

Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Buckinghamshire County Council's Children's Services has recently undergone a major reorganisation. This has included creating two Children in Care teams, based in Aylesbury and High Wycombe. Each of these teams now has two specialist adoption workers and four social work assistants to help improve outcomes for children whose plan is adoption. This is achieved through parallel planning and joint working with the children's social workers.

A specialist adoption team based in Amersham assesses and prepares prospective adopters. The team comprises a team manager, two supervising senior practitioners, 7.5 whole time equivalent social workers and one part time social work assistant.

The Adoption Support Team comprises a team manager, one senior practitioner, four social workers, a social work assistant and a qualified play therapist. This team works with families who have already adopted, and provides support to birth family members.

Services are provided under Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to adopted adults seeking information about their history who have asked to receive counselling in Buckinghamshire. There is also a specialist Birth Family Support Worker. There are good developing links between all the children's social work teams in the County, and with outside agencies such as AAA-Norcap.

The Adoption and Fostering services share an Operations Manager. The Agency Decision Maker for both services is the Divisional Manager (Prevention, Assessment and Protection). The Adoption Service, like all Buckinghamshire's services for children, receives very positive leadership and support from the County's Corporate Parenting Panel, comprising Elected Members across all political parties.

During the period sampled on this inspection, there were on average 18 enquiries per month regarding adoption. The main groups of children needing adoption are older children, siblings, children of dual heritage, children of other ethnic and religious heritages and children with disabilities. The adoption team undertook 38 assessments of prospective adopters in 2007-8, compared with 26 the previous year, so there is an increasing demand for the service. Sixteen children have been placed for adoption in that period, 13 within the County.

Buckinghamshire is part of a consortium of seven local adoption agencies, and works closely with them to help to ensure the most effective service for children who are seeking adoption. Services for those wishing to adopt from overseas are not provided directly by the County, but through Parents and Children Together (PACT) under a service level agreement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a very positive announced inspection with much good practice and a large number of improvements seen.

Nine questionnaires were received from adopters and two questionnaires from birth family members, all of which had positive comments to make about the service. In particular, respondents said that the service has developed since the last inspection into a listening and reflective agency that seeks to analyse and improve practice. Respondents commented on the high level of support they had received from social workers, and increased staffing has largely addressed past delays in assessments. Some 'work in progress' was also identified, but the service is already well aware of these issues and has plans in place to respond to them.

During the process of re-structuring provision for children and families over the past year, there have been major improvements to the service, but also inevitable disruption for staff. Senior managers and the County Councillor praised all staff for their constructive and dedicated response to these changes. Staff at every level are justifiably proud of the work that they do and what they achieve for children, but it is also positive that they have lots of ideas for developing the service further.

Three good practice recommendations have been made, but all other National Minimum Standards inspected were met. No actions have been made.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last key inspection was carried out in February 2005. This was the first ever inspection of the service under the National Minimum Standards, and in common with many other services inspected at that time, a number of requirements (now known as actions) and recommendations were made.

There were 11 statutory requirements at that inspection. These have all been addressed, as follows:

The Children's Guide was previously targeted mainly at older children. The agency has now adapted the guide for younger children and those with complex needs.

The Child Safeguarding procedures have now been updated to meet Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003, Regulation 9.

The agency had not at the time of the first inspection been conducting Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks correctly, but this had been addressed by the time of an additional visit by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) in May 2006. The agency now maintains good quality personnel files, with references and General

Social Care Council (GSCC) certificates in place. At the present inspection, a separate issue with CRB checks was identified, and is the subject of a new recommendation under Staying Safe.

The County continues to address issues of equality and diversity. The comments made at the additional visit in May 2006 have now been addressed, and there are small but increasing numbers of minority groups such as minority ethnic families, same sex couples and single people represented in the body of approved adopters. This is 'work in progress' and the agency has creative strategies in place to address this.

Staff supervision arrangements have been well supported since the last inspection. The adoption teams now have senior practitioners who supervise at least some of the social work staff, and this has had the positive effect of freeing up management time.

