



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

**London Borough of Hounslow**

**88 Lampton Road  
Hounslow  
London  
TW3 4DN**

*Lead Inspector*  
Sally  
Woodget

*Announced*  
15<sup>th</sup> August 2005 14:00

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

<b>Reader Information</b>	
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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](http://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](http://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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<b>Type of registration</b>	LAA
<b>No. of places registered (if applicable)</b>	N/A
<b>Category(ies) of registration, with number of places</b>	N/A

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

N/A

**Date of last inspection** This is the first inspection under the terms of the Local Authority Adoption Regulations 2003.

### **Brief Description of the Service:**

The London Borough of Hounslow Social Services Department has an Adoption and Permanence Team which delivers adoption, long-term fostering and kinship care services. The team provides a central point of contact for those interested in becoming adoptive parents, including intercountry adoption, stepparent and relative adoption. The team provide a range of information leaflets for the general public, prospective adopters and birth parents. The team coordinates all recruitment and preparation of adoptive families including training and assessment. The team manager is a member of the permanence consultation group which meets six weekly to monitor the plans for permanence and to prevent delay for children waiting for an adoptive placement. The team undertakes family finding for all children in the authority who require an adoptive family. Linking and matching children to families are coordinated by the family finders and adoption staff operate a comprehensive transitions procedure to ensure all parties are prepared and supported through the introductions process. Adoption social workers support adoptive families from placement through to the adoption order. The team have responsibility for developing adoption support services including letterbox and supporting direct contact arrangements. The Adoption team are also responsible for managing services to birth families via a service level agreement with an independent agency and via a specialist sessional worker. They also provide information and advice on adoption matters to child-care social workers in the locality

# SUMMARY

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

This was the first inspection of Hounslow's adoption service. Two inspectors undertook the inspection over three and a half days, in addition to the observation of the panel. Detailed Self Assessment and Pre-Inspection documents were received from the Adoption Team Manager and this as well as supporting documentation has been considered. During the inspection the inspectors met with 4 adopters, a birth family member, staff of the adoption service, including the administrative staff, a group of child care social workers, managers of child care social workers, independent reviewing officers, the manager of the therapy service, the panel chair and the managers of the Adoption service. Files were read and panel minutes were seen. Questionnaires were received from 3 adopters, 1 birth family member, 4 placing social workers and 1 adviser.

## **What the service does well:**

The adoption agency has good arrangements in place to identify permanency plans for children and assess their needs. Matching procedures of children to adoptive families is managed through the "transition's " process and is handled effectively.

Adopters reported that the preparation and training was "informative and well structured". Feedback from adopters about the style and content was evaluated regularly by the agency.

Assessments of adopters were thorough and detailed and comprehensive range of checks and references carried out to provide evidence of the applicant's capability and capacity to care for a child. Adopter's experiences of assessments were that they were sensitively handled.

Adopter's experiences of the adoption panel was positive, adopters reported that the panel members "really listened" and were "sensitive and supportive". Agency decisions were carried out swiftly to prevent any delay in children's plans.

The management of the adoption team was sound, with good communication contact and support from senior managers. Staffing levels within the adoption team had improved recently which has been a major achievement in a difficult employment climate locally.

Information provided to adopters about the child to be placed was good on the whole, and adopters valued the input of the agency's medical adviser who was able to offer specialist advice regarding any medical implications of the child's placement.

Adopters were happy with the levels of support provided, and spoke highly of the commitment and sensitivity of individual adoption social workers.

A number of adoption support services were in place and further developments are planned in this area. The agency has access to therapists and psychology services both in-house and via local arrangements which are used to support adopters and children placed to prevent placement breakdown.

Some good-quality work was being carried out with birth parents and birth family members. An independent sessional counselor provided independent counseling and support for birth parents and there was evidence that this is well used. One birth family member reported how much she had valued this service. The agency is aware of further work that needs to be developed in this area and they have been proactive in planning changes to improve services for birth families.

The arrangements for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency is good and targets have been exceeded of the number of children adopted in a given period indicating a proactive service in delivering permanency plans for children and ensuring good outcomes.

The agency had access to the corporate training programme which staff reported positively about. Staff in the adoption team received regular supervision and appraisals and were positive about their roles and the levels of support and management they received.

