



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Kirklees Metropolitan Council Adoption Service

**Family Placement Unit, Westfields
Westfields Road
Mirfield
WF14 9PW**

Lead Inspector
Marian Denny

Announced Inspection
22nd November 2005 09:15

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

Name of service	Kirklees Metropolitan Council Adoption Service
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Telephone number	01924 483707
Fax number	01924 483720
Email address	family.placement@kirklees.gov.uk
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Kirklees MC
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Janet Matley
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service
No. of places registered (if applicable)	0
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection This was the first inspection by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI).

Brief Description of the Service:

Kirklees Metropolitan Council (KMC) operates its own adoption service, which is located within the Family Placement Unit and is part of the Children and Families Division of the Council's Social Affairs and Health. The Family Placement Unit manager has overall responsibility for the management of the adoption service, which is provided through two social work teams, each with its own manager. Both team managers have day, to-day responsibility for the management of their teams' work, which includes undertaking the core tasks of the service; in addition they have responsibility for the development of specific aspects of the service.

A comprehensive adoption service is provided to children and adults, which includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters for both domestic and inter country adoptions; pre and post-placement support of adopters, approval of non-agency adopters; the matching and placement of children with adoptive parents; support for children pre and post-placement. The service also provides and maintains a letterbox scheme that supports information exchange in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults, via a service level agreement with After Adoption. In addition, the agency provides section 51 counselling and support to adopted adults.

The service's office premises are situated at Westfields, in Mirfield and are accessible by car and public transport.

SUMMARY

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

The adoption service demonstrated a real commitment to this inspection and had prepared well for it. All the pre-inspection documentation provided was thorough and arrived within the agreed timescales. The arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful, all those involved in the inspection were extremely helpful and this enabled inspectors to make effective use of their time, which was much appreciated.

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 two inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed the adoption panel for a day. Interviews were undertaken with the assistant director of children and families, the divisional manager for looked after children and care leavers, the family placement unit manager, several community team managers, the two team managers and one senior practitioner within the adoption team, childcare and adoption 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 the agency's office premises were also seen. Security issues relating to both record keeping and the agency's office premises were considered. In addition, the inspection team received sixteen questionnaires from prospective and approved adopters, five from birth family members, six from placing social workers/authorities and two 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:

Kirklees Metropolitan Council had a good understanding and demonstrated a real commitment to the corporate parenting role. The executive member of the Council with lead responsibility for children's services was a passionate advocate of children's services and clearly supported the development of good practice and outcomes for children.

The Council had made a significant investment in the adoption agency with the creation of second adoption team, the post adoption support team and the

appointment of a second team manager. This investment had provided the agency with a real opportunity to fully realise the National minimum Standards for adoption and begin addressing the duties and responsibilities arising from future legislation.

The agency's management team had a clear vision for the future development of the adoption service. They also had the necessary experience and skills to manage and organise the service in an effective and efficient manner. 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 a variety of adoption policies, procedures and written guidance.

The adoption teams were experienced, skilled in adoption work and committed to improving their practice to achieve good outcomes for children. The adoption service was increasingly becoming an integral part of the children services, with improved communication between the childcare and adoption staff, so facilitating a child focused approach to adoption issues.

There was a clear well structured preparation programme, which was routinely evaluated and changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters generally considered the programme "interesting" and "enlightening", with several adopters and placing social workers stating that children's needs were very much at the forefront of the preparation training.

Adopters were generally positive about the assessment indicating that it had been thorough as illustrated by the comment that the worker crossed the "t 's" and dotted the "i' s" and handled personal issues in a "sensitive" manner.

The creation of the post adoption support team had enabled the agency to begin developing post adoption support services in accordance with the National Minimum Standards (NMS) for adoption and the forthcoming legislation.

The adoption panel was properly constituted, demonstrating a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work. The panel was well chaired and the administrative support provided was of a good standard.

The agency's specialist advisers were extremely knowledgeable, their work was extremely child focussed and a good service was provided to the agency.

The life-long implications of adoption were recognised and an independent counselling service was commissioned from After Adoption Yorkshire.

The council was considered to be a fair and competent employer. Staff stated the training provided was of good quality and they were supported to take advantage of the training opportunities provided.

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 developed, along with a mechanism to evaluate its effectiveness. The agency should also broaden its recruitment activities with the recruitment of black adopters. This would ensure adopters recruited by the agency met the needs of local children requiring adoption.

