



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### **Barnet London Borough Council Adoption Service**

**Barnet House  
1255 High Road  
Whetstone  
London  
N20 0EJ**

*Lead Inspector*  
Sue Nott

*Announced Inspection*  
18th September 2006      9:00

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
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Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
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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>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	Barnet London Borough Council
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	Jenny Belsham
<b>Type of registration</b>	Local Auth Adoption Service

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

**Date of last inspection** 2<sup>nd</sup> Feb., 15-17<sup>th</sup> March 2004

## Brief Description of the Service:

The London Borough of Barnet's adoption service is managed within the Looked After Children Division of the Children and Families Service. The adoption and adoption support service operate from premises it shares with other council services, and is centrally located. The agency is managed by the team manager, and supported by the deputy adoption team manager. There are six social workers in the team, which covers all areas of the work. In addition, a full time Campaigns and Communications Officer has recently been appointed to support the work of the team. The administration of the team is shared amongst workers who also support fostering, and looked after children's teams.

Attempts to recruit to two new adoption support worker posts were unsuccessful, and the extra work generated in response to the recent adoption support legislation has been allocated amongst existing staff.

The agency provides a comprehensive adoption service which includes: placing children in need of adoptive families; recruiting, preparing, and assessing adoptive families; providing assessments for post adoption support to adoptive children and families; counselling and support to birth parents and families; and assistance and counselling to adopted adults who wish to see their birth records. Intermediary services in indirect and direct contact arrangements are also provided. The service is also responsible for assessing and supporting birth family relatives, where adoption is the plan within the child's own family.

The agency has established partnerships with other services to provide consultancy and support services. It is a member of the North London Adoption Consortium, and works closely with other authorities to effect suitable placements for children, and share resources, including training for families and staff. The London Borough of Barnet has a contract with Norwood Adoption agency to carry out inter country assessments on their behalf. Also the Post Adoption Centre provides a local surgery for Barnet service users affected by adoption.

At the time of inspection there were ten children identified as needing adoption, and awaiting placements, and twenty approved families awaiting a match.

The number of children placed for adoption by Barnet is relatively small, in relation to its Looked After Children population. A proportion of children have been permanently placed with foster carers, and the kinship service is developing. Interagency placements have been used on a regular basis to prevent delay for children needing adoptive families. Senior managers were in the process of developing a permanency policy to ensure that no children in the system were being overlooked. A review of the adoption service was programmed to be completed by the end of the year.

# SUMMARY

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

This is the second full inspection of the adoption service provided by the London Borough of Barnet under the National Minimum Standards.

Two inspectors spent four days in the agency and interviewed child care and adoption social workers, managers and administrative staff. The panel chair, the agency decision maker, a birth mother and six sets of adopters were also interviewed. The lead inspector observed the panel on a separate day.

Supporting documents were provided by the agency, and read by the lead inspector prior to, and during the inspection fieldwork, and a selection of files, including personnel and panel member files, adopter's and children's files were read during the course of the inspection.

Questionnaires were received from twelve prospective and approved adopters, four placing social workers, and three professional advisors to the agency. No questionnaires were received from birth families members.

The inspectors would like to thank the managers and staff for their cooperation and assistance during the inspection, and the hard work they put into organising both the pre-inspection material and the programme, which helped to facilitate the inspection process.

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

Staff working for Barnet's adoption service were motivated and committed to achieving the best outcomes for children. They aimed to ensure that they secured the most suitable placements for children needing adoptive families. Senior managers were aware that, due to competing demands, a thorough review of the adoption service was overdue. There were plans for this review to take place before the end of 2006, with the aim of producing a permanency strategy, identifying shortfalls, and formulating a clear plan for future developments and priorities for the service.

The adoption team had been successful in increasing its numbers of approved adopters since the last inspection.

A dedicated Campaigns and Communications officer for fostering and adoption had recently been appointed as part of a strategy to continue the improvement in recruitment. The aim was to develop a more targeted campaign to attract applicants who would better meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoptive families in the borough.

The agency was welcoming to prospective adopters, and adopters felt they had undergone a thorough and sensitive assessment process. Comments included "The assessment was fair and thorough. The social worker understood us well, and was very friendly and encouraging", and "Our social worker was great. He dealt with everything and was encouraging". The feedback regarding the preparation groups was also complimentary, although one adopter commented, "it dwelt too much on the negative side of adoption. I found this quite off putting and had serious doubt that I could be a parent". Adopters commented favourably about staff with which they had had contact.

Adopters feedback indicated that whilst the assessment process itself was good, this had, in some cases, been let down by delays at different stages, including the allocation of a social worker, changes in social worker through the course of the assessment, and delays in attending groups or panel.

Those assessment reports of prospective adopters seen were of a good standard, well written and thorough, and provided analysis of the likely parenting qualities of applicants. However, necessary checks were not always completed on prospective adopters on time.

Although the service endeavoured to place children with the most appropriate adopters, and to make good matches, taking into consideration the cultural, religious and ethnic needs of the children, a more targeted recruitment policy was needed to better meet the needs of the children to be placed. In a number of cases permanency plans had changed, in response to the attachments that had been made with foster carers, particularly in the placement of sibling groups. There were plans to improve the tracking systems already in place to help to ensure that children did not wait unnecessarily to achieve a suitable match.