Case records were generally well structured and information was well evidenced.

## **What has improved since the last inspection?**

This was the service's first inspection.

## **What they could do better:**

The agency needs to continue to develop their recruitment strategy for adopters, to improve the placement choice for children, in particular those from an ethnic minority background and for older sibling groups.

There are a number of changes which need to be made to ensure the constitution and operation of the panel fully complies with the regulations and standards, in particular ensuring that the panel is quorate at all times and that panel members have the full information on each case being considered before they make a recommendation. Work needs to be undertaken by the agency to explore the reasons for the six-month waiting list to take work to panel and consider how to manage the agency decision-making role to ensure it provides a thorough and rigorous scrutiny of each case.

The arrangements for the recruitment of staff need to include a process for ensuring that telephone inquiries are made to verify the written references.

Support services to adopters and children placed could be improved by further involvement with the education support service and an evaluation of the therapy services provided.

Legal advice to the agency could be further improved by obtaining a legal adviser to take on a lead role in adoption issues and be the legal adviser for panel for a more consistent approach, rather than this being shared across the legal team.

Further work needs to be undertaken with childcare social workers to prepare them for working with birth family members and to ensure that the family members are involved in contributing to their child's heritage.

Updated training for staff in child protection issues, regarding the child placed for adoption, would improve the staff's understanding of procedures relating to the practice of interagency placements.

The organisation has had considerable difficulty in recruiting and retaining childcare social workers and managers, resulting in some children and families having up to six social workers in their care history. Enormous efforts have been made to resolve this and continued efforts need to be made to consider the implications of the use of long-standing locum/agency staff. Formal workload management systems could also assist with staff retention and satisfaction.

Some work needs to be carried out to refine the case auditing systems to ensure that confidentiality and data protection procedures are adhered to and that the need for accuracy is addressed.

Archived adopter's files are not securely stored and this needs to be addressed.



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](mailto:enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk) or by contacting your local CSCI office.

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

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# 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)
- Adopters 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 standard(s) 2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15,and19.**

The agency's practices are child focused and ensure that children are placed with adopters who have been well prepared and are able to meet their individual needs.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The adoption agency has recently developed a recruitment strategy to ensure they are able to recruit adopters. This still needs further work to refine, extend and build on the ideas and proposals to ensure they are able to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of a range of children waiting for adoption locally, particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds and older sibling groups. The strategy could include the already defined relationship with the local Adoption Consortium, the Adoption Register for England and Wales and other local adoption agencies. The strategy needs to describe procedures for prioritising adopters that are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting. It could also consider the possibility of developing arrangements with other local authorities with a similar demographic makeup.

The adoption agency has developed the family finding and matching criteria model which is thorough and works well ensuring that children are placed with adoptive families which reflect their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion

and language and which allows them to live with brothers and sisters where this meets their assessed needs. The agency has had no disruptions of adoption placement in the last few years, which is one positive indicator of thorough and detailed matching.

The agency's child protection policies and procedures make appropriate reference to the processes to be followed in relation to a child placed for adoption, indicating that the welfare and safety of the child are held at the centre of the adoption process.

Adopters spoke highly of the preparation and training that was provided for them. One adopter described the training as "thought-provoking", another stated that it was "informative and well structured". One adopter felt that the term "new mummy and daddy" could be perceived as discriminatory to those single people and same-sex partners involved in preparation group. This issue needs to be fully considered when preparing and implementing the next training group.

Participants were invited to give feedback on the course and their own contributions were evaluated and included in the full assessment of their abilities as adoptive parents. The effectiveness of preparation and training courses is reviewed and evaluated regularly at staff team meetings.

The assessments of applicants were thorough, detailed, comprehensive and analytical. Social workers carrying out the assessments had made good use of the competency model of assessment and verification of applicants' abilities and capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way was evident. The agency's policy was to obtain names and addresses of six referees from whom three or more were interviewed. Relatives, ex-partners and children from previous relationships were also interviewed as part of the assessment process. Adopters are made fully aware of the reasons why the agency needs to undertake such thorough references. Statutory checks were undertaken appropriately. The health and safety check needs some adjustments to include a reference to applicants owning or storing any weapons or firearms.

