

West Sussex County Council (Social & Caring Services) Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority 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

West Sussex adoption service consists of an adoption team and an adoption support team which undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current adoption legislation and regulations. These include: the recruitment, preparation and assessment of domestic adopters; family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees and others; and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. Some of the support work to birth parents, adopters and adult adoptees is carried out through contract arrangements with an external agency. Inter-country assessments are usually carried out by a voluntary adoption agency on their behalf.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The adoption agency provides a good service to children, birth parents, adopted adults and adopters. The process for the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters is extremely thorough and the adoption panel provides robust scrutiny of approvals and matches. Matching of children is well thought out and systems are in place to prevent drift. All staff are subject to sound recruitment and selection procedures. Adoptive families are well supported, both financially and by the creative use of its own and other services. Birth families and adopted adults also receive a sensitive and supportive service from committed professionals. Birth families are, wherever possible, involved in planning for their children and their contribution is valued and recorded. Life story work is given a high priority and children's heritage is promoted through a robust letterbox system.

The agency is well managed, both structurally and operationally, by committed, experienced, and knowledgeable managers. Good monitoring is in place both from the executive side of the council and the managers; staff are well supported, supervised and receive good training to enable them to provide a good all round service.

One recommendation to improve practice has been made; this relates to taking into account the wishes, feelings and views of children in the development of the service.

Improvements since the last inspection

Three requirements and five recommendations were made at the last inspection in November 2008; these related to some documentary deficiencies, Criminal Record Bureau checks for administrative staff, and ensuring that the agency has a sufficient number of experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the agency. These

have now all been addressed, thus improving the quality of the service for all its users.

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.

The agency has developed a comprehensive programme of preparation and training for all adopters to ensure they have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. Adopters commented: 'The adoption preparation course was 'brilliant' and it was 'amazing to read about ourselves,' while another said, 'the preparation was extremely thorough and useful.'

All prospective adopters receive ongoing advice and guidance in safeguarding which ensures they have the knowledge and skills to keep children safe from any sort of harm. Adopters are aware of what to do if a child discloses possible abuse. The preparation training for adopters includes information on how to keep children safe from inappropriate use of the internet and social networking sites. Adopters spoken to valued the work of their assessing social workers and would contact them if they were unsure of any particular issue.

Children are confident, secure and happy. The agency seeks the views of children whenever possible and ensures their wishes are acted upon where appropriate.

Assessing social workers carry out health and safety checks on proposed adopters' households. The agency has a comprehensive health and safety checklist which is reviewed annually. Adopters' homes provide a wide variety of homely accommodation, where children are encouraged to take appropriately managed risks in order to further their confidence and development. Adopters confirmed that they had been asked to make safety adaptations to their homes as required and that all pets in the home had been risk assessed.

Prospective adopters are actively encouraged to ensure that children's health is promoted by a well-balanced diet and healthy lifestyle. The agency's post-order support plans carefully document all the information that has been shared with adopters regarding health and what needs are known or anticipated. These plans also make clear the responsibilities of the adoptive parent including parental responsibility pending adoption.

Adopters and the agency medical advisor are all sensitive to the children's wishes and feelings about medical and dental issues. The service provides excellent support from the medical advisor, who is a community paediatrician. She speaks to all

prospective adopters to advise them about medical conditions and also sees any adopted children who have ongoing medical issues. The agency promotes children's emotional and psychological health through a wide range of services. Children and their families may be referred to the local CAMHS LAAC team (child and adolescent mental health service looked after adopted children team) which offers a specialist service to adoptive families. This agency offers a therapeutic training course for adoptive parents and other courses as appropriate including individual counselling. Adopters speak highly of the expert advice and support offered by the agency.

The team manager attends meetings at all levels which helps to ensure that children do not 'drift' in the care system. Every effort is made to find a placement that will meet each child's needs. The adoption team work hard to support their colleagues in other teams to ensure that they produce high quality reports and that the needs of the child are kept paramount throughout the process. There is close liaison between the adoption team and all other agencies involved, to provide a 'joined-up' approach.

