

# Adoption NCH - Midlands

Inspection report for independent adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman / Vivien Slyfield
<b>Type of Inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Registered person</b>	NCH
<b>Registered manager</b>	Sally Heaven-Richards
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Deborah Lightfoot
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	29 June 2004

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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## 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**

Adoption NCH Midlands is a branch of NCH, which is a well established voluntary adoption agency. The branch is based in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters who live within a 50 mile radius of its operation. Approved adopters are then offered support, training and social events. The branch works with Local Authorities nationwide to provide suitable families for children who are looked after and who cannot be placed appropriately within their own resources. The branch also provides adoption support to adoptive families and birth families, birth records counselling and an intermediary service to people adopted through NCH in the past.

### **Summary**

This inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over four days with an additional half day being used for observation of the adoption panel and the interview of the panel chairperson. During the course of the inspection, four adopters were case tracked which involved reading their files and interviewing them at their homes. In addition, significant staff were interviewed including the manager of the project, the two deputies, the agency decision maker, the adoption team, the administrative staff and the post adoption support worker. Supporting documentary evidence was read, and other case files and a selection of personnel files and panel members files were examined.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Since the last inspection, the branches of the adoption agency have come under the direct line management of the adoption agency manager, to form a Business Management Unit. This has improved consistency of practices and facilitated the monitoring and controlling of the adoption business of the organisation and there are better links between the branches. New policies and procedures have been developed to take account of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Safeguarding standards have been introduced and staff and management have taken part in safeguarding training. Better information is now provided to prospective adopters at various stages in the process. Systems have been developed and following feedback from newly approved adopters, there is now contact with a social worker shortly after approval. There has been a lot of staff changes, with very well established staff leaving the branch. Although this has caused some difficulties, it is to the credit of the branch manager that the effect on the service appears to be minimal and there has been effective use of sessional staff. The team now has one social work vacancy to fill. Administrative systems have been improved to be more accessible to all staff. The website has been developed and profiles of adopters are more readily available. The development of the Midlands Black Families project is being piloted, with a social worker placed within the branch but managed from London Black Families project.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is inadequate.

The branch has a clear understanding of the types of children who will need adoptive families. The responsibility for marketing is given to one of the deputy managers, who has an oversight of this. NCH nationally are responsible for some recruitment and the local branch links into this, as well as undertaking some of their own. A recent development is the plan to develop a Midlands Black Families Service. A social worker from London Black Families is based in the Midlands office to encourage recruitment of black and Asian families. This offers a choice and flexibility to those families who show an interest, as they can either be referred to London Black Families for their assessment or have it done locally. The branch has a number of families who have been approved for some time without a placement of children. The manager should consider whether the branch are assessing families with whom placements can be made, otherwise their resources are not being targeted appropriately. Data regarding placements indicate that the branch is successful in providing families for sibling groups and in one instance played an active part in liaising with a local authority to facilitate the placement of a child with other siblings, being prepared to allocate resources to extend the adopters' approval to ensure there was no delay in placement. The branch has a thorough and documented preparation, assessment and approval process for applicants. The daily duty system enables enquirers to speak to a social worker immediately and they can then come to the office by appointment for an initial visit to speed up the process. The preparation training is thorough and adopters commented that it was thought provoking and helped them change their thinking. It includes a family and friends day to enable the support networks to be fully apprised of what adoption is about, which one adopter felt had more impact coming from the social workers, rather than from them. Checks undertaken are thorough and include all employer references and contact where possible with all former partners. This is embedded in practice and social workers demonstrate a sound awareness of the reasons for this. Although the branch undertakes enhanced Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on applicants, it should ensure this is documented as the current documentation does not state the level or the date of the disclosure. Adopters spoke highly of their assessing social workers and felt they were sensitive, kept appointments and kept them informed. 'Form F' assessments seen were of a variable quality in terms of depth of analysis, exploration of issues, information and evidence of competencies. Health and safety checks should be improved to include guns, dangerous weapons, and poisonous plants. The branch has developed a post approval pack of information which details the matching and introduction process and also contains forms for inclusion on the National Adoption Register, the Consortium and the website. The adoption panel has clear written policies and procedures to guide its operation. Adopters are invited to attend, although the branch makes sure that they know this is their choice. Adopters interviewed said they were made welcome and asked appropriate, pertinent questions. The panel is appropriately constituted and the observation of the panel indicated that members were well prepared, made appropriate contributions and asked relevant questions. The panel is held at a reasonable frequency, it is well-organised and the minutes are very good. One panel member's CRB check was over a year out of date. This is not an acceptable practice and must be rectified before he can sit on the panel again. The agency decision is made in a timely and considered manner, taking into account all the information and the minutes of the panel. Notifications of the decision are sent out within the timescales but consideration should be given to the wording of the letters to clarify the decision making process. The agency undertakes appropriate recruitment and selection procedures in relation to its staff and all the social workers are qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and experienced. Two have undertaken the post-qualifying award and one is in the process of doing this. The agency has a complaints procedure which is given to applicants. Adopters confirmed they were aware of how to complain. There have been no complaints in the last year

but there is a recording system in place which enables the manager to collate and monitor all complaints and which feeds into the adoption report for the agency. Case recording in one case inspected indicated that a child placed for adoption had been smacked but that the adoption social worker had not notified the local authority or their line manager of this. Appropriate child protection procedures had not been followed in this instance and this is a cause for concern. The manager and staff have undertaken safeguarding training and intend to do this at a more advanced level.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

