

Buckinghamshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC055713
Inspection date	22/09/2011
Inspector	Heather Chaplin / Rosemary Dancer
Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

Setting address	Buckinghamshire County Council, Children and Young People Social Care, County Hall, Walton Street, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, HP20 1YU
Telephone number	01296 383038
Email	nwood@buckscc.gov.uk
Registered person	Buckinghamshire County Council
Registered manager	
Responsible individual	Sue Imbriano
Date of last inspection	14/11/2008

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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 adoption and adoption support teams are based in Amersham. The adoption service is managed by an operations manager who also has responsibility for fostering. Each of the teams, working to a team manager, undertakes the full range of statutory adoption work. This includes assessment and preparation of prospective adopters, operating an adoption panel and supporting adoptive families. St Francis' Children's Society provides a service to birth family members. The adoption support team provides birth records counselling.

Some aspects of the service have been temporarily suspended pending a review of the work undertaken by the two teams. For example, intermediary work is not undertaken at present and service users are referred to an adoption support agency if they require this service.

The two children in care teams each have 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.

Services for those wishing to adopt from overseas are not provided directly by the county, but through Parents and Children Together under a service level agreement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The service achieves good outcomes for children, birth families, adopters and adults affected by adoption, with some outstanding features. Staying safe and organisation sections of this report have been rated good, with solid progress since the last inspection. There are minor shortfalls in terms of quality assurance and staffing levels in the administration team. Work also continues to reduce historical delays for adopters and children awaiting placement. This is work in progress and strenuous efforts are being made to address these areas, which have already been identified for improvement. Three recommendations have been made.

Enjoying and achieving has been rated outstanding due to the exceptionally strong provision of adoption support services. This is due to the coherent multi-professional approach to supporting children and families, the quality of work provided and the range of support options on offer to help ensure that children remain in permanent families.

Making a positive contribution is also rated outstanding. The quality of the work with birth family members and with adults affected by adoption is impressive. Outcomes

for these service users are extremely positive and those surveyed were very complimentary about the help they had received.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection, three recommendations were made. The first recommendation concerned a number of omissions from the health and safety checklist on prospective adopters' homes. The list is now fully comprehensive.

The second recommendation concerned the timing of staff starting in post following an application for a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. This has been addressed and no staff now start in post until CRB clearance has been received.

The third recommendation related to comments made on some child permanence reports by third parties, for example foster carers. On this occasion, no such comments were seen and reports were of a higher standard.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children enjoy good relationships with their adoptive parents. Adopters have received appropriate advice about how to protect children from the potential risks associated with the internet and social networking sites. They have a positive and healthy approach to managing risk and see adventurous activities as an important part of child development.

Adopters' homes seen during the inspection provide a safe, secure and attractive environment for children. Adopters are well aware of how to provide a healthy diet and any who smoke are encouraged to seek help to give up prior to placement.

Buckinghamshire has access to sound medical advice. The panel medical advisor shares responsibility for conducting medicals on children who are to be placed for adoption with a colleague and oversees all the medical reports to panel. She follows up the need for further information on medical conditions affecting prospective adopters and children. The medical advisor makes herself available to advise prospective adopters about any genetic or medical conditions in the birth family or child. This helps to ensure that adopters have complete and accurate medical information to inform their decisions.

Children seen during the inspection were happy and secure in their placements. Firm foundations for security are laid during the information sharing and introduction

period. Children's needs are clearly set out in the child permanence reports. Adopters confirmed that they had access to good quality information from the birth family and foster carers to help them to care for their child.

All adopters interviewed were happy with the pace and planning of introductions. Some children have benefited from the most imaginative and interesting introductory books from their matched family, which they clearly still treasure many months on from their initial placement.

The authority provides a service to intercountry adopters through a service level agreement with Parents and Children Together (PACT). PACT provides the necessary information to prospective adopters and conducts the assessment through an individual contract with the applicants. Buckinghamshire resume work with the family for the statutory aspects of the case.