At the last inspection, it had not been possible to assess the level of staff training, so a previously made requirement was outstanding at the time of this inspection. However, it is clear that staff now receive good quality training, and that this is seen as one of the County's strengths.

The inspectors saw evidence of case file auditing during this inspection, so this standard is now met.

There are now clear timescales in place with regard to matching.

The recruitment strategy, for adopters, does address the need to work with various community groups, and this is put into practice.

There is now a fully comprehensive risk assessment in place in relation to archiving arrangements, and indeed the archive itself is excellent in terms of safety and security of confidential records.

There were 34 good practice recommendations made at the key inspection in 2005. All of these have been addressed, and will not be detailed separately below.

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.

Buckinghamshire has a robust recruitment strategy for prospective adopters, supported by the agency's Statement of Purpose, to assist in recruiting from a variety

of backgrounds to meet the needs of children in the county for whom adoption is the plan.

The marketing coordinator explained how she had brought skills from her commercial marketing background to the task, and had put in place many creative ideas for attracting prospective adopters. She is proactive in working with the local media to increase the agency's profile. There is a dedicated phone line, and enquirers receive a prompt response with an invitation to an information session. These are currently held every eight weeks.

The adoption team manager decides if the enquiry should be progressed. If a formal application is made, statutory checks are carried out in line with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, including Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. The applicant(s) attend Adoption Preparation training, then two social workers visit the applicant(s) to provide feedback on their progress to date and prepare a report for the team manager as to whether the application should proceed to an assessment. If this decision is made, the assessment is allocated to a suitably qualified and experienced social worker.

If it is not possible to accept the application, the applicant is given clear reasons for this and options are given for any further action they may wish to take, for example, counselling or referral to other agencies. In some cases, the prospective adopters are asked to undertake specific tasks such as gaining further practical experience in childcare, or addressing lifestyle issues before their application can be reconsidered.

The agency has worked hard to meet a wide range of children's needs, and this is reflected in re-branding public literature to include ethnically diverse pictures and logos. There are good strategies in place to attract more people from minority ethnic backgrounds, single people and same sex couples to apply to adopt. The county has no blanket bans on the grounds of age. As a result of these strategies, several minority ethnic siblings were placed for adoption last year, and there are now two same sex couples approved as adopters. An assessment on a single person is currently under way. The county recognises the need for continuing and creative work in this area, particularly in recruitment of black and Asian adopters, because despite best efforts, specifically targeted campaigns have brought limited success in this predominantly white county.

Examples of good practice include deaf signing adopters being directed to another agency within the local consortium, because Buckinghamshire staff knew that they did not have a matching child, but that the receiving agency did have a child with these needs.

The agency does, whenever possible, take into account the views of children and young people who are old enough or able to express themselves. One young person who was keen to be included in plans for adoption went to the adoption panel, supported by her advocate, to explain in person.

Adopters spoken to and those who responded to questionnaires are very positive

about the assessment process. All said that they had been kept informed, and that they had considerable confidence in their social workers, whom they found to be supportive, professional and thorough. Managers confirmed that social workers are now being trained in attachment style assessments, so that they will not have to purchase this expertise from outside agencies in the future.

File tracking showed that social workers compile very detailed and comprehensive accounts of prospective adopters' involvement in preparation groups. Prospective adopters can comment on and contribute to these accounts, which is good practice. Preparation training is regularly evaluated and comments are acted upon to provide a flexible and adaptable approach to preparation.

Panel minutes and verbal accounts showed that there have in the past, when there were staff shortages, been delays of over eight months between application and assessment during the period of time sampled. The agency has been monitoring this for some time, and this has been addressed through a positive recruitment plan and additional staffing.

Adopters are carefully prepared for the task ahead and made aware of the challenges before them. Many adopters continue contact with those they have met on preparation courses, and provide each other with ongoing support. They say that courses are helpful and well run. The adoption team and the adoption support team staff jointly lead post-approval training, and co-train on the prospective adopters' preparation group.