Adopters found the agency's preparation training extremely valuable. However, its effectiveness could be further enhanced if preparation groups for second time and relative adopters became a permanent feature of the preparation programme.

Adopters' assessments were generally good, though there were some exceptions to this, which could be addressed through a more robust quality assurance system. The agency should evidence the pet and health/safety assessments undertaken, for example through the use of checklists. In addition, the agency should ensure the contemporaneous notes from the assessment and the twenty-eight day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment, where applicable, is held on file.

The agency had carried out a great deal of work with childcare staff to improve the quality of children's assessments, however they continued to be of variable quality and this needs to be addressed. Birth parents' views about the information presented in the children's assessments should also be consistently recorded.

Whilst there was evidence that the agency effectively matched children with adopters, the matching process could be enhanced through an improvement in their matching documentation. In addition, the agency should ensure that direct work with a child, where appropriate is carried out in a timely manner to ensure placement stability.

The agency had adoption panel policies and procedures, however these should be revised, if they are to meet the National Minimum Standards (NMS).

The agency had a properly constituted, well-organised and effective adoption panel. However, the agency may wish to consider appointing a panel member from a black ethnic minority group in its future membership. The agency should also give consideration to regular, formalised meetings taking place between the panel chairperson and the agency-decision maker. Similarly, meetings between the adoption agency's manager, panel and medical adviser would prove beneficial in addressing any medical difficulties emerging from the

panel's work. Panel minutes could be improved upon with the provision of more detailed information regarding the panel's discussion and reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations.

At the time of this inspection, the adoption team manager also undertook the role of panel adviser such a dual role may give rise to a potential conflict of interests. The agency should therefore give consideration to the separation of these roles. The establishment of a second panel would also significantly increase the work of the panel adviser; the inspection team would therefore fully endorse the agency's plan to appoint a full-time panel adviser.

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work, however if there is to be effective development of these services, issues of capacity within the adoption team should be addressed. Written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers should also be developed in line with the adoption NMS.

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 Yorkshire, along with the other advocacy services outside and within the Council should also be actively promoted.

A children's guide had recently been produced, however revision of this was required if they were to meet the NMS.

The agency's child protection procedures need to include specific references to children placed for adoption.

Staff working in the adoption teams were qualified, experienced and well able to meet the needs of the agency. Difficulties in recruitment though had resulted in the agency continuously carrying staff vacancies; there was a need to ensure contingency plans were in place to address the situation. Moreover, given the future demands likely to be made on the service, the resources allocated to this service should be kept under constant review.

Whilst staff were positive about the training provided, they were of the view that further support in post qualification study was required.

The quality assurance systems in relation to the adoption records should be increased, as some files were not maintained in accordance with the adoption regulations.

The adoption services records were held securely, however, the agency should risk assess the premises where these records are held, to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water.

The access to records policy should be revised to include the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records.

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 agency should develop a service specific 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. However, robust monitoring and quality assurance systems must be developed to ensure the child's welfare is promoted and safeguarded.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had recently drawn up draft plans to address the recruitment needs of the adoption service. Consideration was being given to the recruitment of black adopters from outside the authority. A recruitment officer had recently been appointed, who was to develop the agency's recruitment plans and ensure recruitment activities were effectively targeted to meet the needs of local children requiring adoption.

Kirklees had positive links with the regional consortium and there was evidence of the agency using the consortium and other national facilities, such as "Be My Parent" and the National Adoption Register to meet the needs of children, who had an adoption plan.

The agency clearly recognised the importance of children being matched with adopters who met their needs, however it was recognised that 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 agency also recognised the importance of sibling groups remaining together, 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.

A formal preparation, assessment and approval process was carried out in respect of adopters. Whilst some adopters indicated their assessments and approvals had been carried out speedily; other adopters commented on the delays that had occurred in commencing the preparation groups and their assessment. A number of adopters stated that the agency had maintained good contact with them and kept them well informed about the reasons for these delays, which had been due to staff shortages. However, two adopters suggested the opposite stating that they had been the ones to initiate and maintain contact with the agency, in order to keep themselves informed of the progress of their application. It would appear that these difficulties occurred at a time when there were staff vacancies within the adoption team and a senior managerial position in the agency was vacant. Since this time, there had been an increase in resources, which had significantly improved the situation and minimised the likelihood of such difficulties re-emerging.