The authority has a robust child protection policy in place and strong links with the Local Safeguarding Children Board. The interagency child protection procedures make provision for the investigation of abuse which took place many months or years previously. The authority strenuously follows up any safeguarding concerns that may arise during the assessment period. The adoption panel is kept informed of any child protection issues.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Prospective adopters are encouraged to gain additional experience prior to approval to help them to understand and manage their children's behaviour. There is an excellent programme of post-approval training, covering useful topics such as contact, positive parenting, language development, attachment and loss. Some adopters who had experience of older children through voluntary work, explicitly sought out experience with young children so that they would be better placed to understand their child's needs. A number of adopters commented on the excellent 'family and friends' workshop run by the adoption service.

The adoption support team includes a qualified play therapist, who works in a consultative role as well as undertaking direct work with children and families. The team operates an advice line for families and an effective 'surgery' system for those who need additional help. There is a group for adoptive fathers and a consultative group for young people. The team is also planning a group for the birth children of adoptive parents, to help them to adjust to a potentially challenging situation.

The local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) team has a lead specialist in adoption. This person holds a key role in supporting adoption throughout the service, in the looked after children's teams as well as in the adoption teams. She holds a crucial consultative role for staff and can also nominate certain children for referral for family therapy or further assessment within the CAMHS team. This helps children and families to access appropriate help rapidly. A monthly multidisciplinary

case review meeting reviews complex situations to ensure that children and families are receiving the right level of help from the most appropriate professional. Despite operational pressures in the adoption support team, the level of service provided is excellent.

Children are actively encouraged to explore their world and develop a range of interests appropriate to their age and understanding. All children seen during the inspection were very actively involved in interesting and educational pastimes. Families are positive, enthusiastic and energetic, which increases the chances that they can meet their children's needs for constructive activities. The adoption service holds regular events for adoptive families and encourages all to participate. This helps to ensure that adopters keep in touch with the service and that any issues can be addressed promptly, before they have a detrimental effect on the family.

Children are exceptionally well supported when they start in education. The adoption support team works with parents, teachers and schools to maximise adopted children's chances of achieving and maintaining educational progress. The outcomes for some children are excellent; for example in one situation, a child who had been thought to require many years of speech and language support, was discharged from that service after a brief period of therapy because of concerted work by his adoptive parents and the therapist.

Adoptive homes are all beautifully maintained and provide a very high quality of environment for children. They are all very different and reflect the diversity among the adopters. Robust risk assessments are carried out on the home and on any domestic or farm animals that the family may own.

All adults and children affected by adoption receive a thorough assessment of their adoption support needs. Excellent examples of assessments were seen during the inspection.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Most of the children seen during the inspection were too young to have been formally consulted during the adoption process, but those who are old enough receive exceptionally high quality direct work from specialist staff in the children in care teams. The adoption teams and children in care teams work closely with the lead specialist in adoption from the CAMHS team, to ensure that they receive effective consultation and advice about working with children.

Children receive excellent quality written information to help them to access a professional advocacy service should they wish to do so. They also have access to contact information for the office of the Children's Rights Director in case they wish to raise any concerns.

There are dedicated social workers for adoption and life story workers in each

children in care team around the county. The quality of the relationships between birth family members, their counsellor and these specialist adoption workers helps to ensure that birth relatives understand how important it is for the child to have the fullest information about their birth family and heritage. When this is available, it is incorporated into the child permanence reports, life story books and later life letters. Adopters interviewed were well aware of the importance of keeping information safely for their children to see and read in the future.

At the last inspection, the quality of life story work was already good and was done in a timely manner. The team was at the time developing closer links with the placing social workers. This new way of working is now fully embedded and has had clear benefits for children. Some excellent examples of their work were seen during this inspection.

There are strong links between this service, the worker from St Francis' Children's Society and the lead specialist in adoption from the CAMHS team. This helps to ensure that there is effective communication and consultation about this very sensitive area of direct work with children. Social workers and adopters view the life story workers as a highly valued resource, who have a direct and very positive impact on children's lives.

