

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC056812
Inspection date	18/10/2012
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Rosemary Dancer
Type of inspection	Full

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Date of last inspection	13/05/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a local authority adoption agency which undertakes all statutory responsibilities relating to adoption. These duties include: placing children who have adoption as a care plan with suitable adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving adoptive families, including those who wish to adopt from overseas; providing support to adoptive families both pre and post approval and providing a service to adopted people in relation to access to records and birth records counselling. Birth parents are offered counselling and support through commissioning arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency.

The agency approved 14 adoptive families in the year ending March 2012, two of which were inter-country adoptive families. It placed 11 children for adoption in the same year. At the time of the inspection, there were 15 children currently waiting for an adoptive placement. However, four of these children were about to be matched and five had been approved for adoption only two weeks prior to the inspection.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good and effective adoption agency, which is professional, child-focused and recognises the life-long implications of adoption. Outcomes for children and young people are good and they remain with adoptive families who meet their needs. Effective multidisciplinary working ensures that children's needs are supported, particularly in relation to health, psychological well-being and education. A proactive approach to safeguarding, combined with a good understanding and formalised approach to assessing risk, keeps children safe.

Although the numbers of children placed for adoption are low and the rate is below the national average, this can be explained by the cohort of looked-after children who are much older. This cohort includes a large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The agency embraces adoption as a positive placement choice for all children and has introduced tracking and monitoring systems to ensure that

adoption is always considered. It is extremely good at placing siblings together and has managed to do this very quickly in some cases, taking into account the ages and needs of the children.

There is some delay in placing some children for adoption, but in most cases, this is due to issues out of the service's control. This is an area for improvement. It has an effective, proactive and systematic approach to matching and family finding. Good support systems result in stable and secure placements. A major strength of the service is the very low disruption rate, which has been 0% over the past five years compared to the national rate of over 10%. This provides children and young people with security and stability. A dedicated team which provides psychological support for looked-after and adopted children (LAATCH) is another significant strength of the service which contributes to good outcomes for children and young people.

Children are involved in their plans and social workers' child-focused approach ensures that they always understand what is happening to them. They are further involved as they get older and contribute their views to improve the service; for example, in relation to their own internet safety training.

Staff at all levels are very committed to adoption. They demonstrate good understanding, skills, experience and qualifications to enable them to provide an effective service. They are supported by committed leaders and managers who have a very good and realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and have demonstrated a very positive and proactive approach to improvement and driving the service forwards since the last inspection.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that children are placed within 12 months of the decision of the agency's decision maker that they should be placed for adoption, in line with the outcome statement of this standard. (NMS 13)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children are very well prepared for their adoptive placements. Their wishes and feelings are explored and adhered to if possible and appropriate. Children understand what is happening to them. For example, social workers use a number of books which are appropriate for children of different ages and stages of development to explain what adoption means. Children are encouraged to say what they would like from their new family; for example, their own bedroom, to be with their siblings, or to support a particular football team. There are very good examples of individually-

tailored resources used to undertake this direct work with children. A children's social worker commented, in relation to the help she received from the adoption team to do this effectively, 'I can't believe how much support you get here.' Children also have their own child-friendly timetable of introductions so that they can see and understand what is happening to them during this difficult transition time.

Children make good progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs are appropriately assessed prior to being matched with their adoptive families. Robust matching ensures that the adopters can meet those needs well. Children are usually placed with their siblings and very thorough sibling assessments are carried out. The agency is very effective at placing siblings together where this is deemed best for the children. This facilitates positive sibling relationships and a shared sense of heritage.

Children settle well and are given the best opportunities to develop positive attachments to their adoptive parents. One adopter commented that the child had been very shy but is now happy, confident and developing well in line with all the milestones. Another described their child as 'the happiest child'. A children's social worker commented that one child 'is absolutely thriving'. Another child is 'doing really well; attached, settled well...brilliant'.

Children's behaviour improves so they are more able to form positive relationships with their peers in the community and at school. They are enabled to maintain positive contacts with birth family members. This helps children to develop a positive sense of self and a clear understanding of their identity and heritage.