The service is dedicated to ensuring that children and adopters are appropriately matched. Prior to a match being agreed adopters are given comprehensive written information about the child's needs and history. They have an opportunity to discuss this and the implications for them and their family with their adoption and the children's social workers, the foster carer and where appropriate the Agency Medical Advisor. This helps to increase the chances that placements will be stable and secure for children. Once matched, children receive information about the proposed adoption household in well-formatted written material. Introductions take place in a carefully planned manner. There are several meetings with adopters and visits to their home. Adopters praised the degree of support they received from their social workers at this sensitive time.

The agency is one of a small number of local authorities to have received additional government funding for the multidimensional treatment foster care programme; this helps prepare some of the most vulnerable children to have a more stable and successful childhood through adoption. A small number of children have been prepared for adoption using this programme and this is one of the real strengths of the agency.

The safeguarding procedures are well understood and make specific reference to children placed for adoption; staff are trained in these procedures on an ongoing basis. This promotes a workforce that is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The service offers outstanding support to adopters and adults affected by adoption. Adopters receive good training during and after their preparation period and this is further supplemented by post approval training. This addresses a variety of issues such as promoting attachment, trauma, talking about adoption and managing

behaviour. There is a range of support services which includes a consultation process with psychotherapists, clinical psychologists and educational psychologists within the child and adolescent mental health service. Consultation is carried out with the carer and strategies provided to deal with any difficulties. This helps the adopters to promote the child's social and emotional development. One service user commented that 'West Sussex has changed our life around.' Therapeutic parenting programme 'gave us hope.' 'Things were so bad everything was on the line CAMHS LAAC team very helpful,' while another commented that the 'Service response was prompt, very quick, not left a long time and had supportive phone calls.' 'So impressed with how I've been treated.'

Adopters are given a year's free membership of an adoption support agency called Adoption UK, which provides a forum for mutual support and advice. A regular newsletter keeps families informed about service developments as do recently redesigned pages on the website of the local authority.

Adopters are well prepared and well supported to help the child develop positive relationships and behaviour while assisting the child to understand and manage their own behaviour. Adopters are really complimentary about the support they receive. Comments include: 'excellent service and very supportive,' to name but a few. One young person commented that staff from the agency 'were very pleasant and tried to understand my difficulties.' Adopted children are invited to attend social events organised for adoptive families while there is also an opportunity for them to take part in different activities. One young person commented that 'I thought Lodge Hill (activity centre) was fun and I would like to do it again.' There is also a range of workshops for adopters to enable them to meet with other adopters and to access a range of services which help support the adoptive placement. Adopters can receive a setting-up grant to enable them to purchase essential household items and are supported financially where appropriate.

The agency ensures during the assessment of the prospective adopters' suitability to adopt, that the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there. Homes are attractive, comfortable and vary in location and style to help meet a range of needs. The agency has clear written policies concerning the safety of the children in adopters' homes and in vehicles used to transport children.

Adopted children's educational progress is well supported by the service. The council has a corporate parenting team who promote the educational support of looked after children and who will support those children making the transition to being adopted. There is a virtual school which is committed to raising the educational attainment and aspirations of its pupils. There are clear examples of extra tuition being put in place to assist adopted children with their learning.

Adults and children affected by adoption receive a full assessment of their needs from appropriately skilled and qualified staff. Those adults who wish to continue with birth records counselling are supported by staff within the adoption support team or signposted to specialist services.

The agency has developed two support groups for birth mothers which are now self supporting. This unique service provides support for birth mothers throughout the county and there are plans to further develop this resource by providing an additional support group in the north of the county. The adoption support team support this group and the two leaders of the group have been on a counselling course. In addition home visits are made to birth mothers if they do not wish to attend the group meetings. One of the women who are involved with the group said the group 'changed my life'. This is an excellent development that offers an outstanding service to those birth mothers affected by adoption.