Assessments were planned in advance and adoptive applicants given "homework" to undertake between the assessment visits. Adopters reported that assessments were sensitively undertaken and that they were given lots of opportunities to explore their own feelings. One adopter reported that whilst they found the assessment "intrusive" they understood why this was necessary. Another adopter described the assessment as "intense and therapeutic and challenged our prejudices". A number of adopters were impressed with the skills and professionalism of their assessing social workers and individual compliments were made about a number of social workers.

A number of adopters "case tracked" as part of the inspection process reported considerable delays in the process, from first inquiry through to the

final panel hearing. This was due to staffing shortages in the Adoption team approximately 18 months ago and this has since been resolved.

Most adopters were happy with the information that they were provided with about children to be linked or matched with them, however in one case whilst the courts had given leave for some legal papers to be shared with the adopters this had not happened. Some adopters felt they had been given inappropriate information for example some information handwritten on the forms E, about children, was unsuitable and staff need to ensure that these documents are thoroughly checked before being sent out to prospective adopters. Matching reports on the whole contained good analysis and addressed pertinent issues.

During the inspection it was noted that the " placement undertaking" signed by adopters did not include notification to the adoption agency if the adopted child dies, this was pointed out during the inspection to the manager and this was responded to immediately and the document was altered to include the necessary information.

Adopters are encouraged to create a booklet for the child to be placed with them providing information about themselves and their home to assist the child in transition to their new family.

The agency also have well-developed systems for monitoring the permanency plans for children in the looked after system, for consulting with the Adoption team manager and her staff "consultation forum" and ensuring the preparation of children and planning introductions between adopters of children prior to placement, "transitions procedures".

The Hounslow Adoption and Permanence Panel have recently developed policies and procedures, which were comprehensive, detailed and accessible. This is a new document and had not been fully disseminated with panel members and it was evident that there was still some discrepancy between the policies and procedures and practice of the panel. For example the panel minutes should reflect; the reasons given for the recommendation; whether or not the recommendation was unanimous and whether any panel members were not in agreement and why. Further meetings or training with the panel chair, panel adviser and members of the panel need to take place to ensure new policies and procedures are fully understood.

The issue of declaring an interest at a meeting also needs to be resolved as at present practice is in conflict with the policies and procedures. The legal department is presently exploring the issue of professional interest as opposed to personal interest in the case and this should be dealt with as a matter of some urgency as it may affect quoracy of the panel.

Some panels had met and continued to hear cases and discuss recommendations when they were not quorate. Whilst in some cases the

panel recommendation was not formally made until the next quorate panel, the previously absent panel members had not had the benefit of being involved in the full discussion of the case with the presenting social worker present. This practice does not meet the regulations and the agency must review all the decisions that have been made at inquorate panels.

The agency is aware they do not fully meet the requirements on panel membership and efforts have been made to recruit a male panel member and improve the cultural diversity to ensure it reflects the local demography. The agency is also aware that they have not undertaken full status checks on panel members and it is important that these are carried out expediently to ensure the safety of children being discussed at panel.

Prospective adopters are given the opportunity to attend the panel meeting and most felt that this was a useful and helpful process. They reported that the panel was sensitive and supportive. One adopter stated that she felt the panel had "really listened", another stated that the panel was "welcoming, we felt put at ease".

Prospective adopters are however expected to sit in a large open plan area where a number of other functions may be taking place at any given time. The panel chair does not have access to a specific and confidential room when going out to inform applicants or presenting social workers of the recommendation that is being made. The agency needs to consider reviewing this arrangement to ensure thorough confidentiality as well as sensitivity to the feelings of applicants and presenting social workers.

It would also be helpful to provide feedback sheets for applicants and presenting social workers in order to inform panel members how to improve their practice.

The leaflet provided to prospective adopters at the adoption of permanent panel needs updating to include information about the independent review mechanism.

Cases were being discussed at panel without the full information and as a result, best interests decisions were being made "in principle" or "as a contingency". In one case a form E was being considered on a child at home on a supervision order, in another, a child at home where no care proceedings were being undertaken. Where decisions had been made as a contingency they should have been reviewed to ensure all the information is taken into consideration by the panel before a best interest recommendation is made. Updating forms E for the panel and the panel considering all the information again is time-consuming for childcare social workers and panel members alike.