The agency's preparation course was clear, well structured and routinely evaluated, with changes implemented where necessary. Preparation groups were held three times a year and at convenient times, with venues arranged to meet the varying needs of adoptive applicants. Adopters stated that the preparation programme was well organised and presented. A number of adopters indicated that the introduction to the groups had been "warm and friendly" and the programme "helpful and informative", "enjoyable"; others stated that it had afforded them the opportunity to explore a variety of adoption issues, which had been "enlightening", "stimulating", "brilliant". One adoptive family stated that the information provided in the preparation groups painted a rather "negative" picture of adoption. However, most stated that they had found the whole experience "valuable" and provided a "good grounding to adopt". Several adopters commented on the value of hearing from other adopters. One couple had been given the opportunity to meet with an adoptive family after attending the preparation training. They had found this a particularly helpful experience as it had enabled them to ask additional questions and explore many other adoption issues. One adoptive family, who were adopting a second child, stated that they had been unable to attend a

preparation group for second time adopters. Whilst the agency does provide such preparation groups, their availability is very much dependent on the numbers adopters requiring such training. The agency may wish to consider whether working collaboratively with another agency might enable second time adopters' preparation groups to become a permanent feature of the service.

Preparation training specifically designed to meet the needs of Asian prospective adopters is also provided via the consortium. These preparation groups are well established and address the support and language needs of Asian adopters. In the past year, a number of Kirklees Asian adoptive families had attended these groups and spoke highly of them.

Adopters generally spoke positively about their assessment, which they described as "thorough", comprehensive and stated that staff handled the personal issues that arose in a "sensitive" and "considerate" manner. A number of adopters commented on the "knowledge", "skills" and "professionalism" of the adoption workers. A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of their written assessment, that is the form F, which they indicated portrayed them very accurately. Several of the adopters spoken with had received a copy of their written assessment. They were also aware that they had to send any observations regarding their assessment in writing to the agency, within twenty-eight days of receiving the notice. However, in several of the files examined, there was no evidence of the 28-day waiver notice relating to the adopters' form F.

Placing social workers presented a similar picture as adopters about the quality of the assessments with a number commenting on their "thoroughness" and "detailed" nature. Workers also spoke about the form F's, which were generally regarded as providing a "very accurate" and "realistic portrayal of the family".

Examination of a sample of adopters' files indicated that adopters' assessments were generally of good quality with most assessments seen detailed, analytical and insightful. One assessment though contained too much unnecessary information and would have benefited from greater professional analysis. There was evidence in some of the forms F that the agency considered adopters' capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible manner. However, no health and safety checklists or risk assessments in relation to adopters' pets were found on file. The introduction of such checklists and risk assessments should be considered, as it would evidence the agency's health and safety assessments which are contained in the form F's. In several adopters' files, there was no evidence of the contemporaneous notes of the assessment and this should be addressed.

In one of the files seen there was no indication of the status or disclosure number of the adopters' Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. In another file, there was no CRB check found in relation to one of the adopters and the (CRB)

check for the second adopter had not been obtained independently by the agency. The agency had subsequently obtained CRB checks after the couple's approval by the agency and the child's placement. In another file, CRB checks had been undertaken in respect of significant adults in the family but there were no record of these on the file. Clearly, CRB checks are of crucial importance in the safeguarding of children and therefore such issues of practice must not occur again.

The agency uses a pro-forma in relation to personal references, however some of the questions asked of referees seem inappropriate, for example, issues relating to health and finances. It is therefore recommended that the agency should consider revising this form.

Managerial scrutiny of the assessment process should be increased, as this would ensure that all relevant matters in relation to the adopters and their immediate family have been fully assessed, the information analysed and all appropriate checks carried out.

The agency had written information about the matching, introduction and placement process. A draft leaflet regarding the support services available to adopters had also been recently completed and had been made available to the inspection team. This information was in a user-friendly format and was provided at various points through out the adoption process. Adopters indicated that they had found this information very helpful in gaining a good understanding of the adoption process.

Whilst inspectors were able to confirm through a variety of means that children were well - matched, 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 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 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 and mentorship 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. A quality assurance system had been introduced to address these issues, with the panel adviser looking at all form E's, prior to their presentation at the adoption panel. The panel adviser had clearly made significant inroads in improving the quality of these forms, however, staff mobility within the community childcare teams resulted in this being an extremely time consuming task. Moreover, sustaining improvements in the form E's was clearly proving difficult. Whilst the inspection team would commend the panel adviser for the considerable efforts made to raise the quality of the form E's, they were of the view that such work needs to be undertaken, in conjunction with form E training being provided to childcare workers. The Council may wish to consider whether the provision of such training should be part of the mandatory training provided childcare workers.

