

# Wiltshire Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Wiltshire Council adoption service is a local authority agency which provides a statutory adoption and post-adoption service to children and adults. In the year 2011 to 2012, the service approved 17 adoptive placements and 17 children were placed for adoption. On 31 March 2012, 13 children were waiting for a placement.

The adoption service recruits, prepares, assesses and supports domestic adopters. Inter-country adopters are referred to a specialist voluntary adoption agency. The same voluntary agency also provides support and counselling for birth parents and other adults affected by adoption.

### 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 **adequate**.

Wiltshire Council provides an effective, well-managed and improving adoption service. The large majority of respondents to the Ofsted surveys were positive about the service. Children and young people, most adopters and staff also expressed positive views.

The authority received a Safeguarding and Looked After Children (S&LAC) inspection in 2012, which had mixed outcomes. The most significant shortfalls were found in safeguarding services. Services for looked after children were rated adequate for 'overall effectiveness' and good for 'capacity to improve'. Since the S&LAC inspection, the local authority has worked very hard and productively to address areas where further work is required.

Good progress has been made, but because not all of the service's developments and management systems are fully embedded, it has been rated adequate in each of the outcome areas. However, the service has improved outcomes for children; in particular, in reducing delay in finding appropriate adoptive placements. The service engages children and young people and evaluates many of its functions, so that service users have an effective voice.

The service has a system of rigorous internal management reporting and has also sought advice from external bodies to drive forward improvements. For example, the authority agreed to be a pilot authority for an adoption diagnostic assessment. A permanency and adoption improvement plan is in place and the service also took part in a local government peer review, to help improve performance.

Wiltshire has a number of strengths and elements of good practice. For example, the service has a well-led and representative adoption panel, which plays a significant part in quality assurance and helps to minimise delays for children and adopters. The adoption team comprises experienced, knowledgeable and resourceful staff, who engage in high quality individual work with children and adults affected by adoption. One particularly strong feature is the fact that the authority does not readily give up on plans for adoption when children prove hard to place. Instead, staff and managers work together creatively to bring about positive outcomes for children.

A number of areas require further work. A minority of these, such as amendments to the Statement of Purpose, were also raised at the last inspection and have not yet been fully addressed. Shortfalls include the timeliness of life story work and later life letters, minor changes to the Statement of Purpose and children's guides and the need to extend the virtual school to provide a service for adopted children. The staff files need further work to facilitate auditing and to meet every aspect of the regulations. None of the shortfalls impact directly on the safety or well-being of young people.

## **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 supported to achieve their educational potential; in particular, continue to develop virtual education services to include adopted children (NMS 7.1)
- promote consistent quality and timeliness of life story books and later life letters; in particular, ensure that both are delivered to the adopters within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony (NMS 2.7 and 2.8)
- ensure that the agency retains records of recruitment and suitability checks; in particular, that records are kept of telephone verification of references (NMS 21.1)
- ensure that personnel files are well ordered and can be easily audited to show that files contain evidence of identity checks and all the other requirements of Schedule 3 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 (Regulation 11 (3) (d), Schedule 3 and NMS 21.3)
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose contains all the information required by

Schedule 1 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003; in particular, the name and address of the service's manager (NMS 18.1 and Regulation 2, Schedule 1)

- ensure that the children's guide to adoption contains a statement as to the matters listed in Schedule 2 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003; in particular, a summary of the complaints procedure and contact details for the office of the Children's Rights Director. (Regulation 3 and NMS 18.5)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

Young people are very positive about their experiences of adoption through Wiltshire. They cannot think of anything that could have been done to help them more. One young person said that she would say to any child going to be adopted, 'don't be scared, people will help you.'

After a challenging period, outcomes for individual children in Wiltshire are rapidly improving. For example, some of the figures on the Department for Education's adoption score card (November 2012) are below statistical neighbours and below the national average. Notably, a minority (43%) of Wiltshire's adopted children waited less than 21 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family, compared with 63% for statistical neighbours and 56% for England. The service made available its own unpublished data for the financial year April 2012 to March 2013. The more recent data cannot be compared with national figures, but given these limitations, it indicates that 85% of children are now placed within 12 months of a decision that they should be adopted. This means that more children are now settled with a permanent family, but this level of improvement needs more time to become firmly established.

The historical issues with delay impacted on Ofsted's survey results, which date from June 2012 and therefore reflect the situation some time before this. For example, at that time, a minority of adopters (41%) did not agree that the adoption agency minimised delays for children. One commented 'it took too long to determine that adoption was the best solution for him. As a result, we believe his development was delayed; his speech in particular.'