High childcare staff turnover, inexperienced childcare staff with a lack of understanding about permanency planning as well as pressure to ensure there is no delay in planning for children was offered as the reasons for these practices. As a result of this, discussions at panel to determine recommendations were lengthy and tended to stray into childcare practice

areas. Whilst this indicates a commitment to robust and searching questioning and thorough scrutiny by the panel, it does mean that the panel is unable to get through as much business as it might. Concerns were expressed by a number of staff regarding the length of time (six months) they needed to book in advance to obtain a slot on panel. Some staff expressed the view that cases were being brought to panel too early.

It is the view of the Commission that the panel require all information in order to make a best interest recommendation and that the practice of "contingency " and "in principle" best interest decision making, is discontinued immediately.

The agency also need to review the reasons for such a long waiting list (6 months) for panel dates, taking into account information provided above and considering whether additional panel time should be allocated to the agency work or additional panels should be created. It is hoped that the appointment of a new panel adviser will assist in streamlining the processes and identifying the problem areas to be targeted.

The Agency Decision Maker is also the Assistant Director for Children and Families and has been in post since May 2005. She does not have the opportunity or the time, to take into account all the information surrounding the case, however, she has the opportunity to read the panel minutes before making the agency decision. The panel chair however has not yet ratified these panel minutes and there are no opportunities presently in place for the panel chair to meet with the agency decision maker following the panel meeting to discuss the issues that may arise. It was reported however that these are planned in the future. The present arrangements need to be reviewed to ensure rigorous scrutiny of the decision-making process in order to promote and safeguard the welfare of each child.

The present manager has been in post since May 2005, having previously been a social worker in the team, then acting team manager for a number of months. The manager has the necessary social work qualification, a background and experience in family placement work and is presently moving towards obtaining a management qualification. The present human resources procedures do not require for new references to be undertaken for internal applicants. However it is advised that this practice is changed to ensure that references appropriate to the responsibility of the job applied for are undertaken.

There are no processes in place for ensuring that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references in the system needs to be established.

# 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 standard(s) 6 and 18

The agency provides good support for adoptive parents in order to promote stability and permanency for the child placed. Some further work needs to be carried out to evaluate the quality of support services provided.

## EVIDENCE:

It is usual practice for the social workers who have undertaken the assessments of adopters to carry on providing support services to them through the linking and matching process and on into introductions and the placement of a child for adoption with them. This support continues until the adoption order is made. Many adopters were full of praise and commendations about the individual social workers who have supported them.

An adoption support package is drawn up and signed by the adopters and relevant agencies and these packages are reviewed if there are any changes in needs.

The agency has a developing adoption support service, managed by an assistant team manager who is also an experienced therapist. Adoption support services include regular newsletters to adopters, fun days for adopters and their families, access to "Adoption UK" an independent support network for adopters and access to the South East London Adoption Consortium's support group meetings which are held regularly and include talks by specialist speakers.

The adoption support services are able to provide advice and guidance as necessary, and where appropriate, therapy services will be provided to promote positive attachments. The agency has access to a number of specialist services including Adoption UK, a local counselling and therapy service run by Barnardo's and the local CAMHS team, as well as their own in-house therapist. There is a comprehensive and detailed document on the policies and procedures of the agency for adoption support, including for



example, details of the assessment for adoption support services and adoption support plans, information about adoption support packages, details of financial support arrangements, arrangements for indirect contact (letterbox) and direct contact, birth records counselling for adopted persons intermediary services for birth relatives and birth families independent counselling. There is however, no cohesive plan for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to meet the therapy needs of the adoption service and it is suggested that this is carried out.

Inter-country adopters are offered up-to-date information, advice and support to the agency's membership with the Inter-country Adoption Centre.

Adopters interviewed demonstrated their understanding of issues around self-identity for their adopted child and their role in encouraging them to reflect on this. It was clear that this area had been fully discussed with the adopters both at training and through the assessment process.

Although there had been no recent disruptions of children's adoptive placements, the agency had procedures in place to ensure independent chairing of disruption meetings by their local consortium and demonstrated an understanding of the needs for support and counselling services both to the adopters and to the child in question should this occur.