Information from adopters indicated that the agency had provided a great deal of information about the child, however, given children sometimes have a number of social workers whilst being a looked after child, the use of life appreciation days could be of benefit in providing firsthand, qualitative information about the child's life.

The children's files examined confirmed that their wishes and feelings regarding adoption had been taken into account. In some children's records there was also clear evidence that work was being carried out to prepare and enable the children to move into their adoptive placement, however in others where children had the same needs, such evidence was absent or there were delays in the work being carried out. The agency should ensure direct work, where appropriate, is carried out in a timely manner to ensure placement stability.

The agency's existing written adoption panel procedures did not contain all the information required in the adoption NMS. This documentation was to be revised to ensure it met forthcoming legislative requirements and the NMS.

A number of meetings took place between the panel adviser, senior managers and the agency-decision maker, which provided an opportunity to formally feedback to the agency the quality of cases being presented to the panel. The panel chairperson, through informal meetings with the agency-decision maker was also afforded a similar opportunity. It is recommended that regular, formalised meetings between the panel chairperson, and agency-decision should be established.

Prospective adopters were invited to attend panel and an informative leaflet had been produced to inform them of this process. Adopters also had an opportunity to see a panel book with the names and photographs of panel members, as part of their preparation for panel. Several Adopters' commented positively on their experiences of attending panel stating that although initially "extremely nervous" in attending panel, found the panel members were

“welcoming”, “friendly”, “quickly put them at their ease”. They stated that the questions asked were “appropriate” and the panel meeting was “well chaired”.

The agency’s adoption panel was properly constituted, however, the agency may wish though to give some consideration to the appointment of a panel member from a black ethnic minority group, thereby effectively reflecting the multi-cultural nature of the authority.

Observation of the panel demonstrated that it was well organised, chaired and operated in an efficient and effective manner. Panel members had a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work and paid a great deal of attention to the details of the cases presented. Their thoroughness of scrutiny ensured relevant concerns were noted and effectively addressed.

Panels were convened once a month, however, consideration was being given to establishing a second panel, to avoid any unnecessary delay in the approval of adopters or the matching of a child. The development of a second panel was likely to require the services of a full-time panel adviser and consideration was being given to this. In re-examining the panel adviser’s post the agency may wish to consider whether the current arrangements of the adoption team manager also undertaking the role of panel adviser, gives rise to a potential conflict of interests.

In the selection of panel members’ files seen not all contained a CRB check and or completed a confidentiality agreement. There was evidence to confirm new panel members observed adoption panels and received induction training. Panel Members had also been provided with regular and appropriate training for their roles, for example, The Adoption and Children Act. In view of the fact the agency provides an inter country adoption service, specialist inter country adoption training should be provided to all panel members.

Panel members received information on adopters and children in advance of the panel date, which ensured panel members, had the necessary time to read the documentation. The panel minutes seen though could be improved upon with the provision of more detailed information regarding the panel’s discussion and greater attention given to the reasons for the panel’s conclusions and recommendations.

The agency decision-maker received and read the panel papers prior to the agency’s decision being made and there was evidence that the agency’s decision was made without delay. However, the agency decision should be clearly stated. In view of this, consideration should be given to amending the wording of the form signed by the agency decision maker. The agency’s decision was quickly and effectively communicated to the prospective adopters, the child and birth parents. The inspectors were particularly pleased to note that the Council’s, Chief Executive Officer sent the agency-decision letter to

adopters, as this clearly accorded the decision with its true importance and significance, as well as reinforcing the Council's corporate parenting role. The agency may wish to consider whether the Chief Executive Officers' personal signature to this letter might also further emphasise these issues.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. A sample of personnel files were examined and contained all the information required by regulation, apart from proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph of the staff member. A system had recently been introduced to ensure telephone enquiries were made to verify the legitimacy of references and for staff's CRB checks to be reviewed every three years.

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 provided a variety of support and specialist advice for adoptive families with a view to maintaining placement stability for children. Capacity issues within the adoption team and the lack of a clear strategy though compromised the quality of this support.

EVIDENCE:

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work, though there was clear commitment to its development, as illustrated by the creation of a post adoption support team.

