



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

North Yorkshire County Council Adoption Service

**Ryedale House
Old Malton Road
Malton
North Yorkshire
YO17 7HH**

Lead Inspector

Announced Inspection
7th, 26th – 28th July & 23rd August 2005 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Adoption*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained 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

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above.

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SERVICE INFORMATION

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Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Mrs Sheila Ingram
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

None

Date of last inspection

This was the first inspection by the CSCI

Brief Description of the Service:

North Yorkshire County Council operates its own adoption service, which is located within the children's services and is part of the Social Services' Directorate. The adoption agency is managed by a County Adoption Service Manager, who is based in the Council offices in Malton. The adoption team provides a county wide service, with staff located in five different offices across the county to ensure accessibility of service. The panel adviser is based at County Hall, in Northallerton. A comprehensive adoption service is provided to children and adults, which includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters; pre and post-placement support of adopters, approval of non-agency adopters; assessment of the placement needs of all children with an adoption plan, the matching and placement of children with adoptive parents; support for children post-placement; post adoption contact. An independent counselling and support service is provided via a service level agreement with After Adoption, a support and counselling service for adults who have been adopted is also provided. The service commissions overseas adoptions to a voluntary agency, in Doncaster.

SUMMARY

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

The adoption service demonstrated a real commitment to this inspection for despite managerial sickness, the pre-inspection documentation was thorough and provided in a timely manner. Arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful and enabled inspectors to make effective use of their time. The facilities and resources provided were of a good standard and everyone involved in the inspection were most helpful and courteous.

Prior to the inspection, the pre-inspection material and the questionnaires, which had been returned to the inspection team were read and analysed. The information obtained from these documents has been incorporated into the inspection findings.

The inspection, itself, was carried out over three days and involved three inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed two adoption panels for half a day. Interviews were undertaken with the Head of children's services, other senior personnel, team managers, adoption and childcare social workers and administrative staff. An elected member, who had lead responsibility for children's services, was also interviewed, as well as the adoption panel's medical, legal advisor and chairperson. A sample of children and adopters' files were read and four adoptive families were visited. A variety of agency records were inspected, administrative resources examined and seven office premises seen. Security issues relating to both record keeping and the premises were also considered. In addition, the inspection team received thirteen questionnaires from prospective and approved adopters, one from birth family members, ten from placing social workers and three from specialist advisors. The responses received from these questionnaires, together with the information obtained from interviews with adopters have been reflected in the main body of this report.

What the service does well:

The County Council demonstrated an understanding and commitment to the corporate parenting role. The executive member of the Council with lead responsibility for children's services was a good advocate and supported the development of good practice and outcomes for children. The County Council had made a significant investment in the adoption agency. This resulted in the appointment of a County Adoption Service Manager, a team manager and a threefold increase in adoption staff and for the first time placed the agency in a real position to address the National Minimum Standards for Adoption.

The management team had a clear vision for the future development of the adoption service and recognised the need for it to be an integral part of the childcare services. In a relatively short time, the team had made real progress in meeting the National Minimum Standards, as illustrated by the recent revision and development of adoption policies, procedures and written guidance. The introduction of management information, administrative systems, along with the development of regular staff supervision and appraisal formed a good basis to monitor, control and ensure quality performance of the agency. The managerial team was also involving adopters in the ownership and development of the service.

An adoption team had been established, which was extremely experienced and skilled. They had a high regard for the management team and confident in their ability to realise the vision for their service. The team were enthusiastic, committed to improving practice and determined to achieve a high standard of work. The planned re – structuring of the childcare services had the potential to provide a clearer focus to the work, improve the care planning process and enable adoption to be prioritised more effectively. This, together with the fact that the childcare staff respected and were eager to support the adoption team augured well for the future development of the service.

The agency had developed a tracking system to monitor children with an adoption plan and to ensure the plan was realised effectively and timely.

There was a clear well structured preparation programme, which was routinely evaluated and changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters generally considered the programme interesting and thought provoking.

The agency had made strenuous efforts to improve the quality of information provided adopters, with the introduction of life appreciation days.

There was a service level agreement with Doncaster Adoption and Family Welfare Society (DAFWS) to provide an inter country adoption service. Adopters indicated that this voluntary agency provided a good quality service.

The agency's specialist advisers were extremely knowledgeable; child focussed and provided an excellent service to the adoption agency; often using their own personal time to achieve this.

On an individual basis there was evidence of effective engagement, involvement and support to birth parents. Care, concern and consideration to birth parents was demonstrated in the sensitively worded, individual letters sent to them from the agency's decision maker and agency workers.