However, there is no single reason for the delays. Some children were part of sibling groups or had other complex needs. Three out of eight survey respondents, as well as many staff and managers, commented that delays were largely due to court processes, which are outside the agency's control. Recent changes have brought about significant improvements in the timeliness of court processes. This has already had an impact on reducing delays and improving outcomes for children.

Children and young people are generally well prepared for adoption. Siblings are usually placed together, except when family size prevents this, or when there has

been an assessment that it is in the children's best interests to be placed separately. In 2011-2012, the service placed three sets of siblings together. This is a good outcome for those children. The lack of placement disruptions suggests that there are good quality assessments, matching and preparation processes in place.

Adopted children are very well supported in any planned contact with birth family members and adopted or fostered siblings. A post in the adoption team has been designated for this work, which has meant that some very good outcomes have been achieved for individual children. Positive contact with birth family members helps children to understand their identity and heritage.

Most children and young people progress well in their health and psychological development. There has been an issue for some individual children in obtaining prompt referral to the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). For example, one child has been waiting for some time for an assessment, an issue which the adoption panel identified and highlighted. Recent changes in the organisation of the CAMHS service has meant that previous adoption specialists no longer work for that service. The shortfall in psychological support is being addressed through specific recruitment plans, which are likely to bring about significant improvements in outcomes for children.

Adopted children do not yet receive educational support from the virtual school, which is in itself a good service, but one which currently focuses on children up to the point that an adoption order is made. This could impact on children's ability to relate well to school staff and peers, which in turn impacts on their educational outcomes.

Adopted children and young people generally benefit from a good adoption support service; although seven survey respondents (25%) were unsure about this. For example, some adopters reported waiting for some time before their child received a service, but again, this reflects the situation a year ago. The large majority of adopters were, however, pleased with the support received. One commented that the social worker had stayed with the family until late one night to support them in a crisis, which was much appreciated. One young person said 'because of the help (the social worker) gave us, we can talk as a family now.' This outcome has had a major impact on this young person and their family.

## **Quality of service**

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

Adopters report that they feel valued by the service. Their initial enquiries are responded to promptly and those interviewed found the assessing social workers to be efficient and reliable. They confirm that their assessment and preparation is good. Adopters and staff commented on the home-finder post, created in September 2012, as being a very positive development, although some thought that the service may, as it grows, eventually require more than one person in this demanding role. This development has dramatically enhanced the matching process and hence, outcomes

for children and adopters.

Child permanence reports are of generally good quality, which means that children's needs are identified and conveyed accurately. If there are shortfalls in individual pieces of work, the panel raises this with the agency advisor so that learning from the experience can be fed back to the social worker.

Prospective adopters' reports are also of good quality and contain an appropriate balance of factual information and evaluation. This helps to ensure that adopters' circumstances, strengths and vulnerabilities are accurately described and that sound recommendations can be made based on robust information.

The adoption panel is very well managed. The quality of the minutes is good and the administration processes are effective. The adoption panel makes recommendations about prospective adopters within the prescribed timescales in the national minimum standards, currently eight months from application to approval. The adoption panel reports every six months to the Head of Service, to ensure that she is fully aware of any identified issues.

Adopters confirm that they receive appropriate information about children to be adopted, including their individual identity and healthcare needs. For example, the service has a looked after children's nurse, who is part of a small team working with the agency medical advisor to ensure that children's health needs are fully addressed. Children can participate in their health care planning and are fully consulted. This helps to ensure that children's views about their health and welfare are taken into account in healthcare planning.

The service has a very busy, proactive and creative adoption support team, which has recently been subject to some staffing challenges. The team is small but has boundless energy and organised their seventh annual adoption conference in March 2012. The conference was attended by 120 people, including adopters and adoptees. This event received very positive feedback.

Young people thoroughly welcome the service's picnic days, climbing wall events and fun days organised by the adoption support workers. They said that these events are good, because their parents can speak to other parents who have adopted children. Some young people have received very good direct work to help support their placements and reduce the risk of disruptions.

The quality of life story work and life story material provided by the adoption support team is very good. The quality is said to be more variable when the work is completed by social workers from other teams, who have many conflicting and competing demands on their time. For example, some life story work which accompanies the child into their adoptive family, amounts to little more than a photo album from the foster carer. This does not tell the whole story of the child's life and leaves a great deal of research to be completed by the adoption support team.

Adopters interviewed and surveyed said that they had not all received life story work

and later life letters within the prescribed timescale. This shortfall can have a major impact on children's understanding of their history and heritage.