Children's health needs are well met through the prompt provision of good health resources, including those relating to psychological well-being and health assessments. Adopters have a proactive attitude to ensuring that their children develop as well as possible. Children's concentration and behaviour improves and they make good progress in their educational achievements, taking into account their previous histories. Children develop into confident, self-assured young people with aspirations for their future.

Children are not always placed within 12 months of the agency decision that they should be adopted. However, in most cases, this is due to court delays and other circumstances outside the agency's control. In contrast, the time taken from both entering the care system and receiving court authority to place, to being placed in an adoptive family, is significantly less than the authority's statistical neighbours. There is a clear commitment to place children together and consider adoption for all children, whatever their age, level of ability or ethnic origin, supported by stringent and robust efforts to find appropriate families. Children are placed and remain in safe, secure and stable adoptive families, reflected in a low disruption rate over a significant period of time. For example, there have been no disruptions in the last five years. This shows that great care is given to assess children's needs and ensure that the right adopters are found. This further contributes to children's sense of stability and security.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

There is a formalised, thorough approach to preparing, assessing and approving prospective adopters. This approach is effective in providing resilient families who understand and can respond to adoptive children's needs. Adopters are very positive about their contact with the agency, from their initial enquiry onwards. They comment that social workers are willing to spend time talking things through so they fully understand what adoption means. One adopter said: 'I was reassured on meeting the social worker and this continued throughout the whole process; everyone has been wonderful.'

The preparation training is universally well received. Adopters said, 'it really made you think', and 'all the work we did in preparation has really helped us think about our child's needs'. Analytical assessments which focus on the competences needed to parent adopted children add further support to this process. Assessments are completed in a timely way.

The adoption panel adds further rigour to ensure that only applicants who have the right skills and abilities to be adoptive parents are recommended for approval. It comprises members with a good mix of personal and professional experiences and ethnicities. This ensures that a full discussion of all relevant aspects takes place, which is particularly effective when matches are being considered. The panel administration is very thorough. The role of the panel adviser really enhances the quality of the panel process. For example, the role adds a further dimension of quality assurance to staff and panel members' training, to make it more professional and effective. The adoption panel takes its role seriously and there are many examples of occasions when they have fed back concerns to the agency. These include concerns about the need for additional support for a birth parent and the provision of psychological input for a child, both of which were addressed. More general issues and trends are addressed within the bi-annual report, which is comprehensive and rigorous.

Decision making is also thorough, well documented and timely to ensure transparency and avoid delay. This is carried out at a very senior level, which demonstrates the agency's commitment to adoption and facilitates management oversight of the quality and timeliness of the work, so that shortfalls are quickly identified and rectified.

The agency is committed to working with and supporting birth parents throughout the adoption process. It involves them in the decision making at reviews and ensures that they are aware of the content of the child permanence reports. Birth parents are asked to contribute their wishes and feelings to the process. A local voluntary adoption agency has been commissioned to provide independent support, but despite the proactive systems to engage birth parents in this, the take-up rate is low.

Family finding and matching are very well considered. Family finders are allocated at

an early stage to prevent delay. This also enables them to have time to gain a good knowledge of all of a child's needs, including those related to faith, ability and ethnicity, to inform an appropriate match with adopters. This is formalised by a documented matching meeting, which not only ensures that all needs have been identified and can be met, but also provides a clear record of the decision making for the child in the future. The agency is proactive in identifying potential matches at a very early stage, which helps to prevent delay.

Prospective adopters are given a complete picture of the child to inform their decision making, including meeting with the very knowledgeable and committed medical adviser to discuss any medical implications. Child permanence reports are one of the means whereby this information is provided. The quality of reports is improving, with the support of the panel advisor and additional training. These are now more child-focused and contain the comments of birth parents and the child where possible. An adopter commented that the social worker 'worked unbelievably hard' to follow up on missing information from another authority. Child appreciation days are also used to give information to adopters first hand and help them understand the child's history. These are very well planned and child focused. Introductions are also well planned and supported and fully take into account the needs of the child, for example, by doing a separate, child-friendly introduction timetable for the child so they understand what is happening.