It is suggested that the Looked after Children educational support service run by the London Borough of Hounslow addresses the specific requirements of children placed for adoption, in order to provide much-needed support, advice and information to schools and adopters at a crucial time in the child's transition to their new family and to assist in the stability of the placement over the longer term.

The agency's medical adviser is committed to the adoption service and is proactive in her role, meeting with adopters prior to a match or placement of a child to ensure they are fully aware of any medical conditions and the implications of these on their family life. Adopters who met with a medical adviser were very grateful for her advice and input.

The agency had access to legal advisers within the Borough's own legal department, and a number of these advisers alternated in attending the adoption panel. There was some discrepancy in legal advice given at different times and it was felt that this could be confusing and potentially problematic for the adoption agency and for child-care staff in general. It is suggested therefore that the adoption agency consider reviewing the present arrangement with their legal department with a view to obtaining a legal adviser who could take a lead in adoption issues in general and be the legal adviser for the panel.

A written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers needs to be drawn up and the agency need to ensure they are suitably qualified and registered with their appropriate professional body, as well as undertaking all the statutory status checks as required under the regulations.

## **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 standard(s) 7,8 and 9.**

The service has systems in place and a clear commitment to ensure birth families are actively involved in the planning for children's futures, however this is not consistently achieved.

### **EVIDENCE:**

There was evidence that there was some good quality work being carried out with birth relatives by the adoption support services and via a specialist social worker commissioned specifically to offer independent support and counselling to birth family members. However there was a variable practice in involving birth parents to enable effective plans to be made and implemented for their children. One of the major factors here, was the high turnover of childcare social workers in the locality teams and their varying experience in permanency planning for children in the looked after system. The high turnover of staff continues to be a challenge for the agency and has a real impact on the quality of work managed with birth families. One birth family member reported six changes in social worker, which left her feeling unable to engage with the organisation. It was evident that some locality childcare social workers had unrealistic ideas about contact arrangements, which created possibilities of conflict and disappointment later on.

The Children and Families Department had made considerable efforts in ensuring training for staff and the panel were proactive in raising issues about, birth family involvement in life story work, birth families being given the opportunity to comment on what was written about them in the forms E, and letterbox and direct contact arrangements with birth family members. The agency has recognised that further improvements are required and one of the roles of the new panel adviser will be to quality assure documents being presented to panel and to engage with childcare social workers and their

managers about the content and style of these reports and in ensuring that birth families rights and views are respected and recorded.

The agency is also planning to involve an adoption support worker to work with the childcare social workers and birth family members when completing the support plans for each child.

The Looked after Children's Project Team social workers reported having more success than social workers in locality teams in involving birth parents in the adoption process. These social workers describe being proactive in referring birth parents for counselling, doing joint visits with Post adoption support team and ensuring that birth parents had the opportunity to see and comment on any documents written about them.

The agency has a service level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre to provide independent support and counselling for birth family members. However the take-up of this service has been poor as the service is geographically distant and surgeries are not held locally. The service level agreement terminates at the end of the financial year and the agency is exploring a more accessible, proactive and user-friendly service with a more local independent provider. The agency also employs a sessional counsellor to provide independent support and counselling to birth families locally and there was evidence that this service was well used, although concerns were raised that there was a waiting list. One birth family member reported how useful and valuable she had found this service but raised concerns that it not been offered early enough. Childcare social workers were not always aware that this service was available and could be offered to birth family members other than the birth parents and this needs to be addressed.

The quality of life story work was variable, and there was a misunderstanding about how this should be done. Such work is again affected by the considerable turnover of childcare social worker staff. There were some good examples however and the agency needs to build on this experience. Childcare social workers and adoption support social workers that are involved in life story work need to ensure that birth parents and birth family members are enabled to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage and are allowed to comment on the factual accuracy of information recorded.

Despite the difficulties caused by the high turnover of childcare social work staff, there was some evidence that birth families were being enabled to re-engage later on in the process, by the work done with the Looked after Children's Project Team and by adoption support staff . Adopters commented that training and the assessment had made them sensitive to the needs of birth parents and had enabled them to think positively about contact. There was evidence that adopters and birth parents were encouraged, prepared and

supported to meet with each other at the start of the placement and arrangements for direct contact between birth family members and adopted children were considered positively and that this had had positive outcomes for children.