One adopter identified the agency's strengths as a professional and personable approach, good communication, explaining the risks around adoption, providing good reference reading and offering different experiences. Some said that the latter tended to focus on more unfortunate stories about adoptions that had not gone according to plan, and there could have been a little more information on the successful placements, but this is done in order to raise awareness and reduce any misconceptions on the part of new enquirers.

Several adopters said in their questionnaires that they valued being able to meet other adopters during the preparation. Some commented that it would also have been good to have had the opportunity to meet birth family members. One family said that the agency does everything well: 'We couldn't be more pleased....the friendliness and support given has been invaluable'.

The County does now have a system in place through which adopters are asked to notify the local authority if a child placed for adoption dies.

Adopters commented on the clarity of information provided throughout the application and assessment process. Those interviewed said that they had been given good quality information about children with whom a match might be possible.

Foster carers are encouraged to prepare a book called 'All About Me' on behalf of or with children being prepared for an adoptive placement. Whilst an excellent idea in

principle, some foster carers seem not to have had sufficient guidance in completing this task. For example, one book contained judgemental language about the child. This, together with the paucity of information forthcoming from some foster carers about the child's likes and dislikes, despite the significant duration of the child's placement, was discussed in the feedback meeting. The inclusion of inappropriate information in records that can later be accessed has been addressed under Organisation.

Although there is plenty of evidence from panel minutes and observation that health and safety risks are taken very seriously, and indeed some families have been made to remove completely what some people might regard as quite well controlled risks before being considered for approval, the health and safety checklist form for adoption does not include any specific assessment of risks posed by domestic animals other than cats and dogs. For example, chickens, kept by one couple that the inspectors case tracked, and more exotic pets can potentially harbour diseases that are transmissible to humans. The detail on pets was generally insufficient, for example one family had two cats, but the assessment did not say so, and there was no comment about the risks posed by cat litter trays.

However, an excellent dog ownership questionnaire was seen on one file, and the adopter had been provided with an information sheet advising how best to integrate the child with the dog, which is a constructive and sensible approach.

The health and safety form also does not include any assessment on blind cords and any weapons kept in the home, such as shotguns and ceremonial or antique weapons, although the inspector was told that the fostering form does include this. A recommendation has been made.

The adoption panel is guided by clear policies and procedures. Minutes of meetings sampled during the inspection showed that all those meetings had had a quorum. Minutes also showed how professionally panel had responded to challenging situations. Social workers say that they value the robustness of the panel process.

The inspector observed a panel meeting on 8 August 2008. This meeting was conducted in an efficient and business-like manner, and was fair and consistent in its approach to issues. There is a system for feeding back to the agency any insufficiency in assessments or presented reports. The inspection was held at a time when Child Permanency Reports were still fairly new to social workers, and because of this they still varied in quality. This was addressed by holding training days and in one instance, a mock panel. The inspectors were told and observed that Form F reports are of good quality. Those seen contain all the information required.

The agency has not historically always been able to meet the eight month target between application and presentation at panel. The inspector was told that this had been about allocation problems, and the situation is improving. The panel chair said how much the panel had valued social workers' commitment and generosity of spirit during a difficult time of change, and less than perfect situations. This was echoed by senior managers and the County Councillor interviewed.

Prospective adopters are provided with written information and photographs of panel members. Panel makes every effort to provide prospective adopters with the opportunity to present information through careful and thoughtful questioning. The number of questions put to social workers has been reduced to enable prospective adopters to have more involvement. Although adopters almost inevitably find attending the panel meeting a daunting experience, they acknowledge that they are put at their ease as much as possible.

One young person in their mid teens has attended panel, supported by the young people's advocacy service, Spurgeon's. This enabled the young person to put forward their argument that they too should be included in adoption plans being made for other family members. This is very good practice.

There are 10 panel members including the Chair and the medical advisor. There is also a legal advisor, who has been used in specific instances, for example the placement of a child in Northern Ireland, and the question of whether a guardian appointed by the Court may attend panel. There is a positive balance between members' skills and experience of adoption, and there are two members from minority ethnic communities. About one third of the panel members are male.