Adopters are very well prepared to manage contact with birth family members. Many have already met birth family members, and both parties said how well this helps to reduce the awkwardness of subsequent contact. The service has made a decision not to supervise all direct contacts in future, but supervision is provided if there is a need.

The letterbox system provides an effective and much valued information exchange system for approximately 200 children. Examples are provided to help adopters and birth family members to construct appropriate letters. Adopted young people approaching the age of 18 years are consulted about whether they wish to maintain contact using the letterbox system. This provides the opportunity for young people to choose how they keep in touch in future.

Birth family members receive help from St Francis' Children's Society, an independent charitable organisation which is also a registered voluntary adoption agency. Birth family members confirm that the service provided for them is excellent. They feel comfortable with the counselling and are able to make good use of this. The service has commissioned four sessions for birth family members, based on a brief therapy model.

There are groups for birth mothers and birth fathers, as well as an accessible, user-friendly drop-in centre. Service users commented on the excellent support offered to other birth children in their families and to any other extended family members affected by adoption. Although the commissioned hours have been reduced to 14 per week from 22 and there has been insufficient time to assess the impact of this, the outcomes for all current service users are exceptionally good. The take-up rate for this service is very high (approximately 75%), which is in itself evidence of the

impressive effectiveness of this service.

The quality of this service demonstrates the respect with which the authority views its birth family members. Their wishes and feelings are recorded on the child permanence reports and some birth parents explained how they had conveyed their wishes to the service during proceedings.

One parent said: 'I met the adopters and got on really well with them. I thanked the adoption team for finding such nice people to care for my children. I did argue with them about one point, as they were thinking about separating my children from each other, but in the end they agreed that they should be kept together.' Birth family members' views are conveyed to prospective adopters during their preparation training.

Buckinghamshire provides an excellent birth records counselling service to all those affected by adoption living within its boundaries. The adoption support team has suspended its intermediary service while it evaluates the extent of its remit, but the service has made this clear to enquirers. Service users interviewed were enthusiastic about the help provided. One person described the social worker as 'excellent, very professional', and thought that the information she gave him helped him to make important choices. He felt very well protected during the intermediary process (which was still taking place at that time) from the possibility of inappropriate contact. Another service user said: 'My counsellor is excellent and supports me 100%.'

A service user who had used the former intermediary service described the social worker as 'fantastic'. He was made aware of all the potential pitfalls in advance and was very well supported to trace and eventually meet his birth relative. Asked to rate the service he had received on a scale of one to four, where one is the highest, he said: 'Well, you can't get higher than one, can you?'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Male and minority ethnic staff are represented in the adoption team and on the panel. Premises used by the service are all accessible to disabled people.

The service is very well supported by a professional marketing colleague based in the fostering team, who leads recruitment for adoption. The service recruits prospective adopters reflecting the diversity of the community. Buckinghamshire is a corporate member of an organisation which seeks to promote adoption by same sex couples.

Children needing placements within a minority ethnic community are likely to be placed out of county in order to protect their identities. This means that on occasion the authority rejects applications from prospective adopters with whom a match is less likely within the consortium. The service is not yet able to place dual heritage and minority ethnic children within its boundaries, partly due to geographical constraints, but can access suitable placements within the consortium.

Adopters confirm that they receive a prompt response to their enquiries, with good quality written information. The service runs sufficient information evenings and preparation groups each year to ensure that prospective adopters are not kept waiting to embark on the journey towards adoption. However, there is some delay in the allocation of assessments due to operational pressures on social work time. Some statutory checks have in the past been started prior to the application; for example, Criminal Records Bureau checks. The inspectors were informed that this is no longer standard practice.

Adopters enjoyed their preparation courses and found them to be useful. Prospective adopters' reports are generally of good quality, although there are some instances where there has not been sufficient analysis within the report. This may lead the adoption panel to defer the case, which disrupts the panel timetable and has a negative impact on the prospective adopters. The in-team quality assurance process is therefore not always sufficiently robust.

There is a clear and detailed complaints process. Complaints are investigated thoroughly, but two of the three complaints were about delays for adopters.