# 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 standard(s) 1,3,14,16,17,20,21,22,23,25,26,27,28,29.**

The adoption agency is well managed and staff receive good leadership and support, which enables them to provide a good service for children. Staffing difficulties in the child-care department however continue to present a challenge to the organisation in managing appropriate planning and preparation for children.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The adoption agency's Statement of Purpose was comprehensive and accessible and met all the requirements. Further details about the services provided to birth parents and adopters would be helpful.

The children's guide "About Adoption" provides useful, interactive and child friendly information for children and young people aged about eight and over, however it needs updating and also needs to comply with regulations. It is anticipated that the children's participation officer together with young care leavers will be employed to ensure that any new guide will be child focused. The agency also needs to consider a children's guide for younger children.

Information provided to adopters in information packs was comprehensive and informative and adopters were happy with this, however some of the information needs to be brought up to date with regard to the current practice of undertaking references and checks. Some information provided during the initial information sessions for adopters requires updating to fully explain the adoption process and to include information about the adoption panel, the independent review mechanism and the matching process.

The eligibility criteria is fair and inclusive and all adopters have the opportunity to meet with experienced adopters as well as adoptees in preparation group.

The Adoption team manager has the necessary knowledge and experience of childcare and adoption work and is presently undertaking management qualifications. The service managers with responsibility for family placement services have the relevant experience knowledge and skills to manage the work efficiently and effectively. The adoption agency does however need to consider how they will support assistant team managers to obtain appropriate training, skills and experience in management.

The adoption agency has over the last two years been through a very unsettled period was regard to staffing which has affected the service delivery and is the reason for the number of delays in progressing adopter assessments during this period. Priority was however given to family finding for children and has not therefore created any delays in children's placements. The Adoption team manager was appointed early in 2005 following a period of "acting up " in this role. She has been successful in filling any staff vacancies within the adoption and adoption support teams and this has improved the delivery of service. It is planned that the recent development of a permanent assistant service manager post (presently the temporary post is held by an agency worker) will contribute to the improvement of all adoption services generally, provide further scrutiny and quality assurance and prevent any delays in planning for

children and is evidence of the agency's commitment to ensuring the best outcomes for children.

Staff reported that they found the Adoption team manager to be helpful, accessible and supportive. And staff also commented on the helpfulness of the agency worker currently temporarily undertaking the assistant service manager post.

There was evidence of a range of monitoring and controlling activities taking place to ensure thorough scrutiny of the work of the adoption agency and the targets for the number of looked after children adopted in any three-year period set by the government had been exceeded.

The London Borough of Hounslow Social Services Department has undergone several organisational changes recently not only in anticipation of the changes in current legislation but also in order to strengthen the family placement function and improve planning for children.

A member of staff has recently been recruited to rewrite the agency's policies and procedures.

The Looked after Children's Project Team was developed to focus on children's needs and to provide a dedicated resource to prepare children for adoption and long-term fostering. However the work of staff in this team has evolved into other areas of practice and staff reported having less time to be involved with preparing children for adoption. Child-care social workers and adoption social workers reported that the discrete work undertaken by the looked after children project team was positive, that they had provided a good resource and had provided better outcomes for children. Managers proposed to undertake a proper review about the best use of these staff to ensure that they delivered an efficient and effective service.

One of the major challenges for the London Borough of Hounslow social services department is the recruitment and retention of staff both social work staff and social work managers, which is referred to earlier in the report and has created some significant difficulties in ensuring consistency of practice and quality of work undertaken with children. The organisation of childcare work doesn't always lend itself to consistency and some staff reported that birth families and children may have upwards of six social workers involved with them during their time in the care system.

Whilst it is recognised that managers try to ensure handover meetings between social workers it was recognised that the "soft" information on children could be lost easily with so many transfers of social worker. The transitions policy which includes a series of meetings to discuss and determine the needs of the child in relation to their placement may include other professionals presently involved with the child, but consideration of Child



Appreciation Days where past social workers , health visitors, playgroup/nursery teachers and previous foster carers can contribute to the full picture of the child may be worth considering to ensure as much information as possible is provided for both the child's heritage and to assist adoptive parents in understanding the needs and background of any child to be placed with them.