All panel members are recruited by word of mouth but with a robust interview and reference procedure. All have full recruitment checks including CRB certificates, which are renewed every three years. All receive appropriate induction and guidance regarding panel membership; they have job descriptions and sign a confidentiality agreement.

Panel members are kept up to date through training days and special business meetings, for example on changes in legislation. In 2008 there were two training days. Panel members receive annual appraisals from the Chair, and the Chair receives an appraisal from the Agency Decision Maker. The Agency Decision Maker attends panel business meetings and at least one panel meeting per year, and confirms all the statutory recruitment checks on panel members.

Panel minutes seen were all of a very high standard. They are detailed, with reasons for recommendations clearly recorded. Several senior managers and the panel Chair praised the high quality of the minutes. Panel papers are distributed in a timely manner and with careful regard for confidentiality.

The Agency Decision Maker takes into account all the relevant information and responds to the panel's recommendation promptly. The decision is conveyed to all parties in writing. The Agency Decision Maker said that there has probably only been one occasion when she has not agreed with panel's recommendation.

The agency is run by managers and staff who are suitable and sufficiently experienced to hold this high level of responsibility. All have CRB certificates, with checks renewed every three years.

Staff recruitment follows a clear and detailed policy, which generally provides good protection for children and other service users. Some aspects of practice are very good, for example safeguarding interviews of new and existing staff, and telephoning referees to check the veracity of their written reference.

On three occasions within the adoption service, some staff were started in post before their CRB certificates had been received. This was done at a time when the inspectors are aware that there were significant delays in obtaining certificates, but it does not meet the National Minimum Standards. Written risk assessments were completed and the staff concerned were restricted in their work, for example they had no contact with children and were not permitted any access to confidential records, so children remained safe. A recommendation has been made.

The Adoption Support Team staff have all been specifically trained to work with those seeking services under Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and have experience and understanding of the issues around access to birth records and possible reunion with birth family members. All social workers are well qualified to do the work: three of the 14 social work staff hold Post Qualifying Awards at Level 2, two Child Care Awards, one Practice Teaching Award, and eight hold Level 1 awards.

The agency has a clear Safeguarding policy which, as a local authority, complies with the Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures. The policy addresses how to respond to any disclosures of historical abuse made by service users and explicitly refers to children placed for adoption and whose plan is adoption. The Head of Service said that the County had revised its safeguarding procedures and has a specialist child protection team with a team manager and two social workers which, jointly with the police, investigates any allegations of historical abuse. There are strong links at senior management level between the adoption service and the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Serious Case Review Board, which helps to ensure that these areas learn from each other's practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The County has an Adoption Support Team which provides high quality post-adoption support to adoptive families. They provide ongoing training, including Positive Parenting training, underpinned by effective policies and strategies for supporting adopters.

The Agency Advisor ensures that a referral has been made for adoption support at the Permanency Planning Review meeting. Prior to any placement, the adoptive family and the child are assessed for support needs, and support plans are agreed with the adopters and included in the placement report.

There is a duty system for adoption support, with a duty social worker available all day one day a week. This worker deals with enquiries and all referrals to the adoption support team. Crisis calls are dealt with straight away, and there are

monthly assessment 'surgeries' for families run on an appointment basis.

Adopters say that they were made well aware of the support offered and have been offered contact details for support agencies and Adoption UK. The latter runs support groups and training courses. One parent said 'We couldn't be more pleased....the friendliness and support given has been invaluable'.

Adoption Support Team members participate in training for Care and Protection team social workers and they go into schools to increase staff understanding of adoption issues. The team also organise a number of annual social events for adoptive families, including an Easter egg hunt and a summer picnic, which adoptive families said that they enjoy. The team is considering setting up a group for adoptive fathers, which is a need that they have themselves identified.

The team supports parents by working with schools, and will meet with head teachers with parents, at the parents' request. The team sees itself as empowering parents to help bring about better outcomes for their children, and uses the Adoption Forum to work with other agencies to bring about a better understanding of adoption issues.