The counselling and support service to birth family members is provided by a voluntary adoption agency, Parents and Children Together (PACT). PACT also provides a service to adopted adults seeking a tracing and intermediary service. The service keeps good records to evaluate how this agency meets service users' needs. There are three service level agreements with PACT, to manage the contracts for the various services provided and to provide a basis for monitoring.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Children are kept safe by this service through thorough and effective recruitment, assessment and preparation of adopters, together with improved matching with suitable families. There have been no safeguarding issues. Young people say that they feel very safe in their placements. They know to whom they can speak if they feel unsafe or if they have any complaints.

The current system for managing staff files, which was also the subject of a recommendation at the last inspection, is not sufficiently robust. The staff file material is in two different locations, which makes effective auditing difficult. Furthermore, the service's managers have not always recorded written evidence of telephone checks on referees. Files do not always contain proof of identity, even though this was clearly obtained in order to apply for Criminal Records Bureau checks.

Children are kept safe through effective plans for contact, which take into account any risks. Birth records counselling is undertaken by all the qualified social work staff in the adoption team. Appropriate safeguards are in place to protect service users and members of the public from issues arising from research into birth records.

The local authority has effective child and vulnerable adult safeguarding procedures. For example, child protection procedures cover the need to provide for investigation of historical incidents of abuse and alleged abuse affecting those who have been adopted.

### **Leadership and management**

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

The management of the service is strong and has driven forward performance in the most positive and determined manner. Monitoring systems provide readily accessible data to inform senior managers of progress. There is clear and accountable management reporting throughout the service right up to executive level, to ensure effective oversight. For example, independent reviewing officers are now tracking



children's progress and challenging permanence planning at the second looked after children's review, to help reduce delay. The agency has clear measures in place to identify children who should be adopted at an early stage in their progression through the looked after children system. There are two adoption panel meetings per month, which helps to ensure that children's situations are presented to panel in a timely manner.

The service recruits adopters who reflect the diversity of the local community. This strategy is effective, because the large majority of children placed for adoption are placed with Wiltshire adopters. When the service becomes aware that a child's needs may not be matched within the authority, they use the South West Adoption Consortium (SWAC) and national resources to try to identify a potential match.

The service has a Statement of Purpose, which required amendment at the last inspection. It now reflects Ofsted's correct address and also that of the Children's Rights Director. However, it still does not contain the name of the manager and service's address. The children's guide to adoption does not contain a summary of the complaints procedure or the contact details for the office of the Children's Rights Director. This means that children and adults seeking information about the service are not provided with all the information that they might need.

The service engages effectively with other local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies to help to ensure that a seamless service is provided. The service has particularly strong links with SWAC and with PACT.

Within the adoption team, two specialist roles have been defined and although the overall staffing of the team has not increased, the home-finder and contact worker posts have made a major positive impact on outcomes for children. There remain some difficulties due to key staff, such as the team manager, having left the service. At the time of the inspection, an interim team manager was in post. Staff changes have been unsettling for social workers. However, managers are well aware of the service's priorities and pressure points. The service has recently been awarded a substantial sum as part of the government's adoption service improvement agenda. Decisions are now being made about how best to direct the funds for maximum benefit to children, and staffing will be addressed as part of this process, so no recommendation has been made.

Assessment and reporting processes are thorough. Feedback from service users is routinely sought from those receiving adoption support or attending the adoption panel. Adopters', panel and staff training is effective. Placing social workers praised the quality of the training, saying that it is often more effective than that provided externally. For example, the adoption team has delivered training for other social care staff on life story work and preparing later life letters. Further training has been held on attachment and permanence. Social workers summarised their views by saying 'we could not manage without the adoption team, that's for sure.'

Records are clear and provide a factual account of work with children and adults. Computerised records are easy to navigate and there are paper files for adopters,

kept near to where the adoption team members work. The service has moved to new premises, which are modern and spacious, but have their own challenges; for example, lack of space for recently used but non-current files and accessibility of the adoption library. The service's managers are aware of these issues and are addressing them.

Three recommendations from the last inspection have been fully met. The first recommendation concerned the timing of the adopters' applications. These are now taken prior to the assessment of suitability. The second recommendation concerns the safeguarding policy, which now covers all children, including those who are receiving adoption support services. The third recommendation concerns procedures for dealing with cases of historical abuse. The child protection procedures now cover this area.

Two recommendations from the last inspection have not been fully met. The Statement of Purpose had a minor shortfall and this has been addressed, but there is still a small deficit in the information. The final recommendation concerned staff files, which were found not to contain complete information. There were gaps in employment history and references missing. Both of these shortfalls have been addressed. However, there remain some minor shortfalls in the staff files in terms of evidencing that checks have been completed and general organisation of the files, as each file has some material with the human resources department and some with the line manager. This makes file auditing extremely difficult, but it does not in itself impact significantly on outcomes for children and young people.

## 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 the inspection of local authority adoption agencies.