Adopters and children have good support, both before and after adoption, which helps them sustain positive relationships. Comments from adopters include: 'All of the help and advice offered has really helped the family strengthen its bonds,' and 'the service has been a lifesaver.' The LAATCH team is a very good resource. Delays due to staffing levels have now been addressed. There is a very good working relationship with the adoption team so that information is appropriately shared.

The adoption team responds promptly to requests for help. In addition to individual support, it offers workshops, social events, newsletters, young people's groups, the enhanced parenting programme and facilitates 'buddying' between adopters. Social workers also provide support with education. Educational professionals are very committed to ensuring children are placed in the right school and given the right support to help them access education in the best way to suit their abilities. Similarly, health professionals are committed and proactive in ensuring that health issues are followed up. This results in good outcomes for children.

Contact arrangements are well thought out, for the benefit of the child. The link worker system ensures that contact plans are realistic, child focused and considered at an early stage. Direct contact is supported where appropriate. Indirect contact is well managed. It is proactive and subject to regular review to ensure that issues are resolved at an early stage and that the agreed contact continues to meet the child's needs. Birth parents are offered and receive help to write their letter, so that contact is sustained and positive. This helps children to maintain a good sense of their heritage.

Life story books and later-life letters are provided to children in a timely way and are

of high quality, to give a child a good understanding of the reasons for their adoption, both now and in the future. Adopters demonstrate a very open attitude to birth families and the importance of using this information with their children on a regular basis.

The agency provides birth records counselling and access to records for adult adoptees, in recognition of the life-long implications of adoption. There is a short waiting list for this service, but people are prioritised according to need. Feedback from service users is positive, with comments about the social worker's sensitivity to needs and taking time to find out what the service user wanted.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children are safe and feel safe, because the agency places children's safety and well-being at the centre of everything it does. For example, the agency demonstrates a robust approach to the preparation and assessment of adoptive parents to ensure they are suitable to provide safe and appropriate care and support to adoptive children. In addition to undertaking all the necessary checks and references, it also uses adult attachment style interviews to explore more complex situations and has the option to consult with the psychologist for further support and guidance.

The agency takes a proactive approach towards safeguarding, to prevent stressful situations escalating into child protection concerns. For example, when adoptive families are experiencing a significant amount of pressure, social workers will undertake a formalised model to clarify and identify the degree of risk. Depending on the outcome of this assessment, this may then lead to a professionals' meeting to agree an appropriate intervention. This proactive and preventative approach safeguards children and contributes to the long-term security of the placement.

Safeguarding issues form a significant part of the preparation training for adopters, who demonstrate an excellent understanding of how children's previous experiences affect their subsequent behaviour when they are with their adoptive families. This enables adopters to develop appropriate strategies to deal with these situations. One adopter said: 'I felt prepared for anything.'

This is supplemented by further training on internet safety, both for adopters and young people, so that they understand the dangers of unplanned contact and how to minimise risk. Children commented that they felt this training was useful, as it highlighted the adoption aspects of social networking and the potential risks. When families are receiving support, the workers involved focus on the individual needs of the children to inform their understanding of the presenting behaviour. Other children in the family are safeguarded, as the impact on them is always assessed.

Once children are in placement, they are visited regularly by both their own social worker and the adoption social worker. The difference in roles and responsibilities is clearly understood. This shared working enables a complete picture of the family's

functioning to be assessed and any potential safeguarding issues to be highlighted and addressed.

Children know they can contact the social workers at the agency if they have any concerns that they do not wish to share with their adoptive parents. This contact is supported and supplemented through the social events, which all adoption social workers attend, their training and support groups, and the information in the children's guide. This ensures that children have more than one avenue of support to access guidance and share any worries.

There have been no allegations in the last year, but social workers are guided by clear policies, procedures and regular training so they are aware of the action to take should this arise. Anyone wishing to access their birth records is treated with respect and their welfare is given sensitive consideration before any action is taken. Likewise, adults are protected through safeguarding procedures which address allegations of historical abuse.

Staff and members of the central list are recruited safely, in accordance with relevant guidance. This ensures that only those people assessed as safe are able to work with children and adult service users.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the local authority adoption agency are **good**.