PAC provide an independent specialist adoption support service to adults and children, on a service level agreement. This agency operates its own system of consultation and feedback, but the commissioning agency is currently in the process of reviewing the contract to ensure high quality provision and good value for money.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children's wishes and feelings are taken into account throughout the adoption journey and they know how to obtain support and make a complaint. There is a whole service commitment to listening to children, and looked after and adopted children have a voice as a result of positive participation and inclusion mechanisms. Their social workers, foster carers and adopters advocate on their behalf to ensure they receive the services they need, and independent reviewing officers encourage them to express their views and engage in their reviews. However, there is no clear recorded mechanism in place to ensure that views of children are taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing the service. Children are also helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases and what to do if they are unhappy with their care. This is achieved by the provision of excellent child-friendly guides which give them information about how and to whom they can make a complaint about their care. This includes the contact details of the Children's Rights Director at Ofsted.

Social workers produce good quality life story work and later life letters which ensure that children are provided with a clear knowledge and understanding of their background. Life story books are of a high quality and are used as tools to help children understand their history. Later life letters are also well written and are sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. There is a clear understanding and commitment by adopters to maintain each child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to collect and store information from a child's birth family and early life. Adopters value this information and ensure it is available and shared with their children.

The service ensures that agreements for the contact arrangements between children and their families are in place and supported by adopters before the adoption order is made. Contact arrangements may be face to face, or via the letter box system.

The service will facilitate supervised contact between birth parents and adopted children where necessary. The adoption workers oversee an effective letterbox system to facilitate and monitor written communication between children and their birth families. There are robust systems in place to ensure that effective and comprehensive agreements are administered precisely. These arrangements contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining contact agreements for the benefit of the child's understanding in the future. The service is looking at developing a system that will routinely send out reminder letters.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their child and maintaining a child's heritage. The child's permanence reports clearly show that birth parents are involved in care planning and their wishes and views are consistently recorded whenever possible. Child permanency reports are variable in quality and content. For example, one report was withdrawn by the agencies panel advisor during the inspection, so that it could be improved. Senior managers are aware of the variability of these reports and have developed a clear monitoring process. The service has developed a programme of in-house training on writing child permanency reports which should lead to an improvement in this area.

Adopters demonstrate an empathic attitude towards the birth family and are encouraged to meet with the birth parents and then share information about the family of origin with their adoptive child. Adopters have commented that the preparation training plays a crucial part in helping them understand and accept this important aspect of adoption and adoptive parenting.

Birth records counselling is carried out within the adoption team. This complex and sensitive work is carried out to a high standard. Comments about intermediary services were extremely positive. In relation to a worker on the adoption support team a service user said, 'The agency were very supportive and sensitive to my needs.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

All adopters are received and welcomed without prejudice. The agency welcomes applicants from people from all walks of life and from all racial and cultural backgrounds. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff. The agency takes a sensitive approach in counselling and supporting people in making the decision about whether applying to adopt is the right course for them.

The adoption service works extremely hard to ensure that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are placed with families whose culture reflects that of the child. For example, social workers advertise outside the area and use contacts in neighbouring agencies to seek a suitable family. If no exact match is possible, plans are revisited regularly in order to avoid delays and ensure that every child has the opportunity to find a family. The agency actively recruits applicants from a variety of backgrounds to provide high quality placements to enable it to meet a wide range of children's needs. Information packs are sent out promptly to ensure that prospective applicants feel valued and well informed. Clear information about the adoption processes and why they are in place is provided both verbally at information sessions and in writing, starting with the initial enquiry and culminating in a preparation for applicants who progress to a formal application.

