use them safely. There is also information for birth family members to help them understand what they should do if they have unsolicited contact from a child they are related to through the internet.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The support services provided to adoptive families and people affected by adoption are excellent. There is a dedicated support services adviser who coordinates the services and links in with other agencies to ensure that services are integrated.

Prospective adopters are very well prepared and supported to understand the difficulties children may have experienced in their lives. They are clear about how these experiences may have impacted on their child's self-esteem, developmental progress, behaviour and on their ability to form secure attachments. Adopters accept and love their children for who they are and, with the support of the agency where required, help the child develop positive relationships and socially acceptable behaviour. A placing social worker said that the children they had placed are 'making really positive progress, they have not previously lived together and presented a considerable challenge to the adopters.' Another placing social worker said, 'the child was very anxious waiting for an adopter to be found and has really settled since living with her new mummy. She feels she has her own life, and clearly feels loved and valued by her adopter.'

There are an impressive range of resources to support adoptive families. There is a clear focus on the importance of helping children to develop a secure attachment; this helps children to form sound relationships within their new family. There is a clear understanding about how to help children move on from their early adverse life experiences. Therapeutic services are accessed, either via an external agency or professional or via the adoption team. This work ensures children's emotional well-being is met to a high standard; this support helps adoptive placements to remain stable. An independent reviewing officer said, 'Without exception, all children I have reviewed have made very good progress during the course of my involvement. Emphasis from the adoption team on attachment formation is considered and well thought through and children benefit from good working relationships with adopters and adoption social workers... child not adult focused practice ensures that children are kept at centre of interventions and decision making.' Children feel supported. A child confirmed that a social worker comes to visit them and that they knew who to

talk to if they were worried about anything.

When there is an assessed need for financial support this is provided so that placements can be made and maintained. There are a range of training and social events that allow adoptive families to get together and share experiences with each other. For example, there is a group to support adopters who have a child placed with them who is from a different ethnic background; this helps to support these parents in thinking about ways in which to promote the child's ethnicity. There is also a group, that was set up by the agency, but is now self run, for lesbian and gay foster carers and adopters; this group provides peer support to these carers.

Children are supported very well in developing their emotional, social and creative skills and in trying new and interesting activities that broaden their horizons. Adopters provide children with a stimulating environment and a range of interesting and stimulating activities. The agency supports adopters to help their child develop their creative skills; for example, through the parent and baby group it runs. This provides a good support network for children and parents and space to help parents understand the value play has for children's overall development.

There are excellent arrangements for ensuring that children progress in their education. There is a clear well-established education policy and priority access arrangements for children who are or have been looked after. The virtual head teacher works hard to achieve a joined up approach to supporting children in school. There are high aspirations for children placed for adoption which help children to move towards reaching their full potential. The adoption support teacher works with teaching staff to help them fully understand the needs of children placed for adoption. The work includes direct work to support children in school in partnership with parents and teaching staff. This integrated approach means that the risk of a child being excluded from school is minimised due to an improvement in their behaviour.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

A real strength of the agency is in ensuring children's wishes and feelings are obtained and taken into account. Children are enabled to feed their views into many aspects of their care including their overall care planning; the social worker help children to develop their own child-friendly care plans. Other examples where children's views have been obtained and acted upon include: a case where letterbox contact had progressed to direct contact in line with the child's wishes; a change in a permanence plan from adoption to long-term fostering as the adoption plan no longer met the child's wishes, feelings or needs. Where children are not of an age or level of understanding to express their wishes and feelings their perceived wishes are carefully considered through evidence based assessments and the findings are acted upon.

The agency actively tries to get information for the child from the birth family about

their background and situation; this is an ongoing commitment. The permanence reports for children are overall of a good quality and most are very sensitively written; they provide a good account of the child's early life and the decision-making processes. This information will be useful for the adoptee in the future to help them understand why they came to be adopted.

There have been improvements in the timeliness and quality of life story information. Some very good examples of life story work, books and later in life letters have been developed. There is a clear understanding about the importance of this work. Social workers, foster carers and adopters share the responsibility in ensuring each child has good quality information. This work ensures that children gain an age appropriate view and understanding of their situation. Adopters are fully involved in this work. This means they are confident in telling children about their history and provides a very good opportunity for them to add to this work throughout the child's childhood.