The adoption panel was properly constituted, well organised and demonstrated a good understanding of adoption. Administrative support provided to the panel was of a high standard. Decision-making was thorough and timely.

Complaints to the adoption agency were handled thoroughly and the system was well managed.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This was the first inspection of the agency under the current legislation.

What they could do better:

The agency's recruitment strategy should be refined, with mechanisms to evaluate its effectiveness developed. The agency would benefit from a more effective prioritisation of its work.

The agency's preparation groups could be enhanced with provision of a preparation group for those adopting a child for a second time and for relative adopters. The venue and times of preparation groups should also be reviewed.

Adopters' assessments were found to be of variable quality. In some cases there was no evidence to confirm that all the necessary statutory checks had been carried out in respect of the adopters. This needs to be urgently addressed through the development of more robust quality assurance, monitoring and recording systems.

The agency's child protection procedures should include specific references to children placed for adoption and staff provided with up-dated child protection training.

Whilst the agency demonstrated a clear commitment to foster carers, who adopt a child receiving the same services as other prospective adopters, this was not being totally reflected in practice and required addressing.

In view of the geographical size of the county and issues of service accessibility for adopters, the agency needs to consider the appropriateness of commissioning one agency to provide an inter country adoption service.

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work and this was reflected in the varied picture presented by adopters. To ensure effective development and accessibility to these services, the agency should address capacity issues within the adoption team and develop a coherent, strategy of support. The adoption agency was involved in partnership working between a number of agencies, though this was variable across the County Council and a Countywide approach was required.

The adoption panels should develop its quality assurance role. Regular meetings between the chairperson and senior managers of the agency would also assist this process and provide a useful mechanism for feedback to the agency. An alternative venue for one of the adoption panels should be considered.

The agency should develop a coherent strategy for working with birth parents and their families. The independent counselling and support service provided by After Adoption, along with the other advocacy services outside and within the Council should also be actively promoted.

A strengthening of the agency's managerial team would prove beneficial in enabling the agency to fully realise the national minimum standards for adoption. Moreover, in view of the increased demands that are likely to be made on the service in the future the allocation of resources to this service should be kept under constant review.

Staff felt the quality of training provided was generally good, though were of the view that further support in post qualification study was required if staff were to achieve the necessary professional development.

A greater emphasis should be placed on the development, management and monitoring of the adoption records, particularly in relation to the content and organisation of the adoption records. Issues of diversity should also be considered more fully and addressed. Further work is required to improve the quality of form E's and all birth parents should be given the opportunity to receive a copy of this document. Some of the files were not maintained in accordance with the agency's policies, procedures, current legislation and regulations.

The procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff must be more robust. Personnel files and panel members' files were not kept in accordance with the adoption regulations and this must be immediately addressed.

The adoption services records were held securely however, the agency should risk assess the premises where these records are stored to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water. . There was evidence that some of the agency's adoption records were not effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system and attention should be given to this. The agency should develop a disaster recovery plan.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Being Healthy - There are no NMS that map to this outcome

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing - There are no NMS that map to this outcome

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- Adoptors are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15&19

The agency had effected successful placements. Robust monitoring, quality assurance and recording systems must be developed to ensure the child's welfare is promoted and safeguarded.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had recently completed a written recruitment strategy, which was based on an analysis of the current need of local children waiting to be adopted. An evaluation of the agency's recruitment activity for 2004/05 had also been carried out, though it was recognised that the current information systems used required development, if the information obtained was to be of real value to the agency. In addition, a tracking system had been devised to monitor the progress of all children who had an adoption plan; the information was then shared on a monthly basis with managers and staff. This system had the potential to ensure the agency's recruitment activities were effectively targeted and was a useful mechanism to prevent the drift of children in the care planning process. However, this system had only been operational for a short time, so preventing its effectiveness being fully assessed.

Adopters spoken with, together with the information obtained from returned questionnaires, resulted in a rather mixed picture being obtained regarding the agency's response to initial enquiries, for whereas some adopters stated they spoken to in an "extremely friendly", "courteous", "empathetic" and helpful manner" and had received their information packs "promptly"; other adopters stated that the agency showed a "lack of interest in them" and they "were given no encouragement to proceed with their enquiry". One adopter said that initially they had received "no response" from the agency and had been forced to approach the agency a second time, before receiving the information they required. Another adopter stated they had initially received "inaccurate information", which had caused them some distress and a delay in the adoption process. During the course of the inspection, evidence was obtained that this latter matter had been effectively addressed by the agency.

Whilst adopters gave no clear indication in their questionnaires as to when the above difficulties occurred, some of the comments made, would suggest they might have arisen during the time the agency was severely understaffed. The quality of service provided adopters at the initial response stage had also been addressed with the production of a staff document, which described the process for anyone enquiring about adoption and service delivery expectations, including the agency's timescales to respond to adopters.