The support services included a variety of financial support packages for adopters. In both the pre and post adoption stages, adoption workers enabled the child and adopters, whether domestic or inter country to access and receive any counselling, therapeutic or support services required. The agency had also employed two community care officers to ensure children were prepared for placement and their life story work completed. Arrangements with the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) enabled adopted children and their families to quickly access the service. There was also good accessibility to the multi-agency education support team for adopted children who were experiencing educational difficulties. In addition, where there were difficulties in placement, the agency was able to spot purchase therapy packages from independent sources to support an adoptive family. The adoption agency had recently established a newsletter and support groups and there were also plans to provide post adoption training for adopters. Assistance with contact arrangements was provided for adopted children and their birth relatives. In addition, the agency carried out assessments for support in relation to adoptive families and their children, who had adopted over three years ago and were residing in the authority. Adopters who were

matched with a child from abroad received on-going support in line with statutory requirements from staff within the agency. They were also able to access advice from the Overseas Adoption helpline.

The agency had recently produced a leaflet regarding the agency's support services, which were in draft form and it was intended once completed would be provided to all adopters. This leaflet was attractively presented, in a user - friendly form and provided useful and helpful information regarding a range of support services that the agency was intending to provide adopters.

Adopters were generally complimentary about the support they had received from the agency and terms such as "great", "excellent," "helpful" was used to describe the support provided. One adoptive family stated their worker had been very sensitive to their needs and wishes, which had resulted in them receiving exactly what they required in terms of support. Similar views were also expressed by the placing social workers with several indicating that the agency had provided their adopters with "continued, good support".

Whilst the recent creation of a post adoption support team had enabled the agency's support services to be increased and developed; staffing levels will need to be kept under close review to ensure the quality of these services are not compromised and they continue to develop. A clear emphasis will also need to be placed on partnership and collaborative work with other agencies both within and outside the authority

There was evidence that the agency's preparation training, assessment and matching process provided adopters with information about a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self-image. It also enabled adopters to understand the need and to develop strategies in assisting a child to address all forms of discrimination. The importance of keeping safe information provided by birth parents and families was clearly addressed through out the preparation and assessment process.

The agency had access to a variety of specialist advisors and services to meet its needs. These included CAMHS, the education of looked after children support team, a looked after children's nurse, the overseas adoption helpline, as well as the panel medical and legal adviser. In addition, the family placement unit employed development workers, who carried out a specialist role in working with Asian families. Staff confirmed that the advisers were available for consultation, if required and were described as being "extremely knowledgeable" and provided "a good service". It was reported that all the advisers were highly committed to their work and extremely "child focussed".

The agency had experienced one adoption disruption during the past year. Examination of the file documentation indicated that the family had been provided with appropriate support and the learning gained from this disruption

was being carefully considered by the agency with a view to incorporating this into the agency's future practice.

There were no written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers; the agency should develop these in line with the NMS for adoption.

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. 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. 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 to ensure maximum up-take of the service, a more proactive stance was required in its promotion.

Interviews with childcare social workers indicated that use was also made of various specialist services within the Council. However, several workers indicated that at times it was difficult to access support from these services due to the high threshold of referral.

Birth parents were encouraged to contribute to information included in the form E. There was also an expectation that birth parents were made aware of the form's contents and able to comment upon the information contained in it. In several of the files examined evidence of this practice was seen, though it was not evidenced in every file, for example, some form E's were not signed by parents and neither were there any reasons recorded to account for this. An

improvement in the quality of the form E was also required, which 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, a variety of reasons were provided as to why they were unable to complete such work, for example, a lack of knowledge, skills, training and work pressures. These difficulties were clearly reflected in the sample of children case tracked, as several did not have a completed life storybook despite the fact they had been adopted. To address this, the agency had recently appointed two community care officers, who were to work directly with birth parents and their families, enabling them to contribute to their child's heritage and ensuring life story work was completed for any child placed for adoption.

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to maintain and update their child's heritage through direct or indirect contact via the agency's letterbox system. Examination of the letter box scheme confirmed it was a robust, well organised and an effectively managed system, providing birth parents and their families a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

The agency did not have a clear written strategy for working with birth parents and their families, though there were plans for one to be developed. The agency's service level agreement enabled birth parents to access the local support groups organised by After Adoption Yorkshire. Information about independent national support groups was also provided.