There are very clear and thoroughly embedded arrangements for identifying children who may benefit from adoption. These arrangements have recently been further strengthened, in response to the authority identifying that relatively low numbers of children leave care as a result of adoption; for example, 3% compared with the statistical neighbours' 10%. However, Solihull has substantially more children in older age groups. This has a significant impact on the cohort of children who may be identified for adoption and thus skews these statistics. Additionally, a relatively high proportion of Solihull children entering care eventually return home to their parents.

Systematic tracking and monitoring by the adoption manager and the independent reviewing officers ensures that children for whom adoption is the right plan are identified at an early stage. This helps to reduce delay. No child, whatever their individual characteristics, is automatically excluded from consideration. Children placed for adoption in the last year include sibling groups of older children and children from minority ethnic backgrounds. These children are often harder to place.

There is a well-planned marketing strategy to ensure that there are sufficient adopters to meet the needs of Solihull children. A specific group, including a social worker from the adoption team, has been recently constituted to improve the focus of recruitment and target particular communities; for example, the Asian community. The adoption team is particularly successful in helping applicants and approved adopters explore and widen their initial criteria in relation to the children they can successfully parent. For example, adopters have been enabled to consider and

accept larger sibling groups by giving them information and time to think about their own capabilities in relation to the needs of the children. This has resulted in children being placed together with their siblings in a timely way, with adopters who are confident and committed to meeting their needs.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a significant commitment to adoption, with realistic yet ambitious targets to improve and develop the service. Members and senior officers attend social events to meet adopters and children on an informal basis. This ensures that adoptive families are aware of the value the authority places on adoption in general and on them in particular. The agency has a realistic and honest self-evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses. It is keen to learn from shortfalls, complaints, feedback from service users and research, to develop and improve the service and outcomes for children. The recent internal report on the adoption service was extremely thorough and analytical, giving a very realistic picture of the service and its development plans. There are very well-developed forums for adopters to influence the progress of the service, which include a committee as well as regular questionnaires about all aspects of the service. Young people are also consulted on a regular basis and as a result, the training on internet safety was developed for them. They were also involved in the recruitment of the psychotherapist for the LAATCH service.

There have been significant developments and improvements since the last inspection. All the recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed, providing a safer and more effective service with improved outcomes for children.

Additionally, the agency has implemented a system whereby a member of the adoption team formally links to a children's team. This social worker provides advice and support as well as ensuring that the progress of children's plans is effectively monitored, to prevent delay. The service has also commenced young people's groups; established practice meetings for the adoption team so they can keep up to date with new research and discuss practice issues; piloted an enhanced parenting course for adopters and improved tracking and monitoring systems. All these developments improve outcomes for children by preventing delay, involving them with the agency, ensuring that the social workers are knowledgeable and skilled and that families are well supported.

The disruption rate is impressively low. There have been no disruptions in the last five years. This compares with a national rate of over 10% per year. This is testament to good planning, matching, support and multidisciplinary working arrangements.

Stakeholders, service users and children know what they can expect from the service as there are a number of clearly written pieces of information available and readily accessible. For example, the Statement of Purpose and information for enquirers are on the local authority's website. These documents can be translated into other languages and formats as required. As well as a child-friendly children's guide, there are a number of individually-tailored resources which are used to enable children to

understand what Solihull offers to them and how to access other services.

There are very effective relationships with partner agencies; for example, with LAATCH, health and education, all of which work closely with the social work and adoption teams. This ensures that children achieve good outcomes, as all the services work together in a coordinated way for the benefit of the child.

Staff are very committed to providing a high quality, child-focused service and they are appropriately skilled, knowledgeable, qualified and experienced. They benefit from and value the support they receive from their managers and the authority, which in turn benefits the people with whom they work. One social worker commented: 'I cannot fault Solihull regarding the quality of supervision and the training and development opportunities.'

In response to team meetings becoming more business-orientated, the adoption manager implemented opportunities for practice discussions on a monthly basis. This ensures that there is time to discuss developments and research to improve practice, explore values and achieve consistency. The administrative support to the adoption team and panel is excellent and valued, as it enables the team and panel to be more efficient and effective in what they do.

Records are very well ordered to enable ease of access to information and give a coherent picture of the child's life story, if they access their records in the future. These are stored in very safe and secure facilities to prevent unauthorised access or damage.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority adoption agencies.