A formal preparation, assessment and approval process was carried out in respect of adopters. However, whilst there was a clear commitment that foster carers, who adopt a child they have previously fostered, receive the same services as other prospective adopters, this was not being totally reflected in practice and should be addressed.

The service's preparation programme was clear, well structured and routinely evaluated, with changes implemented where necessary. Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from returned questionnaires, indicated that the preparation programme was well organised, the materials used were described as "interesting", "stimulating" and "thought provoking". Two adopters stated that the information provided in the preparation groups painted a rather "negative" picture of adoption. One adopter described the programme, as being "excellent," though expressed some dissatisfaction about the venue, which had been some distance from their home. Several other adopters expressed a similar view, with one adopter citing the expense of car parking as being a prohibitive factor in the use of this venue. Some adopters, who were in employment, stated that they had not been given sufficient notice of the preparation group dates, whilst others indicated that the times had not been convenient. Another adoptive family, who were adopting a second child, stated that the preparation group would have been more effective, if it had been specifically designed to meet their needs as second time adopters.

Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from the returned questionnaires, indicated that the assessment process had been "clear" and "well structured". The inspectors found a mixed picture though in relation to the commencement of adopters' assessments, for whereas some stated their assessment had commenced speedily, others indicated that staff shortages had resulted in them having to wait a long time, for example, over nine months. Discussions with the agency's managerial team indicated that the recent increase in staffing levels would ensure future assessments were completed within the nationally agreed timescales. There were early indications to suggest that this may prove the case with several adopters stating that their second assessment had been carried out in a more "timely manner". A number of adopters stated that their assessment had been "thorough", "rigorous" yet "sensitively" handled. One adoptive family described their assessment as "very probing, sensitive and incisive" and said the worker "got us to challenge our thoughts". A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of the form F. In the returned placing social workers' questionnaires several commented positively about the quality of the agency's assessments.

Examination of a sample of adopters' files though indicated that the assessments were of variable quality, for whilst some were of a good standard in so far as they were detailed and analytical, others were less detailed and analytical, for example, in one form F there had been insufficient attention paid to the needs of the adopter's own child and the likely effects their decision to adopt might have on this child. In other form F's not enough reference had been made to diversity issues. In one file, the adopters were applying to adopt a second child, whilst the contemporaneous records demonstrated that the worker had explored their adjustment to parenthood, assessed their parenting capacity and considered the effects an adoption might have on their other child; this information had not been fully and effectively reflected in the form F. In another file, allegations had been made against an adopter, who had a child in placement. Whilst the authority had carried out an assessment of the situation, there were still a number of issues outstanding at the time of the inspection, which required urgently addressing. Information concerning these matters is to be forwarded to the Commission and dealt with outside this inspection. In a third file, there was no evidence of a CRB check on the adopters and in a fourth file, a child had been placed on an emergency basis with a family friend and an initial police check carried out with the family protection unit. However, despite the fact this child had remained in this home for eighteen months, there was no evidence on file of a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check being carried out until the carer applied to adopt. Clearly CRB checks are of crucial importance in the safeguarding of children and the local authority must ensure such issues of practice do not occur again.

There was evidence that the agency's managerial team had a realistic view about the quality of adopters' assessments and were making strenuous efforts to improve practice, for example, through the completion of an enhanced

application form, the use of a health and safety checklist, the taking up of employer references where relevant, the development of a protocol in relation to checking previous partners etc. Whilst these changes clearly augured well for the future development of the agency's assessment practice, the inspectors were of the view that increased managerial scrutiny would support such improvements, for example, in ensuring all relevant matters in relation to adopters and their immediate family had been fully assessed, analysed, with all appropriate references and checks carried out.

The agency had recently produced written information about the matching, introduction, placement process and support to adopters. There were also plans to improve upon this with the development of an adopters' handbook. In the past the agency had provided verbal information about these matters.

The agency's matching policy and procedures clearly emphasised the importance of children being matched with adopters who met their needs, however it was recognised an ideal match was not always possible to achieve. In such situations, rather than compromise a child's need for adoption, a child was placed with a family who best met their needs. There was evidence that in such situations, the agency provided the adoptive family with the necessary support and ensured that any gaps in relation to the children's background and needs were met. The importance of sibling groups remaining together was also acknowledged by the agency, though again there was recognition that there were some circumstances where the separation of siblings was appropriate. Any decision to place siblings together or to separate them was taken very seriously and there was evidence of psychological assessments being carried out to support such professional decision-making.