The most recent approvals have taken on average between nine and 12 months between the date of application and the panel, which is slightly over the eight month deadline. However, the service does not have significant delays for most children. In the 12 months prior to July 2011, 92.66% of the children for whom adoption was the plan, were placed with adopters. Children who have to wait for longer periods are those from minority ethnic groups or disabled children. The service has already identified ways to address this.

The panel meeting observed was conducted in a professional and businesslike manner. The agency advisor is currently developing a central list of members and because the panel is busy, the frequency of meetings will increase to help address the increase in Special Guardianship cases. The panel administration is excellent, with clear and detailed minutes. The decision-making process is robust and timely.

The agency has a clear and regularly updated Statement of Purpose. There are two colourful and child-friendly leaflets to advise children of different ages about adoption. They contain all the required information to help children and young people raise any concerns.

An experienced, well-qualified operations manager has responsibility for both the fostering and adoption teams. Day-to-day management of the adoption and

adoption support teams is effected by two team managers. The adoption team also has a deputy team manager. There is a clear line of accountability throughout the structure up to and including the elected members of the council.

Files for panel members and staff contain sufficient information to show that panel members and staff are recruited appropriately to ensure they are safe to work with children and service users.

Adoption staff and other professionals involved with providing this service, are appropriately qualified for their roles. New staff receive a thorough induction and are well supported by colleagues and managers. The service has a good learning and development programme and engages outside agencies to provide essential training. For example, the British Association for Adoption and Fostering is to run a course on the assessment of sibling relationships and making plans for them to remain together or be placed with different adoptive families.

Social workers say that they are well supervised. They benefit from being a part of strong, supportive teams. New staff are very well supported through their induction.

The authority has always operated a staff appraisal system. A new performance management system is being introduced, which will be a significant change for social workers. These plans are not yet fully implemented. Despite the necessity to implement temporary reductions in the level of some aspects of the service, staff feel positive about working for Buckinghamshire and regard the authority as a fair and competent employer. Social workers and managers have access to excellent sources of external supervision and support, discussed above. This is seen as very beneficial.

There are clear arrangements for the management of the adoption teams in the absence of either one of the team managers or the operations manager. There are monitoring practices in place to ensure that consistently high quality standards are maintained. The adoption panel performs an effective quality assurance function and on occasion, has instructed the team to undertake further work to clarify various points in the assessment. The agency advisor also has an important quality assurance role and is independent of the line management structure, ensuring that there is no conflict of interest.

Reports are prepared for the elected members of the council every six months. The portfolio holder has embraced her role with enthusiasm and determination, to ensure that looked after and adopted children are a priority for the council. She has worked hard to understand the issues affecting social work in the county and is determined to ensure effective representation for looked after and adopted children.

Since the last inspection, the service has become fully staffed in terms of the adoption team. The adoption support team has taken on Special Guardianship Orders (outside the remit of this inspection) and this has created significant pressures. The adoption support team remains stretched in terms of resources.

The administrative service is already very stretched and is in the process of being

restructured. There are concerns that business support staff will have additional pressures placed up on them. There is only one full-time business support staff member for the adoption support team. Staff say that the service would benefit from another half-time post to ensure that the needs of service users can be fully met. The adoption team and adoption support teams are also very pressured, but are technically now fully staffed. The service has done well to achieve this, after long-term staff shortages in the past.

The service uses a computerised child record system which is congruent with the Integrated Children's System but which has limited usefulness for adoption. The Information Technology systems are currently under review. The service ensures that all records are kept in a safe environment, protected as far as possible from the effects of fire and flood. The county has an archive which offers exceptional levels of security and protection for its most valuable documents. There is a business continuity plan and a risk assessment in place to help minimise risks and ensure safe conservation of any damaged records. Office premises seen are suitable for the purpose, with access to the public via a secure reception area.

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 prospective adopters' reports are thoroughly checked for evidence based information prior to submission to the adoption panel (NMS 10.11)
- continue to work towards reducing delays between application and approval of adopters (NMS 17.7)
- continue to keep under review the provision of business support to the adoption teams. (NMS 28.1)