Enormous efforts have been made by the organisation to recruit staff from abroad and to ensure they are appropriately and thoroughly inducted. There was evidence also that the organisation was employing trainees social workers and seconding them to undertake appropriate qualifications in social work. Staff cited cases of agency staff being employed for significant length of time (up to three years). These staff are paid significantly more than permanent staff creating some dissatisfaction. It is recommended that the organisation review their recruitment and retention policy and consider the resource, recruitment and retention implications of employing locum staff for such long periods of time.

Ensuring appropriate ongoing training in permanency planning, such as; life story work, direct work with children, working with birth families and writing forms E is also a challenge with such a transient workforce.

Regular updated child protection training for adoption social workers and looked after children project workers is recommended. The child protection forms on the supervision files are a useful way of recording staff member's understanding in child protection issues and involvement in child protection training, however these were not in use at the time of the inspection and this is recommended.

Staff in the Adoption team reported that the agency provided good training opportunities. Two members of staff had been encouraged and supported to attend the British Association Of Adoption and Fostering black workers' group. Staff have been supported to undertake their post qualifying awards in social work. However specific training for adoption social workers was less easy to access and it was reported that there was no financial budget for British Association Of Adoption and Fostering training courses.

The adoption team does not operate a formal workload management system, nor was this happening with childcare teams and this is recommended in order to avoid staff becoming overworked and stressed and is also another way of retaining staff within the organisation. Regular supervision of staff was undertaken by the managers and staff felt that this was helpful. There was evidence that decisions made during supervision are placed on the case file but these decisions needed to include more information about the discussion which took place to indicate how the decision came about.

Staff were positive about the support offered to them by administrative workers however it was generally felt this was not sufficient to meet the needs of the agency in particular in the adoption support team. However managers reported there were plans to appoint an unqualified social work to undertake responsibility for letterbox administration and this should relieve the pressure on this service.

Case records were generally well structured and information on files well evidenced. There was evidence of management oversight of files and file audits taking place. Full panel agendas including the names and details of other applicants and children were included on case files however and this breaches confidentiality and data protection legislation and needs to be addressed expediently. The first names only of other professionals involved in the case were used instead of the full name, title and organisation, the lack of this information could be crucial when investigating possible allegations or complaints. In one case the surname of adopters was misspelled in three different ways, in another case the relationship of the birth family member maintaining contact was inaccurate. The case file audits therefore need to include details of action to be taken, date for this to be achieved and means of checking that the action has been carried out, in order to ensure that the adoptee who may request to see their file in the future has access to full and accurate information on their life.

Case files for adopters and for children, need to include separate dividers for information to be stored on any complaints or allegations.

The archived Adoption files were inappropriately stored. Not all files are locked away due to lack of space and the information stored is not backed up anywhere post-1964. The present accommodation of files does not minimise the risk of fire or water and the agency must seriously consider the implications for the security of these records as they do not presently meet the legal requirement.

The adoption agency has recently moved to new premises, and much consultation was carried out with the staff in the team to ensure that it met all their criteria. The organisation is presently introducing a new computer system "SWIFT" in the adoption team and there is presently a considerable amount of consultation with the adoption team to ensure the security of the system.

# 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

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

<b>MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>7</b>	2
<b>8</b>	3
<b>9</b>	3

<b>STAYING SAFE</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>2</b>	3
<b>4</b>	2
<b>5</b>	3
<b>10</b>	1
<b>11</b>	1
<b>12</b>	2
<b>13</b>	2
<b>15</b>	2
<b>19</b>	2
<b>24</b>	N/A

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

<b>ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>6</b>	3
<b>18</b>	2

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

n/a

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

### 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.	10.2	Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 Reg5(5) amended by 1997 Reg 5(4)	The adoption agency must ensure that the panel is quorate at all times. The adoption agency also needs to ensure that all recommendations made at the time when the panel was inquorate are brought back to a full quorate panel for consideration.	31st December 2005
2.	11 and 28	Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003. Regulation 11 (3) Schedule 3. Regulation 15 (1) Schedule 4.	The adoption agency must ensure that all status checks are carried out on panel members.	31st December 2005
3.	13	Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983. Regulation 7 (1) (2)	The adoption agency must ensure that the panel and the agency decision maker has full information on all children for whom it is considering a recommendation/decision for	Immediate