The information obtained from the returned birth family members' questionnaires provided a rather mixed picture of the agency's effectiveness in working with birth parents and families. In two of the questionnaires the birth parents were positive about the service they had received from the agency, however, in another two there was a mixed picture presented, with birth parents making some positive comments about the service but also stating that they had not received prompt help and had not found the staff easy to contact. In the fifth questionnaire, the birth parent was extremely negative about the service and stated that they had received no written information from the agency about adoption. They also indicated that they had not been provided with any information about counselling, had any access to such support or received any other help in relation to the adoption of their child. The agency should consider promoting the independent counselling and support services in a more proactive manner, to birth parents and their families. In addition, it is recommended that the agency develop a qualitative monitoring system in relation to the service provided by After Adoption Yorkshire.

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 adoption agency's managerial team had only recently been established, however there were early indications that the service was being managed in a more effective and efficient manner. A robust quality assurance system was required though if the agency was to ensure a good quality service and outcomes for children and adopters.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had a statement of purpose, which 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. It was noted though that the Council's Child Protection Procedures did 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 a child's welfare and safety. The agency should also consider providing up-dated training to adoption staff.

The agency had only recently produced a children's guide, which was 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. This guide though did not contain all the information required in Schedule 2, for example, it did not contain a summary of the complaints procedure or the name, address and telephone number of the children's rights director. The guide also needs to be produced in other formats, so that it is suitable for children of different ages. In addition, it is recommended that the office address and telephone number of CSCI be revised to reflect the adoption team's base. The agency should ensure if the statement of purpose or the children's guide is revised CSCI must be notified of any such revision within 28 days.

The agency provided an information pack to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This pack contained clear, well-written comprehensive information about the adoption process. There was evidence of people interested in becoming adoptive parents being welcomed without prejudice and treated in a fair, open and respectful manner. The agency ensured that information was provided about the eligibility criteria, the needs of local children who required families, as well as the preparation, assessment and approval process. The agency had also recently produced a draft leaflet regarding the support services provided.

Adopters indicated that the agency responded in a "pleasant," "helpful" and welcoming manner to their initial adoption enquiries. Adopters also stated that the information pack had been sent out "promptly", had been extremely "clear", "informative" and "effectively" met their needs. However, one adopter stated that they had waited some time for a response from the agency and expressed some disappointment regarding this. There was evidence that the agency ensured that all foster carers, who applied to adopt, received the same information as other adopters. Those adopters who wished to adopt a child from overseas were referred to the Overseas Adoption Helpline.

The agency had effective systems in place to prioritise those adopters who were most likely meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents.

The agency had a new managerial team in place with the appointment of a Family Placement Unit Manager and a team manager for the post adoption support team. All the managers in the agency had a wealth of knowledge in the child-care field and two of the three managers considerable experience and skills in adoption. Managers were very visible amongst their staff and appeared to have an open and accessible management style. Staff interviewed stated that until recently much of the division's attention and focus of work had been on the fostering service, however they were of the view that this was now changing, citing the recent managerial appointments as an example of this. Staff clearly believed that the new fully complement managerial team meant that the "foundations" were now in place for the agency to begin building upon and developing their practices and services. Staff were enthusiastic about this and had confidence in the management teams ability to realise this.

There was evidence to confirm that the agency operated in accordance with its statement of purpose and was managed efficiently and effectively. There were written job descriptions available for the manager of the agency and well-defined managerial arrangements in place to identify, who was in charge when the manager was absent. However, the recent establishment of a second adoption team appeared to have resulted in a lack of clarity regarding the roles of the team managers and this clearly needed to be resolved. Staff had clear roles and there were well-established lines of communication within the agency. A supervisory and appraisal system was in place, which was used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence that staff were being supervised and appraised in accordance with the Council's policies.

The agency ensured managers and staff were aware of their responsibility to declare any possible conflict of interests and this was regularly monitored through the teams ` work and staff supervision.

There were a number of systems in place to monitor and control the activities of the adoption service, which were in the process of continuous development. These systems included the agency's supervision and appraisal systems, which monitored the adoption workers' performance. Team managers had established a file auditing system to monitor the agency's case records and to ensure they met the required standard. The Service Manager was also intending to implement a similar system. Reviewing officers, who chaired looked after children's reviews, carried out a monitoring and quality assurance role in respect of the adoption service. Similarly, the adoption panel carried out a quality assurance role in relation to the cases presented to the panel, as did the agency decision-maker. The adoption agency reported on a regular basis to the divisional manager regarding the performance of the agency and

this information was periodically incorporated into the senior management meetings. The agency-decision maker met with the elected member, who had lead responsibility for children's services and regularly up-dated him on the adoption service. An annual adoption report was presented to the executive Committee of the Council, however, in the future, the agency must ensure a six monthly report is also made available to them. Interviews with members of the senior management team, as well as the elected member confirmed that councillors took their corporate parenting role seriously and carefully scrutinised all information presented.