Contact arrangements are clearly focused on the children's needs and other birth family members and adopters are very well supported and encouraged to fulfil these. Where siblings cannot be placed together there is careful consideration about the best way to maintain these important relationships through contact. Arrangements for contact are underpinned by written agreements and there are clear expectations placed on all parties. The arrangements are reviewed over time in line with the child's wishes and needs. Adopters understand the importance for and benefits to the child of contact arrangements. Rising 18 year old adoptees are helped to consider the options for them to remain in contact with birth family members and if they wish the arrangements can continue post 18.

There are clear arrangements for providing birth family members with support from the time adoption is identified as a plan. Although it is difficult for those birth parents contesting a plan for adoption to engage with services, the agency promotes this service throughout the process. For those birth parents who feel more able to access counselling after their child has been placed for adoption or adopted the agency provides them with a service at this stage. This ensures that birth parents are able to get counselling at a time that best suits them.

The agency is good in ensuring that birth parents wishes and feelings are obtained. For example, social workers have visited parents in prison to try and gather their wishes and feelings about their child being adopted. They also use these visits to gather further information for the child. Permanence reports are provided to the birth parents' solicitors. This is because many feel unable to engage with the agency and therefore do not take up the offer to read them before they are submitted to the panel. The panel, in its quality assurance role, ensures that parent's views are clearly recorded within the permanence report.

Parents who are considering relinquishing their child are helped to fully think through the options for their baby and the implications adoption will have on the child and them. This work has led to a very positive outcome in at least one recent case as the child remained with their birth mother.

The work carried out with adults affected by adoption is another strength of the agency. It is carried out in a very sensitive way. There is particular regard paid to the safety of the adult and their welfare and wishes. They are supported to consider the potential impact a reunion may have on them, their family and the birth relative being contacted.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. For example; the agency's policies, procedures, written information for prospective adopters and other interested parties fully cover issues of diversity; the diverse make up of the local community and prospective adoptive applicants is well understood; the recruitment strategy is inclusive; the diverse needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement are assessed and fully understood; children who have a Black or Ethnic Minority background are placed in a timely way.

Most children are placed in a timely way with prospective adopters who can meet their needs. This is achieved through placing children with: prospective adopters the agency has recruited and assessed; prospective adopters assessed via the consortium arrangements; prospective adopters assessed by agencies across the country.

Overall, Brighton and Hove prospective adopters are treated fairly and respectfully. They are provided with good quality information, both in writing and verbally. This means they develop a good initial understanding about adoption and about the needs of children waiting. They are supported, through the loss and motivation session, to understand their own expectations and begin to develop an understanding about their vulnerabilities; this forms a sound basis for future work with them.

Prospective adopters are prepared effectively to parent a child from the care system. The preparation sessions provide them with comprehensive information and a good understanding about the needs of children waiting for a placement. They begin to understand the difficulties that can be faced in parenting a child from the care system. A professional said that the workers prepare adopters, 'in a fully child-centred way.' Prospective adopters find the information they get from people affected by adoption particularly useful in helping them to understand the complexities of adoption; adopters have a good understanding about the birth parents' situation and the benefits post adoption contact can bring to a child. One adopter commented, 'Invaluable advice and personal experience was presented at

the preparation group.'

The assessments of adopters are of a very good quality. They are evidence based and analytical. This means that adopters are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children, who may have complex needs, in a safe way that meets the children's developmental needs. There is very good attention paid to identifying, discussing and recording any areas of vulnerability and this feeds into the planning for support. Where adopters have birth children or there are other adoptive children living in the family these children are considered as part of the assessment; this ensures that their needs are also met. An adopter stated, 'We have a birth child and he has felt very comfortable about being talked to.' An independent reviewing officer said that the assessments are, 'thorough assessments with realistic expectations about what adopters can expect from their child.' And another professional commented, 'assessments for adopters are usually very thorough'.