The agency's preparation of prospective adopters is thorough and generally of a high standard. Preparation courses are now held four times a year thus ensuring that prospective adopters do not have to wait long to attend such a course. Adopters reported that they found the preparation course to be thorough, well planned and organised and that it helped them to gain a better understanding of all aspects of adoption. Adopters commented favourably about the preparation courses. One commented that the training was 'very enlightening and informative; thought provoking really making us think about aspects we had not previously considered,' while another commented that 'Our preparation course was intense, well prepared with a variety of activities and relevant, experienced people to meet.'

The agency has an effective and appropriately constituted adoption panel, which meets regularly to provide a carefully considered service to children and prospective adopters. The panel is drawn from a central list of approved and properly inducted persons, all of whom have received appropriate safe recruitment checks. Good quality panel papers are produced in time for members to give each case due consideration. All of the adopters spoken to confirmed that they had been well prepared by their assessing social workers for attending the panel and were able to present their views.

The panel is very aware of the recent changes to the national minimum standards and the obligation to approve minutes promptly. Panel minutes are of good quality and are presented to the agency decision maker in time to make the decision within seven working days of their receipt. Adopters confirm that they receive decisions very promptly, orally and in writing. This helps to reduce anxieties and avoid undue delays in the process.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which sets out what can be expected of the service. It contains contact details for Ofsted to enable service users to report any concerns if they wish to do so. Children's guides to adoption and adoption support are available in formats appropriate to children's ages and needs. The guides contain contact information which enables children to seek independent advocacy and also contact the office of the Children's Rights Director. This helps to ensure that children can access independent support.

The adoption team is well managed by a qualified, experienced and skilled manager who is fully committed to ensuring safe, stable and secure placements for children are made and maintained. Staff are suitable to work with children and adoptive families, this being ensured by a robust recruitment and selection procedure. Staff are well supported to carry out their respective roles through supervision and appraisal, and there is a high level of peer support.

The agency has a good training programme and there are opportunities for staff to attend post qualifying training. Social workers from the adoption and children's team view the manager as being very supportive and knowledgeable in adoption work.

Social workers, psychologists, the medical and legal advisors and other professionals are appropriately qualified for the work. All have many years of relevant experience to help them meet children's needs. Approved adopters and social workers identify their training needs regularly and have equal access to a good all-round training and development programme.

Staff confirm that they are very well supported through in-depth regular supervision from their line manager. Supervision sessions are recorded and team meetings are held regularly to provide peer support as well as additional learning.

There are clear line management structures which provide professional accountability and support for all staff up to departmental leadership level. West Sussex is widely regarded as a good employer and many of the staff have worked for the agency for many years and this helps to provide a consistent approach throughout the agency.

The service is very well managed and monitored, to ensure positive outcomes for children and other service users. Regular meetings take place throughout the adoption service structure, to ensure that there is joined-up and timely decision making about children's needs. The service reports every six months to the executive, which provides a high level of scrutiny and monitoring. The adoption panel performs a very useful service in terms of quality assurance of reports and practice. The adoption team social workers are a valued resource, who help and support colleagues from other teams during the adoption process.

The authority has an effective and transparent complaints procedure, outlined in clearly written leaflets. Adopters and birth family members confirmed that they are able to access this service if they wish to do so.

The local authority has effective policies on recording and records management, which reflect the need for data protection and confidentiality. File records seen for both adopters and children are comprehensive, well-ordered and up to date. Records are regularly monitored, and securely and confidentially stored. Confidentiality agreements are made with panel members and any visitors to the service, including inspectors, which helps to ensure that personal information is safeguarded.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and

accessible to the public. The information technology systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan. Adoption records are archived within appropriate storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency strives hard to ensure that due care and attention is given to issues of equality and diversity throughout the whole of its operations. Services are user focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the agency is non-discriminatory and that they are treated with sensitivity and respect. Staff are provided with good support and training in this area. Commitment to these values is woven through every aspect of the service's work.

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 wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service. (NMS 1.6)