Whilst inspectors were able to confirm the children were well - matched with the adopters they visited, such evidence was not always apparent in some of the case files examined, for example, in one file, the form E used at the matching panel was eighteen months out of date. In a second file, the matching report could have been enhanced with a detailed assessment of the child's needs, the adopters' attributes and an analysis indicating whether the adopters had the necessary qualities and abilities to meet the child's needs. Similarly, in another file, the matching documentation did not clearly record the reasons for the child being matched to one family, as opposed to another. In a fourth file, there was no evidence that child's views and wishes regarding adoption had been ascertained. In some children's files there was clear evidence that work was being undertaken to prepare and enable the child to move into their adoptive placement, in others where a child had the same needs, such evidence indicated delays in the work being carried out or was absent. The agency needs to ensure direct work, where appropriate, is carried out in a timely manner to ensure placement stability.

The agency had made strenuous efforts to improve the quality of information about a child provided to adopters, as evidenced by the training, mentorship

and various guidance documents that had been provided to the childcare workers. These efforts were clearly appreciated by childcare staff, who spoke positively about the help and support provided them by the adoption staff. However, despite all the work undertaken by the adoption team, the quality of the form E's found on some of the children's files were variable and on occasions not up-to-date. The inspectors were of the view that consideration should be given to form E training becoming part of the mandatory training provided childcare workers.

Adopters generally indicated that the agency had provided them with as much information about the child, as they possessed, however, one adoptive family, stated that they had received insufficient information regarding the children placed with them. In view of the fact that children sometimes have a number of social workers, whilst being a looked after child, the agency had begun to use life appreciation days so adopters could benefit from first hand, qualitative information about a child's life.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was in the process of introducing a system to address the death of an adopted child and some draft documentation had been produced.

There was evidence that adopters provide information about themselves through the completion of a family book, however, the agency should give further consideration to advice, guidance and training being provided to adopters in the completion of such albums.

The County Council's Child Protection Procedures do not specifically refer to children placed for adoption and this must be addressed. The agency must also ensure all staff have access to information, which would enable them to contact the Commission for Social Care Inspection regarding any concern about child welfare and safety. In addition, it is recommended that all adoption staff should receive up-dated child protection training.

The agency had produced draft panel policies and procedures. These documents contained all the information required and had been circulated to panel members and staff. The constitution and membership of both adoption panels were in accordance with the adoption regulations, though the agency needs to give some consideration to the appointment of panel members from ethnic minority groups. In addition, the agency needs to note that CRB checks are no-longer portable. The agency must therefore carry out their own CRB check in relation to panel members.

Observation of both adoption panels demonstrated that they were well organised and generally operated in an efficient and effective manner. The panels were convened at appropriate frequencies to meet the needs of prospective adopters and children. However, greater attention needs to be paid to their quality assurance role. Regular meetings between the panel

chairperson, the county adoption manager and the agency-decision maker might also prove a useful mechanism to achieve this. In addition, the agency should ensure all panel papers are up-to-date and provided in advance of the panel.

Information obtained from adopters, who had attended panel, spoke positively about their panel experience and indicated that panel members had been "extremely friendly", "welcoming" and "had made real efforts" to put adopters "at their ease". A couple of adopters indicated that the choice of venue for the Harrogate Panel had not been appropriate, as it failed to provide them with the necessary "privacy". There was also a concern that individuals outside the panel might hear the information. In view of these comments, the agency should consider an alternative venue for this panel.

The panel minutes could be improved if they were clearer, more structured, with panel discussions and reasons for the panel's conclusions fully detailed.

The agency decision – maker took his responsibilities seriously and his practice was extremely child focussed. All panel papers and minutes were received and thoroughly examined prior to the agency's decision being made. The agency's decision was made without delay and prospective adopters, the child and birth parents quickly informed.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. However, the personnel files examined did not contain all the information required by regulation, for example, one file did not contain two references. In other files there was no evidence of telephone enquiries being made to verify the legitimacy of references, nor documentary evidence of relevant qualifications, although there was evidence of the managers being registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). In some files, there was no proof of identity, for example, a recent photograph. There was also evidence of the personal details relating to a number of staff being incorporated into one system, which is contrary to the Data Protection Act. These matters were discussed with the head of the children's services at the end of the inspection, who immediately agreed to address them.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The adoption agency provides support for adoptive parents (NMS 6)
- The agency has access to specialist advisers as appropriate (NMS 18)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

6 & 18

The agency provides support for adoptive parents, with access to a developing range of post adoptive services. Capacity issues within the adoption team, together with the lack of a clear, coherent, comprehensive support strategy, is compromising the quality of support provided.

EVIDENCE:

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work and there was a clear commitment to its on-going development.