Staff working within the adoption team were an 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", "very professional," "extremely committed", "reliable", "sensitive", "understanding" and "skilled in their approach to the assessment". Several adopters had also written to the agency to compliment their worker on the quality of service provided making such comments as, the worker was "excellent" and "we could not fault the service".

The childcare social workers, who were interviewed, showed a real commitment to providing a good, qualitative service to the children and their families. They stated that they worked well with the adoption staff and indicated that there was good communication between them. Several childcare workers spoke positively about the advice, help and support given them by adoption staff, in making an adoptive placement. Placing social workers also expressed similar views in the questionnaires returned to the adoption team.

There was a workload management system in operation, though staff reported some weaknesses to this system though were generally of the view that workloads were being allocated appropriately. They also stated that they received regular supervision though believed these meetings could be enhanced and their professional developmental needs more effectively met through a greater opportunity to reflect on their social work practice.

The administrative support provided to the adoption team was of a good standard and assisted staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. This was also reflected in the positive comments made by adopters, who described the administrative staff as "friendly", "helpful" and efficient. However, in view of recent legislation and the increased demands likely to be made on the service, the agency needs to review the current administrative resources provided the service.

The agency's staff group were generally a stable workforce, however the agency was continuously carrying vacancies due to the difficulty of recruiting social work staff with sufficient experience and skills to undertake this work.

These staff shortages had in the past impacted on some processes, for example, in causing delays in the preparation and assessment of adopters. The agency clearly needs to be mindful of this, ensuring that where a shortfall in staffing occurs, there are contingency plans in place to resolve the situation. Moreover, the current adoption legislative changes indicate a need for resources provided to the agency to be constantly reviewed.

The managers and staff interviewed generally considered the Council was a fair and competent employer. The agency enabled staff to access internal and external training and post qualification study, as part of their professional development. Adoption staff generally felt the training was of good quality and effectively met their needs, though acknowledged that the organisation was not as supportive in completing post qualification study.

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 being followed with the records seen generally well organised and in good order. There were some shortfalls in the adopters' files though, for example, in one file, the checklist had not been fully completed and the case decisions arising from the worker's supervision meeting did not cover the whole period the agency had been responsible for the case; in another there were no case decision records/supervision notes. In several files the case records had not been signed by the worker, nor the manager and in others such signatures were inconsistently applied. There were also some shortfalls in relation to adopters' and significant adult's CRB's, which are fully detailed in the section of this report, entitled "Staying Safe". In one file, a support plan was found though was absent in all other files examined. In another file there were no panel minutes; in others there were panel minutes but these did not contain details of the panel members present and therefore did not comply with current legislation. In another file, there was no agency-decision letter. Similarly, with regard to the children's files some shortfalls were found, for example, in one file, there was no record of case decisions relating to the child, in other files, there were also some documents missing such as a copy of the care order, the birth mother's obstetric report. In one file, there was no later life letter and in another file, although there was a later life letter the language used was inappropriate. A similar difficulty also emerged with regard to the child's life storybook. In several files, the statutory visits made to children were not clearly recorded and this should be addressed.

The agency had a system in place to ensure confidentiality, which was in accordance with current legislation. Staff, panel members and specialist advisors were fully aware of this system and strictly adhered to it.

The Council had a written policy and procedure in relation to access to records; however, this did not deal with the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records. The agency was in the process of addressing

this though through the development of specific written procedure covering access to adoption files.

There was a procedure in place to ensure a written agreement was obtained in providing adoption records or information to other agencies. However, the agency did not have a written agreement for staff within Social services and was in the process of developing one.