		(3)	adoption in their best interests and that these recommendations are not made " in principle " or " as a contingency".	
4.	15, 19 and 28	Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003. Regulation 6 and 11. Schedule 3	The adoption agency must ensure that references and checks have been undertaken for each member of staff in relation to the qualifications and skills and experience necessary for carrying out their job description.	31st December 2005
5.	1.4	Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003. Regulation 3 (1) Schedule 2	The adoption agency must ensure that it produces a children's guide which includes all the elements of the one Schedule to and standard 1.4. This should also include a guide for younger children.	31st December 2005
6.	25	Adoption Agency Regulations 1983. Regulation 14 (1) (2) (3) (4)	The adoption agency must ensure that it preserves all case records and minimises the risk of damage from Fire and water.	31st January 2006

## 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.	4.3	The adoption agency should ensure that all preparation courses fit with the framework of equal opportunities and antidiscriminatory practice.
2.	4.6	The adoption agency's health and safety check of applicants should include reference to weapon and firearms.
3.	11.1	The adoption agency should ensure that all panel members

		receive training on the functions, policies and procedures of the adoption panel to ensure consistency of approach.
4.	12.3	The adoption agency should ensure that the minutes of the panel meetings are accurate and informative, consistent with the panel's policies and procedures and are clear about the reasons for any recommendation made.
5.	10.2	The adoption agency should ensure that the panels policies and procedures are clear about what happens when a panel member declares an interest in the case under consideration.
6.	10.3	The adoption agency should ensure that when adopters and social workers are given the opportunity to attend the adoption panel and be heard, that arrangements are in place to ensure that any recommendations made by the panel are delivered verbally in a private, sensitive and confidential setting.
7.	12.1	The adoption agency should review the reasons why there are such delays for cases to be heard at the panel, and ensure that adoption panels are efficiently organised and conducted to avoid any delays in the consideration of prospective adopters, children's best interest decisions and in matching children and adopters.
8.	13.2	The adoption agency should ensure that the decision maker takes into account all the information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation before making a considered professional decision.
9.	15 and 19	The adoption agency should ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references and that this is evidenced appropriately.
10.	18	The adoption agency should ensure that they implement an effective strategy to assess and evaluate the therapy needs of the adoption service.
11.	6	The adoption agency should ensure that the educational support service run by the London Borough of Hounslow addresses the specific requirements of children placed for adoption, in order to provide much-needed support, advice and information to schools and adopters at a crucial time in the child's transition to their new family and to assist in the stability of the placement over the longer term.
12.	18.3	The adoption agency should ensure that there is an identified legal adviser available for consultation and to provide consistency, for the staff and the adoption panel.
13.	18.5	The adoption agency should ensure that there is a written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers, who should be suitably qualified and where applicable registered by the appropriate professional body, evidence of qualifications and professional registration should be evidenced on the advisers file.

14.	7.4	Adoption agency should ensure that childcare social workers are aware that independent services are available to birth family members who have made important contributions to the child's life as well as birth parents, and that information and leaflets should be made available to them.
15.	7.5 and 8.2	The adoption agency should ensure that efforts are made to obtain for the child, clear and appropriate information from their birth parents and birth families, and that the families have the opportunity to comment on and sign any documents completed for the adoption panel and any life story work that is completed for the child.
16.	21.4	The organisation should ensure that staff policies encourage retention of salaried staff.
17.	19 and 23	The adoption agency should ensure that ongoing and updated child protection training is available for adoption social workers and looked after children project workers.
18.	25.5	The adoption agency should ensure that decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and are legible, clearly expressed, signed and dated.
19.	27.3	Adoption agency should ensure that information stored in case records meets all data protection and confidentiality policies and procedures, that written entries in records are clearly expressed and information is accurate. The system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records should ensure that remedial action is taken and that this is monitored.
20.	27.2	Adoption agency should ensure that records of complaints and allegations are clearly recorded on the relevant files for staff, prospective/approved adopters, birth parents, both family and children -- including details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken. These should be stored in separate dividers within the case record.

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