The support services included financial support packages to adopters in both the pre and post adoption stages; however upon examination it emerged they were not operating efficiently and needed to be reviewed and developed. Adoption staff offered regular advice and support to adopters during placement and had recently re-established support service groups in various areas in the county. They were also providing post placement and post adoption training to adopters and in the ensuing months intended to develop the programme provided. In addition, they had a service level agreement with After Adoption, Yorkshire, which provided a variety of support services to adopters. Adoptive families and children also had access to the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) and in some parts of the County there was a fast track system for adopted children to access this service. Clearly, all adopted children should have access to such a system and the agency needs to give consideration to its development through out the County. Similarly, extending the provision of services as provided at Lime trees in York to other parts of the County would be beneficial. In addition to the above services, the agency was also able to spot purchase therapy packages from independent sources to support an adoptive family where there were difficulties in placement. The agency had a service level agreement with DAFWS to provide an inter country adoption service to those adopters wishing to adopt a child from Overseas. A North Yorkshire adoption worker was also allocated to each family, who had an

inter country placement. In view of the geographical size of the County and issues of service accessibility for adopters, consideration should be given as to whether an additional agency specialising in inter country adoption should be commissioned.

Adopters spoken with presented a mixed picture in relation to support service information and indeed the support services they had received; for whilst some adopters stated that they had been "well supported", "the workers are always there when needed"; other adopters were not as positive and indeed two adopters were highly critical of the agency stating that they had received no support whatsoever from the agency. One adopter indicated there had been a lack of clarity regarding the services provided. Another adoptive family stated that they would have appreciated more practical help and advice prior to the placement of their child. One adopter said they had experienced a significant delay in accessing financial support, which had caused them some financial hardship. In view of the fact the agency has only recently been staffed to a level enabling support services to be developed, such comments are hardly surprising. However, to ensure the quality of the agency's support services are not compromised and further development occurs staffing levels within the agency should be kept under review. A clear emphasis will also need to be placed on partnership and collaborative work with other agencies.

The agency's preparation and assessment process ensured adopters received information about the significance of a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self - image. Adopters were helped to understand the need for and to develop strategies to assist a child to address all forms of discrimination. Adopters visited clearly understood the importance of ensuring information provided by birth families was kept safe.

Recent interim guidance on disruptions and meetings had been recently completed to ensure consistency of practice. There had been one adoption disruption during the past year and the meeting chaired by a member of staff from the agency. Whilst this meeting had been handled in a sensitive and thoughtful manner, the disruption minutes and indeed the subsequent panel minutes provided no indication of what had been learnt from this disruption and whether it had any implications for the agency's future practice.

The agency had access to a legal adviser and two medical advisers. Staff confirmed that the advisers were available for consultation, if required and were described as being "extremely knowledgeable" and provided "an excellent service". All the advisers were said to be "child focussed" and prepared to use their own time, if necessary, to provide a quality service, for example, one medical adviser had seen some adopters on an Easter Sunday to ensure they received the necessary information and support they required. There was evidence that the adoption agency was able to access other specialists, as required and written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers were being developed.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- Birth parents and birth families are involved in adoption plans (NMS 7)
- Birth parents and birth families are involved in maintaining the child's heritage (NMS 8)
- The Adoption agency supports birth parents and families (NMS 9)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

7,8 & 9

The adoption agency demonstrated a commitment to developing and improving support to birth parents and their families. Independent support to birth families was also available through their partnerships with other agencies. A coherent strategy for working with birth parents and families was required though if the outcomes of these standards were to be fully achieved.

EVIDENCE:

There was evidence that the service recognised the life – long implications of adoption. Placing social workers were encouraged to involve birth parents and families in the care planning processes for their child. One file examined evidenced good engagement and consultation with the birth family. In several files, there was evidence of the birth parents' views about adoption and contact being clearly recorded, though this was not evident in every file examined.

In addition, the agency had a service level agreement with After adoption, Yorkshire to provide independent counselling and support to birth parents, however, the referral system was bureaucratic and in need of revision for effective accessibility to the service. The service also required to be more actively promoted. The agency monitored the service provided by After Adoption, though the system was rudimentary. A more qualitative monitoring system was being developed.

Interviews with placing social workers indicated that use was also made of various advocacy services within the County and specialised services within the social services directorate. Several workers indicated though that at times it was difficult to access support from other social services due to the high threshold of referral.

Agency's procedures did not state that the birth parents had the right to see or have an opportunity to comment on what was written about them or their circumstances, before information was passed to the adoption panel or adopters. In view of this and perhaps not surprisingly, few of the files examined contained evidence that the birth parents had seen the form E and signed to this effect. This matter was being addressed by the agency, with a staff guidance outlining the importance of such practice. An improvement in the quality of form E's was also required and was discussed earlier in the report.