There is a group for adopted young people aged 12 to 18 which has run successfully for three years. The group provides an opportunity for adopted teenagers to get together, and there are currently nine young people. The group does focus on adoption at times, but is also used as a consultative group, for example to provide a view on adoption support leaflets for teenagers and feedback on how contact is managed.

Supporting adoptive families in crisis is very demanding work and the team is looking at different ways to manage this work. They are also planning training for adopters on how to talk to children about difficult issues, for example parental crime or mental health problems.

The adoption teams explain to adopters how important it is to keep safe any information given or sent to the child which forms part of his or her heritage. Adopters spoken to were all clear about this and felt able to respond to a child's questions sensitively. Adopters also felt able to address any issues of discrimination, and they are well supported by the adoption teams to do this.

The County has created champions to promote access to all services, and can fast track families to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). A number of the team have qualifications in specialist counselling work and can offer therapeutic work themselves. The team is currently reviewing how best it can use Educational and Clinical Psychological support. The aim is to introduce the newly appointed Clinical Psychologist at an earlier stage.

The Adoption Support Team also employs a qualified Play Therapist, who works three days per week in a consultative role as well as directly with children to help with behavioural, life story work issues or any other concern connected to adoption,

including on occasion preparation for adoption. The Play Therapist is involved in post-approval training for adopters, including the annual Attachment and Adoption Evening, and there are plans for further training for adopters and foster carers.

The agency has a panel medical advisor and a legal advisor, both of whom would provide post adoption advice if required, based on a written protocol. The agency uses a voluntary adoption service, PACT, to work with families seeking to adopt from overseas.

The agency provides a service to all adults and children affected by adoption living in Buckinghamshire, including services under Schedule 2 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 adults who were adopted before 12 November 1975 and who have asked to receive counselling in the county.

There is provision in the policy regarding these services to allow for withholding information thought 'likely to do harm'. Staff undertaking this work have the necessary qualifications and experience, and the welfare of all parties is paramount.

Adoption UK (Adoption Support Agency) runs two support groups for adopted adults in the area. A member of the adoption support team is planning to start a group for adopted adults, which is another identified need.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Birth relatives are involved in plans for adoption and receive written information about this process. There is evidence on the files seen that their views are recorded.

Birth family members are supported by the adoption support team, which has run a birth mothers' group for two years. The agency is now extending this work by offering a wider range of services to birth fathers, an area commented on by one birth father in his questionnaire. A group for birth fathers was due to start the week after the inspection, using a male outreach worker as co-facilitator.

Birth parents commented on the improvements in the service offered to them since the last inspection. 'They are always making things better and they are listening..' and 'They are always there when you want to talk to someone.'

There is an independent counsellor who works to support birth parents, starting during Court proceedings. All staff spoken to said that this person does 'a fantastic job', and works jointly with the letter box coordinator to help parents understand the importance of contact. This brings positive outcomes for children by helping birth parents to move on from their own issues so that they can be an effective part of their children's lives after adoption. The team is looking at recruiting contact supporters specifically to assist with this aspect of the work.

Social work staff said that the agency has recently appointed new staff to replace a member of staff who did most of the life story work for many years. The Adoption Team are working to develop relationships with colleagues in Children in Care teams, so that they can gain mutual understanding and better support them in completing life story work for children. Children in Care social workers say they strive to improve the quality of this work, but it does vary in quality and that some additional equipment might help them to produce high quality work for children.

Social workers say that they are aware that not all authorities complete life story work in a timely manner, but it is now done promptly in Buckinghamshire, as the adoption panel insists that life story work is in place before recommending matching a child with adopters.

Two-hundred and twenty children are currently involved in the letterbox contact scheme, and 15 children had direct contact with siblings during 2007-8. Nine children had contact with birth parents, and eight children with grandparents. The adoption support team has a social work assistant whose main role is letterbox contact and supporting birth parents to promote good quality contact. She visits birth parents to help them write letters and is proactive in its support of the letterbox system. Sometimes issues arise on the adopters' side of the contact arrangements, when joint work may be done with one of the social workers on the team.