The agency had a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records, however this system required developing and a recommendation has been made regarding this.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff. There was evidence to confirm all the agency's adoption records were stored securely in locked cabinets. Premises where adoption records are stored should be risk assessed to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and water. The agency had not developed a disaster recovery plan specific to the adoption agency 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 had disabled access and 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	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	Score
7	2
8	2
9	2

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

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
Standard No	Score
6	2
18	2

MANAGEMENT	
Standard No	Score
1	2
3	3
14	3
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	2
22	3
23	3
25	2
26	2
27	2
28	2
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	AA Reg83 8(2)(h)	A 28-day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment should be held on file, where this is applicable.	01/04/06
2	AD4	AA Reg83 LAAS Reg03	The agency must ensure statutory checks have been completed in relation to adopters, prior to approval and a child's placement.	01/12/05
3	AD4	LAAS Reg03 7(a)(b)	The agency must implement and maintain robust quality assurance systems for all aspects of adoption service.	01/02/06
4	AD11AD28	LAAS Reg03 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.	01/03/06
5	AD6 AD19 AD20AD21	LAAS Reg03 10	The manager of the service must ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent, experienced social	01/03/06

			work and administrative staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency.	
6	AD1	LAAS Reg03 9(1a,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.	01/03/06
7	AD1	LAAS Reg03 3&Sch2	The manager of the service must include in the children's guide, all the information contained in Schedule 2 of the Adoption Services Regulations 2003.	31/01/06
8	AD1	LAAS Reg03 4(a)(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.	01/04/06
9	AD25	AA Reg83 LAC'97	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 local government circular.	01/03/06

10	AD25	AA Reg83 LAAS Reg03	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.	01/03/06
11	AD26	AA Reg83, 15	The manager of the agency must revise its access to records' policy the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records.	01/04/06
12	AD18AD28	LAAS Reg03 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. This evidence must be held on their file.	01/02/06

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 should be developed and include the recruitment of black adopters.
2	AD4	Prospective adopters should be kept fully informed of the progress of their application.
3	AD4	The agency should consider the introduction of preparation groups for second time adopters and relative adopters becoming a permanent feature of preparation training.
4	AD4	Consideration should be given to pet and health/safety checklists being used and held on adopters' files.

5	AD4	The contemporaneous notes of adopters' assessments should be held on file.
6	AD4	The agency should consider revising the pro forma used for adopters' references.
7	AD4	All written assessments of a child should be comprehensive, detailed and up-to-date.
8	AD4	Consideration should be given to the training on form E's being a standing item on the training programme.
9	AD5	The agency should consider developing the documentation used in the matching process.
10	AD5AD8AD25	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.
11	AD10	The Adoption Policies and Procedures should be revised to meet the requirements of the Adoption National Minimum Standards and pending childcare legislation.
12	AD11	Panel members should be provided with regular inter country adoption training to ensure that they are kept up-to-date regarding any developments in this field.
13	AD11	Consideration should be given to regular, formal meetings between the agency-decision maker and adoption panel chairperson.
14	AD11	The agency should give consideration to the recruitment of panel members from a black ethnic minority group.
15	AD11	The current arrangements for the team manager to also act as the panel adviser may give rise to potential conflicts and should be reviewed.
16	AD12	Panel Minutes should be enhanced by more detailed information being provided regarding the panel's discussions and greater attention given to the reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations.
17	AD13	Consideration should be given to re-wording the form used by the agency decision maker.
18	AD6	In the provision of adoption support services, the agency should consider partnership and collaborative work with other agencies outside the authority.
19	AD18	A written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers should be developed.
20	AD7	The agency should ensure the birth parents views about adoption, contact and the information presented in the form E's is consistently recorded.
21	AD7	The independent counselling and support service provided should be actively promoted.
22	AD9	The agency should develop a clear strategy for working with birth parents and their families.

23	AD8	A qualitative monitoring system should be developed in respect of the independent and support services provided birth parents and their family's.
24	AD1	The agency may wish to consider whether the office address and telephone number of CSCI in the children's guide should be amended to reflect the adoption inspection team's base. The agency should also consider producing the guide in a format to meet the differing ages of children placed for adoption.
25	AD17	The agency should ensure a six monthly report regarding the activities of the adoption agency is provided to the Council's executive members.
26	AD23	Adoption staff should be provided with up-dated child protection training. The agency should also ensure staff are able to fully utilise the post qualification training provided.
27	AD25	The agency should ensure statutory visits to children are clearly recorded.
28	AD17AD27	The audit tool used by the agency should be developed.
29	AD25	Risk assessments should be carried out on all premises where adoption records are stored to ensure they are stored in a manner to minimise the risk of damage from fire and water.
30	AD29	The adoption agency should produce a service specific disaster recovery plan.

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