Birth parents and their families' were encouraged to provide information and photographs about their child to contribute to the child's heritage. However, whilst childcare staff recognised the importance of life story work, workers provided a variety of reasons that they were unable to complete such work, for example, a lack of knowledge, skills, training and work pressures. Since the completion of this work is of vital importance for the child and greatly assists in placement stability, this work should be given priority and carried out by appropriately trained staff.

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to pass on information through direct or indirect contact via the agency's post box system. This post box system provided birth parents and their families a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage. The system was managed by a dedicated administrator and was found to be robust and well organised. In examining one of the files where letter box contact had been agreed, the letter box contract seemed somewhat one sided and harsh, as it stipulated that a mother who had a learning disability had to initiate the request information about her child on an annual basis failure to do so, meant such information would not be forthcoming. The inspectors were of the view that a more generous approach to letter box contact would have been appropriate; a view, which it emerged was also shared by the adopter.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and the adoption agency ensures that it meets those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- The agency provides clear written information for prospective adopters (NMS 3)
- The manager has skills to carry on or manage the adoption agency (NMS 14)
- The adoption agency is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 16)
- The agency is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 17)
- The staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 20)
- The agency has sufficient staff with the right skills / experience (NMS 21)
- The agency is a fair and competent employer (NMS 22)
- The agency provides training for staff (NMS 23)
- Case records for children and prospective / approved adopters are comprehensive and accurate (NMS 25)
- The agency provides access to records as appropriate (NMS 26)
- The agency's administrative records processes are appropriate (NMS 27)
- The agency maintains personnel files for members of staff and members of adoption panels (NMS 28)
- The premises used by the adoption agency are suitable for purpose (NMS 29)
- The adoption agency is financially viable (NMS 30, Voluntary Adoption Agency only)
- The adoption agency has robust financial processes (NMS 31)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

1, 3, 14, 16,17,20,21,22,23,25,26,27,28 &29

The recently established management team had introduced a number of policies, procedures and systems to underpin current practice and service development. There were early indications that the service was being managed in an effective and efficient manner and this augured well for the future.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had a statement of purpose, which had been approved by the executive side of the Council in July 2005 and contained all the information required under the Adoption Services Regulations 2003. All those working in the adoption agency were fully aware of the contents and had a copy. At the time of the inspection, many of the agency's written policies and procedures were in the process of development and revision. Those seen though accurately reflected the agency's statement of purpose.

The agency used the BAAF booklet for the older child, which had been modified to reflect Conditions and services local to North Yorkshire. A children's guide for those children under four years of age had also been recently completed. Both these booklets contained all the information required under the National Minimum Standards and could be made available in different formats to meet the differing needs of children, for example in Braille, other languages, as well as in visual and audio form etc.

The agency provided an information pack to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This attractively presented pack contained clear, well - written information about the adoption process. Information was also provided about the needs of local children, who required families.

There was evidence that the agency was developing systems to prioritise prospective adopters, who were most likely meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents through the establishment of the Adoption monitoring group meetings and work being undertaken by the county adoption service manager.

The agency had a new managerial team in place with the appointment of a County adoption service manager and team manager. Both managers had a wealth of knowledge in the child-care field and considerable experience and skills in adoption. Staff interviewed spoke extremely highly of their managers, and clearly held them in high esteem. They said that the managers were very visible and described their management style as being "open", "accessible", "approachable", "helpful" and "supportive". They also stated that the managers were always enthusiastic about the agency's work and took a genuine interest in any issues discussed with them. One staff member described the management team's achievements as being "dramatic", as they had created a "new team from a blank piece of paper". Several commented on the quality of their leadership skills. A number of staff said that the managers had a clear vision for the service and were confident it could be realised. Whilst the inspectors shared some of these sentiments, they were mindful that the council should give consideration to strengthening the management team.

There were written job descriptions available for the managers of the agency and managerial arrangements were in place to identify, who was in charge when the manager was absent. There were clear roles for managers and staff, with well-established lines of communication and accountability. There was evidence that the newly formed management team was developing a shared understanding of quality assurance issues and adopting a unified approach to these matters. The agency had a supervisory and appraisal system, which was used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence that staff were now being supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies.

There were a number of procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service, which included a tracking system to monitor the care planning process for the child and adopters. The management team regularly reviewed this tracking system at the adoption monitoring groups. The supervision and appraisal systems in place monitored the adoption workers' performance. The panel adviser quality assured all documentation presented to the panel. The adoption panel undertook a monitoring role in respect of the quality of cases being presented to panel. Independent reviewing officers also monitored the adoption service through the chairing of children's reviews. In addition, the executive Committee of the Council received an annual report regarding activities of the agency and arrangements had been made for a six monthly report to be forwarded.