Birth parents are linked with AAA-Norcap, an Adoption Support Agency, and also with the Adoption Support Forum, described under Organisation, where they may have a say in how services are run.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which contains all the required information, and which is regularly reviewed and approved by the Corporate Parenting Body of Elected Members. All staff have access to the Statement of Purpose, which is on the intranet system.

The Children's Guide is a well designed booklet which has recently been updated to show people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, and it is available in age-appropriate formats.

Clear recruitment policies and good practice ensure that all those interested in becoming adoptive parents are welcomed without prejudice, and the County has made considerable progress in its efforts to attract prospective adopters from

minority ethnic backgrounds, single adopters and same sex couples.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children needing placements within a minority ethnic community may well be placed out of county in order to meet their needs. There is targeted recruitment to try to reduce any delays in placement for these children.

Any prospective adopters unlikely to achieve a match through this agency are given the necessary information to enable them to search elsewhere, for example, those who wish to adopt from overseas are referred to PACT. Adopters confirm that they are given accurate information about preparation, assessment and support services. Staff strive to support all service users equally, regardless of their individual ethnic, social or cultural backgrounds. Adopters are given information, if they wish to do so, to enable them to access the Adoption Register for England and Wales.

The agency is operated by highly experienced managers and staff, under a well qualified and experienced Operations Manager. There is a robust system of accountability throughout the structure up to and including the Elected Members of the Council.

All staff and managers within the service have the necessary qualifications for the work they do. The Operations Manager has social work and management qualifications to the required level, and a clear job description setting out the duties of the position.

There are transparent and reliable arrangements in place for the management of the service in the event of the Operation Manager's absence, and similar arrangements in each team to provide effective leadership when the team manager is not available. All staff are fully aware of policies and procedures and can access these through the intranet. Teams are described as mutually very supportive.

The strong management structure helps to ensure that quality assurance of work maintains a high priority. This is achieved through the team structures, with the fairly recent addition of senior practitioners who do much of the file auditing, with action points and timescales recorded. Introducing senior practitioners into the teams has enabled the team managers to spend more time managing. Social workers also audit their own files. The two team managers each maintain an overview of their team's work, and liaise with the Agency Advisor. The adoption panel minutes show evidence of identifying practice points and raising these with the social worker and team manager. The Agency Decision Maker has no formal quality assurance role, but does pick up issues from time to time and ensures that these are passed on to the relevant team.

The Corporate Parenting Body includes Elected Members across all political parties who share a passionate commitment to improving services for children. The body meets every six to eight weeks, and monitors all work relating to children who are looked after. This group approves the Statement of Purpose, and holds Cabinet Sessions four times per year to review work and work on specific topics such as

recruitment and retention of staff. Young people used to be directly represented on the body, but this did not work very effectively for them, and so they are now invited to be involved through their advocacy service on specific projects which are more meaningful to young people, where they can express their views in a less formal environment.

With restructuring of the social work teams and strong management systems in place, supervision and appraisals are managed well. All social workers spoken to said that they receive monthly supervision, with sessions more frequently for newer staff. They have an annual appraisal, with a new system in place for a six monthly review. Non-management peer support groups are being rolled out for social work teams, to help them express some of the difficult feelings that can be engendered by the work. The managers also have peer supervision meetings which are facilitated by the new Clinical Psychologist. The Operations Manager confirmed that these systems were effective and that morale was much improved as a direct consequence of the high levels of support in place.

All staff said that they had always been able to access quality internal and external training. All new staff receive induction training and have their own portfolio, which is checked at 10 and 20 weeks for completion. Staff all have access to the intranet where policies and procedures are located. There are regular team away days which enable the teams to look at effective practice.

Child protection refresher courses are run frequently, and there is corporate, IT and financial training as well as specialist training to enable staff to undertake adoption work. The team training plan confirms that training has been delivered on a wide range of topics including assessing and supporting gay and lesbian adopters, supporting traumatised children, the impact of abuse and neglect on the brain, and working effectively with those affected by adoption. One member of staff said 'training is fantastic, and superior to anywhere I have ever worked'.