Following feedback from adopters who commented that the level of support post-approval but pre-placement was not as strong as they would like, the branch has improved its systems. Adopters now receive a visit within a few days of approval, they receive a post approval pack of information and are assisted in completing the forms for their inclusion on the National Adoption Register and the information sent to the Consortium. The majority of adopters interviewed confirmed that they were happy with the level of contact and support they received. One adopter said: "we were fortunate that NCH was there or we might not have gone ahead with the adoption". Another said: "we wouldn't have carried on if not for NCH". There was evidence of a variety of support, both emotional and practical and social workers are strong advocates for their families when this becomes necessary. Adopters felt the preparation training helped them once children were placed with them and this is supported by regular visits, regular contact and emergency contact numbers for staff which they can use at any time. Although there is a designated post adoption worker, adoption support is seen as the role of all workers and the post adoption worker will provide advice, support or co-working with other social workers if this is seen as helpful. She will also work directly with families, providing advocacy, assistance with claiming financial entitlements, signposting them to other agencies and liaison with Local Authorities to obtain their assessment of support needs. There was evidence of prompt response when a family in crisis contacted the agency. The agency sends out an annual newsletter to all approved families, there are two social events a year, post approval training opportunities and workshops. The agency has access to legal, medical and psychological advice, with written protocols in place to access this. The medical advisor to the adoption panel provides good written medical information on prospective adopters and was reported to deal sensitively with applicants if there are any medical issues.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The amount of contact with birth families who are currently going through the adoption process is very limited, due to the nature of the work of a Voluntary Adoption Agency. There has been experience in the recent past of the agency offering an independent service to birth parents on behalf of a Local Authority, which was undertaken by one of the social workers in the agency, but this has now ceased. The importance of the birth family to the adopted child and the issue of contact is dealt with in depth in the preparation training which all prospective adopters undertake. One adopter commented that this was significant in altering their attitude towards contact. Through observation and discussion with adopters, it was clear that they recognise the importance of keeping and sharing information about the birth family and they demonstrated an openness in talking about adoption. All adopters are encouraged to attend a days training on "Explaining Adoption", which was seen as useful. There was evidence that social workers

will strive to obtain as much information about the birth family as possible from the child's Local Authority if this is not readily forthcoming. Services to birth families include intermediary services, birth records counselling and information about tracing. There is also a small letterbox service which facilitates contact between birth families and their adopted children. Guidance is provided on letter writing if required. There was evidence from case files, from a service user evaluation form and from discussions with staff of extremely good practice in relation to working with birth families who had historical links with the agency. This demonstrates the agency's lifelong commitment to birth families and all involved in the adoption process. The birth parent was treated with great respect, sensitivity and empathy in what was an extremely emotional experience. There was evidence that information about other support groups was provided. At all stages throughout the process, the birth parent was enabled to make choices about what happened and was supported in those choices. All social workers are involved in post adoption support and it is clear that the experiences gleaned from working with adopted adults and birth families is used to inform their current practice.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has a formally approved statement of purpose which contains information about the branch, is comprehensive and well written. The policies and procedures of the agency reflect the aims and objectives of the statement of purpose. They have also developed a children's guide, outlining the role of NCH to children placed with their adoptive families. All written information can be translated and the branch provided evidence of the use of a translation agency. There are clear eligibility criteria in place and evidence that a variety of adopters are assessed and approved. There is clear written information which is sent to applicants and there is opportunity to talk to adopters at the preparation training. 'Dial an adopter' week has been piloted recently, which gave opportunity to interested parties to telephone a number and speak to an approved adopter. The management of the branch is sound and effective. The branch manager is appropriately qualified, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable. She has demonstrated creative use of resources during a recent staffing crisis, and there was little evidence that prospective adopters had been subjected to delay despite severe staffing problems at the time. There are two deputy branch managers and they were clear about the delegation of responsibilities and their specific roles and remits. Staff interviewed said that communication was good. There are quarterly reports to the Children's Services Committee which cover the work of the adoption agency and all the branches. The branch sends out evaluation forms to applicants and approved adopters at all stages of the adoption process and there is evidence which shows that feedback is taken seriously and acted upon. Since the last inspection, the management of the adoption agency has changed and there is now a Business Management Unit, with the adoption agency manager having direct line management responsibility for the managers of the branches. This has improved the monitoring and management systems, providing an overview and consistency amongst the branches and appropriate professional support. Staff interviewed confirmed that they received regular supervision and this was in evidence in their files. There is also an appraisal system in place. Staff said that access to training was "brilliant". The staffing levels of the branch appear sufficient as there was no evidence of delay. The branch manager uses sessional workers flexibly and creatively when there are any shortfalls in provision. The administrative team have undergone a lot of changes recently but they are becoming

established and staff spoke highly of the office manager, who has developed systems which can be accessed by all. Staff said they loved working for NCH and saw the organisation as a good employer. Case records were generally well maintained. However, there had been difficulties which were notified to the Commission for Social Care Inspection, concerning a specific circumstance and individual. This has led to significant gaps in recording on some files. This has been addressed by the agency. There is a file audit system in place and there was evidence that cases were discussed in supervision and the records placed on the files. Some case records were not signed and this should be addressed. The storage of records is appropriate, although the storage of the archives could not be inspected as this is maintained at another branch. Since the last inspection, the branch has moved premises. The new premises are accessible, very pleasant, provides appropriate accommodation for meetings and interviews and is an indication of the value placed on workers and service users.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
11	ensure all panel members have up to date CRB checks before they sit on the adoption panel	7 September 2007
19	ensure staff implement the child protection procedures.	10 August 2007

### Recommendations

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

- ensure the CRB level and date of disclosure is detailed on the adopters' file - standard 4
- extend the health and safety questionnaire to include guns, weapons and poisonous plants - standard 4
- consider re-wording the notification of decision letter to clarify the decision making process - standard 13
- ensure that case records are signed by the author - standard 25.



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## **Annex**

## **Annex A**

### **National Minimum Standards for independent adoption agency**