The practitioners working within the adoption team were a very experienced group of staff, with the necessary qualifications, experience and skills to undertake the agency's work effectively. Adopters made a number of very positive comments regarding individual adoption workers' practice, for example, they were described as "knowledgeable", "supportive", "assessed us in a sensitive and thoughtful manner". Staff themselves spoke of their enthusiasm for their work, indicated that they were eager to improve their practice and the team was very much developing a culture of "learning and sharing". Whilst staff indicated that there was no workload management system in operation, they indicated workloads were being allocated appropriately. They also stated that they were receiving good on-going professional development and training, though acknowledged that the organisation was not as supportive in completing post qualification study.

Adopters indicated that those administrators spoken with were "polite", "friendly" and "helpful". The administrative support provided to the adoption team varied from area to area, for whilst some staff had dedicated administrators who dealt solely with adoption work, other staff used administrators from the child-care services. The degree of support varying dependent on the area, as did the accommodation and the office equipment available to the adoption teams. A consistent response should be adopted in respect of these matters. Both the adoption and letterbox service were administered to a high standard and good administrative systems had been developed to assist the efficient and effective delivery of the adoption service.

Administrative resources provided to the service should be kept under review though, if this progress is to be maintained and enhanced.

The agency had been organised and managed in its current form for a short time, which made it difficult to fully assess the impact of such changes. There was evidence to indicate though that the changes, which had taken place would result in the delivery of an efficient and effective adoption service. Current legislative changes in adoption indicate a need for resources provided to this service to be constantly reviewed.

Managers and staff interviewed generally considered the county Council to be a fair and competent employer, however some staff expressed dissatisfaction at the inequity of the car parking arrangements and facilities in some areas.

There were written policies and procedures in place for case recording, as well as the maintenance and formatting of adoption case records. Examination of a sample of records indicated that these policies and procedures were not always being followed, for example, in two adopter's file, the check lists had not been fully completed. In another file the case recording regarding to social work activity was scant, there was no evidence of the medical advisers opinion in relation to the applicant's health or evidence of agreed adoption support. In one file, the adoption support plan had not been fully completed or signed by any party. Adopters' records also contained little recorded evidence of the case decisions made in supervision. In one adopter's file, there was an email relating to a worker 's employment issues, this file was not therefore being maintained in accordance with legislation. This matter was raised with the managers at the end of the inspection and agreement reached that it would be immediately removed.

Similarly, with regard to the children's files some shortfalls were found, for example, in one file, an email referring to the inspection was found on the file, there were also some documents missing such as the child's birth certificate and obstetric reports. In one file, the language used in the case recording was inappropriate and failed to consider the likely impact on the person, if in later life they accessed their file, for example, the form E. In one file the case recording indicated that life story work was being completed, however, it was difficult to determine when this work commenced, it's frequency and the likely timescale for its completion. In several other children's files whilst the case recording was of a good standard, not all the information required under regulation was found.

Both adopters and children's files were generally well ordered, however, the recording in several files was handwritten and difficult to read. Typed records would have improved the legibility and the recording further enhanced, if individuals' full names had been used and their roles in the situation, clearly identified. There was also some inconsistency in records being signed and dated by both the worker and manager.

In discussions with managers it was openly acknowledged that in the past there had been significant shortfalls in the quality of case recording and the maintenance of agency files. The new managerial team were making strenuous efforts to address this and there was some improvements in the records. The inspection team would commend the management's efforts to improve the standard of recording and endorse the continuance of such actions.

The agency had good systems in place to ensure confidentiality and access to records, which were in accordance with current legislation. Staff were fully aware of these systems and ensured that there was strict adherence to them.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff, including agency staff and there was evidence to confirm all the agency's adoption records were stored securely.

The agency should risk assess all adoption records to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water. This should also include the archived records.

The agency was in the process of developing a disaster recovery plan. The agency's adoption records were not all effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system and some attention should be given to this.

Personnel and panel members' files, as discussed earlier in the report, did not comply with the adoption regulations and this must be addressed.