Administrative staff and social workers agreed that there are sufficient administrative staff to support the agency's work, although the Children In Care team social workers said that filing was a major challenge for them, as they no longer had a filing clerk. Business support hours have been increased by one part time post recently. Social workers and the adoption panel really value the dedicated support provided by the administrative staff.

The adoption service has experienced some challenges in recruitment in recent years, but this has been overcome and the teams now have a full complement of staff either in post or about to start in post. New posts have been created to enhance the service to children and families.

Everyone spoken to said that they thought Buckinghamshire is a fair and competent employer. Staff say they feel very valued and some commented specifically on the County's commitment to maintaining a positive work-life balance. Clearly, this will support the County's aim to retain staff.

Staff have regular team meetings, some of which are held jointly with the two adoption teams. In addition, there is an Adoption Forum where representatives from professional services involved with children and young people meet quarterly with the all the children's social work teams, senior managers, other adoption agencies in the area, members of the public affected by adoption and the Medical Advisor to the adoption panel. The aim of the Forum is to learn about what each agency and service provider does, to get the message of adoption and adoption issues across to a wide range of professionals, and to act as a 'think tank' by raising ideas for conferences, for example, a conference called 'One Life' held in June 2008. This conference looked at all the different professionals who had been involved in the life of one child.

File records are generally well recorded and clear, with detailed recording on Form F forms and Child Permanency Reports. Most were of a high standard, although in one case sampled the recording was 'chatty' rather than professional in style, although the information was all there and the analysis was good. Supervisors' decisions are recorded on file.

All the required information regarding statutory checks of prospective adopters is kept on file to meet this standard. The County uses a computerised child record system which is congruent with the Integrated Children's System (ICS). There is a client access to records policy in place, and all records are kept in a safe environment protected as far as possible from the effects of fire and flood.

Foster carers are encouraged to have an input, which is good practice, and it is not reasonable to expect the same high professional standard of recording from foster carers as can be expected from social workers. However, there was one example of an 'All About Me' booklet where the foster carer had not given this sufficient time and attention, and had cross-referenced a child's booklet to information about siblings, and did not seem to be able to give an account of daily activities despite the considerable length of placement. In once instance, a foster carer had used judgemental language to describe a child who later in life may well access that record, and this had then been used in the Child Permanency Report. In discussion, the Operations Manager said that a great deal of work had been done with foster carers since the case-tracked files were constructed, and this had included appropriate recording. The Adoption Team said that they are pleased to be developing good links with fostering team, and this will help ensure that the needs of adopted children are always to the fore, and that recording is of an acceptable standard to be accessed by young people in the future. Some adopters' files contained information about other adopters. This included agendas for panel meetings with other names on them, and possible alternative matches whose names had not been made anonymous. A recommendation has been made about inappropriate recording.

The Operations Manager explained that there is an independent audit process in place relating to staff files. For some time now the authority has been conducting safeguarding interviews of staff. This involves a detailed interview to establish whether responses given match previously obtained information. This is good

practice. Staff files seen were of a very high standard of organisation and generally contain all the required information.

There is an issue with a very small number of staff CRB certificates not being in place at the commencement of employment. This has already been addressed under Staying Safe.

Office premises seen in Amersham and Aylesbury are suitable for the purpose, with access to the public via a properly managed reception system. The High Wycombe office was not visited on this occasion.

The County has an excellent archive arrangement which offers exceptional levels of security and protection for its most valuable documents. A risk assessment and a Disaster Recovery Plan is in place, both of a high standard. A small number of files are in a temporary archive in Amersham prior to transfer to County Hall in Aylesbury, and although this is not such a robust system as the main archive, it is acceptable as a temporary measure.

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 the health and safety risk assessment includes hazards such as weapons, blind cords and risks posed by all domestic animals kept (NMS 5).
- ensure that no staff start in post until all checks, including Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, have been received (NMS 19.4).
- ensure that personal data such as names of other adopters or children, and inappropriate comments made by foster carers to describe children in their care, is not placed on adopters' and children's files (NMS 27).