The adoption panel is conducted and chaired effectively and is convened with appropriate frequency. The panel members are knowledgeable, committed and sensitive to peoples' needs but remain child focused throughout the proceedings. Panel members are provided with full information about cases prior to the meeting; this enables them to scrutinise each case effectively. Panel also ensures, through updates to it, that cases are progressed in a timely way and that outcomes for children are positive. Sound consideration is given to the recommendations made and these, along with the identified vulnerabilities and advice are clearly recorded in the well-written panel minutes.

The agency employs a dedicated agency adviser who is independent from practice management; this is excellent practice as it means the work of the agency is quality assured by someone not involved in the management of cases. A panel member commented, 'The agency adviser on panel is the key link providing updates on developments in the agency and practice issues relating to children with plans for adoption. He plays a pivotal role which is really valued by panel members.'

Overall the timescales set out for children to be placed are adhered to and where this has not been possible the reasons why are clearly recorded. Timescales for adopters are also satisfactory from the point of application and they are matched with a child in a timely way.

The decision-making process overall is overall effective and all relevant people are informed, sensitively, of the decision in writing. However, the agency has not yet been able to introduce a confidential system to ensure that the decision maker uses the final set of minutes in his deliberations.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose that clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the agency. This is made available to prospective adopters; it is also on the agency's website. There are guides for children to help to explain to them about adoption; these are child-friendly colourful documents and useful tools for explaining adoption to children.

This is an agency that is well managed overall by committed, skilled, experienced and qualified managers. An adopter said, 'The process with Brighton and Hove was really good. Excellent care and attention to our needs was given and we feel the process went well and as fast as possible in all aspects.'

An increase of business has limited the agency's ability to develop its services to the extent it had planned. However, additional posts have been created; these post holders are about to commence work in the agency. The manager plans to use these workers to increase the pool of approved adopters and to free time up to focus on further developing the agency. The agency makes good use of research and reflective practice in developing its services and it has had input into national developments. This includes being involved in developments and national training in post adoption contact.

There are effective arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency. There is a strong commitment from the Director, senior managers, the Leader of the Council and the Portfolio Holder for Children in Care to ensure that the agency operates in the best interests of children at all times. The agreement to increase the numbers of social workers on the permanence team to ensure that children continue to be placed in a timely way evidences this commitment.

Social workers in the adoption team are skilled and experienced in adoption work and are developing good working relationships with the recently reorganised children's social work teams. Children's social workers feel very well supported by the skilled workers in the permanence team. One children's social worker said, 'I received excellent guidance and support from Brighton and Hove adoption team. They are very good for consultation and advice is always child-centred.' Another stated, 'The permanence team have my utmost regard and I believe they are working really hard to achieve the best possible outcomes for as many children as possible.' An adopter stated that their social worker was 'amazingly well organised.'

Social workers are positive about the support they receive from managers, including the supervision and training they are provided with; the agency invests well in supporting staff in their work.

There are written arrangements for recruiting staff to work for the agency. The agency is in the process of moving to an electronic system for storing staff recruitment details and full information required in relation to staff recruitment could not be located in every case. For example, in one case there was only one reference available and it did not provide clear information about the status of the referee. In a second case while there were the required minimum of two references the attempt to verify one of these had not been successful and there was no recorded follow up in relation to this.

The records, for adopters and children are well ordered and stored securely. Children's records provide, those that choose to access them, with a clear account of their adoption. The premises the agency operate from are suitable for their purpose and IT systems are secure as they are password protected.

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 safeguarding procedures provide for staff, prospective adopters, children placed for adoption by the authority and any person to whom the authority provides adoption support services, to have access to information that would enable them to contact Ofsted, regarding any concern about child welfare and safety (Breach of Regulation 9 (2) (d) (LAAS Regulations 2003 as amended 2005)
- ensure the agency's safeguarding procedure is known to staff, volunteers, prospective adopters and children (NMS 22.2)
- ensure, before making his decision, the decision maker has the final set of panel minutes (nms 17.11)
- ensure that full and satisfactory information, in relation to staff employed, is available in respect to each of the matters in Schedule 3 (Breach of LAAR 2003 regulation 11 3 (d))
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references in every case (NMS 21.1)