The adoption agency had identifiable office premises, which were fit for purpose.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Adoption have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 "N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	2
8	2
9	2

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	2
4	2
5	2
10	2
11	2
12	2
13	2
15	2
19	2
24	2

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
6	2
18	2

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	3
3	2
14	3
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	3
22	3
23	3
25	2
26	3
27	3
28	1
29	2
30	N/A
31	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? N/A

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Voluntary Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003 or Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	AD4	LAA Regs 2003 7(a)(b)	The agency must implement and maintain robust quality assurance systems for all aspects of adoption service.	01/01/06
2	AD4 AD25	AA 1983 & LAA 2003	Where the adoption agency is considering a person may be suitable to be an adoptive parent, the manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 1983 and 2003.	01/01/06
3	AD4 AD25	AA 1983(2)LAC(97)13	The manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up for a child, where the adoption agency is considering adoption for a child. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 1983 and the guidance provided in the	01/01/06

			local government circular.	
4	AD4	LAA Regs 2003 9(2)d	The Local authority must have arrangements in place for persons working for the adoption service, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the authority, to have access to information that would enable them to contact the Commission, regarding any concern about child welfare and safety.	30/11/05
5	AD2	LAA Regs 2003 9(1)a,b	The agency must ensure that its child protection policies and procedures specifically refer to the measures intended to safeguard children placed for adoption by the authority from abuse and neglect. They should also include arrangements to be made for persons working for the adoption agency, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the authority to have access to information that will enable them to contact the Commission regarding any concern about a child's welfare and safety.	31/01/06
6	AD15 AD19 AD28	LAA 2003 6, 11, 15	The manager of the service must ensure that information is held on all persons who work for the adoption service in accordance with Schedule 3 and 4. This applies to all staff, panel members and specialist advisors, who provide services to the agency.	31/01/06

7	AD18 AD28	LAA Regs 2003 10(b)	The agency must ensure that those working for the service are suitably qualified and competent. In view of this documentary evidence must be obtained in relation to panel members and specialist advisors' registration with the appropriate professional bodies and this should be held on their file.	31/01/06
8	AD19 AD20 AD21	LAA Regs 2003 10a,b	The manager of the service must ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent, experienced social work and administrative staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency.	31/01/06
9	AD1	LAA Regs 2003 4a,b	The manager of the service must keep under review and where appropriate revise the Statement of Purpose and the Children's Guide. The Commission must be notified of any such revision within 28 days.	31/07/06

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	AD2	The agency's recruitment strategy and evaluation of this recruitment strategy should be refined.
2	AD3	Systems to prioritise the agency's work need developing.
3	AD4	Foster carers, who wish to adopt should receive the same preparation training, assessment and support services, as

		those provided other prospective adopters.
4	AD4	Times held for preparation groups should be kept under review to ensure they remain appropriate to the needs of adopters. Consideration should also be given to the suitability of the venue used.
5	AD4	The establishment of preparation groups for second time adopters and relative adopters should be considered.
6	AD4	The agency should ensure that the views of applicants' children are ascertained and taken into account in any adoption application.
7	AD4	The agency should consider developing its health and safety checklist. This checklist should be applied in a consistent manner in all assessments carried out by the agency.
8	AD4	Consideration should be given to the health and safety checklist being expanded.
9	AD5	The agency should consider training on form E 's being a standing item on the childcare training programme.
10	AD5	The guidance and training provided to adopters in the preparation of their family album should be reviewed.
11	AD10	Greater attention should be paid to the adoption panels' quality assurance roles.
12	AD10	The agency should arrange for the panel chairperson to have regular meetings with the senior managers of the adoption agency.
13	AD12	The agency should tighten up its procedure to ensure all adoption panel papers are presented in advance of the panel.
14	AD12	The current format and information contained in the Panel minutes should be reviewed.
15	AD5 AD8 AD25	The agency should ensure that clear and appropriate information is obtained for the child about themselves and life before adoption. This information should be provided in a timely manner and in accordance with their needs.
16	AD6 AD18	In the provision of services to adopted children. Partnership arrangements with other agencies should be developed on a countywide basis.
17	AD6	The agency needs to review the arrangements made in relation to its inter country adoption service, particularly in relation to issues of accessibility.
18	AD6	A clear, coherent and comprehensive strategy should be developed in relation to the agency' support services.
19	AD18	A written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers should be developed.
20	AD7	The agency should consistently evidence that a birth parent has been provided with a copy of the form "E" and their views regarding the contents recorded.

21	AD8	The independent and support service provided to birth parents and their families should be more actively promoted and the referral system reviewed.
22	AD20 AD21	Consideration should be given to a strengthening of the agency's managerial team.
23	AD25	The agency should risk assess all adoption records to ensure that they are stored in such a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and water.
24	AD25	To aid legibility of records, consideration should be given to records being typed. The agency should also ensure that all records are signed and dated, by both staff and managers.
25	AD27	The adoption agency should produce a disaster recovery plan.
26	AD27	The manager of the agency should make provision for the safeguarding and back up of all the agency's records.

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