The adoption support service was developing, but this development was restricted by the demands on the deputy team manager, who had lead responsibility in this area. Individual packages of support were also negotiated with other professionals where necessary, and the excellent links established with the local CAMHS ensured that future support needs were identified at an early stage. Adopters with children in placement were well supported, and access to advice was readily available. Adopters were aware of the support available, and good feedback was received. This included "it is now better than it has ever been, with a mix of social events and courses/training and we appreciate it".

The agency decision maker operates within good timescales. He discusses the papers, recommendations and any notes from the chair with the team manager when making his decisions. This provides an opportunity to pick up on relevant departmental issues arising from the panel, although the decision maker does not attend the quarterly meetings with the panel chair and the assistant divisional manager.

The agency had access to sound legal and medical advice, and to a good range of local resources and services.

The agency had experienced managers, who provided good leadership, support and communication. Supervision sessions were regular, and staff confirmed that managers were approachable and supportive. Social workers were committed to providing a good service, and had a broad range of experience and skills. The adoption team worked closely with the looked after children social workers, and there was evidence that communication and working relationships across the teams was good. Placing social workers commented of the adoption team: "The staff are particularly well trained and managed"; "They were very helpful in guiding me, and the adopters through the process"; and "They are always child focused and put the child's needs first".

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

There were twelve requirements and fifteen recommendations made following the first inspection of the adoption agency in 2004. A clear action plan was produced following this, and progress has been made and improvements introduced. These included:

- The Statement of Purpose, which had been approved, and reviewed annually.
- Policies and procedures have been updated in line with changes in legislation.
- The agency had introduced a clearer system to ensure adopters signed a form regarding the notification of the death of a child.
- Clearer information was now provided regarding financial support for adopters.
- A formal feedback mechanism from the adoption panel to the agency had been established.
- Panel recommendations were only being made when the panel was quorate.
- The information required to be maintained in staff files had improved.
- The carrying out of telephone enquiries following written references had been implemented.

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

Although the agency has good leadership, manages the adoption process well in many areas and is committed to best possible outcomes for children, there are some issues that require attention.

Information management systems, which tracked the progress of children where a review decision for permanence had been made, and identified any reasons for delay in achieving this plan, were in place. Managers identified that

these could be improved to fully provide the data needed to analyse future need. The system for tracking the progress of adopters, particularly the completion of checks, should be improved to provide a closer monitoring process.

The agency was aware that although the numbers of families it was approving had increased, it needed to attract more families who could better match the specific needs of the children in the borough. More families for sibling groups, older children with complex needs, and children of black and dual heritage backgrounds were needed. A recruitment strategy has been produced, but this needed to be further developed and extended, and be based on a full analysis of need, and recent performance.

The agency had also identified that it needed to improve the quality and consistency of its services to birth families. The extent to which efforts were made to engage birth families in the adoption planning process for their children was variable. It was not clear how much access to independent support offered by the Family Talk service was promoted. Birth parents' involvement in information giving about their own and their child's history needs to be better recorded in the paperwork provided to panel.

Evidence of the quality of direct work being carried out with children moving towards an adoptive placement was limited, and social workers reported that this work was mainly carried out by foster carers. Specialist training opportunities for social workers in supervising foster carers helping children move through the adoption process need to be ongoing.

A number of adopters indicated in the inspection questionnaires, that delays at different stages of the process, and changes in social workers let down the otherwise quality of the service they had experienced. The communication at the post approval stage for those not quickly matched with a child was also variable, and not as reliable as should be expected in some cases. The agency needs to develop consistency across the board to ensure applicants are fully informed of the process, and particularly where matches with other agencies are being considered, provide reliable support to adopters who are waiting anxiously for a decision.

The adoption panel is administered efficiently, and is facilitated by an experienced and knowledgeable chairperson. Medical advice is clear and thorough when the Medical Adviser has access to all the paperwork. Although some of the medical work is now carried out by two additional doctors appointed to deal with the volume of work, there are problems with communication in the system and the timely provision of paperwork to the Adviser, which in some cases affects the availability of full information to panel when considering a recommendation that a child should be placed for adoption.

Case records management in some areas needs improving. There was little evidence of formal, regular auditing on files. The content of children's case records (adoption files) examined was inadequate, and did not contain all the

information required under Reg. 12 of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005.

The files of staff, sessional workers and panel members have improved, but did not all have the necessary information as detailed in the regulations.

The working conditions for the adoption team are cramped, but plans to improve the space available were underway.

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)
- 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 and 19

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The agency provides a service that is aimed at the best possible outcomes for children, but the quality and delivery of the service is, at present, inconsistent.

## EVIDENCE:

The managers and workers in Barnet's adoption service demonstrated a commitment, supported in practice, to ensuring that the needs of children placed for adoption were at the centre of their work.

There were a growing number of adopters being assessed, but these were not all meeting the agency's placement needs. A number of families were waiting to be matched as they did not meet the needs of the specific children waiting for new families in Barnet. There was a basic recruitment strategy in place, but this needed further work to provide a clearer analysis of need and current provision, in order to prove more effective in practice. The agency was aware that further work was necessary to increase resources for the placement of sibling groups, older children with complex needs, and children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Plans for recruitment to be targeted both within

the local Consortium, and within the team, were being developed to better achieve this. The monitoring system for children who needed permanent families had also been tightened to reduce delay.

The service has just employed a Campaign and Communication Officer jointly with fostering, who will review and update all the adoption publicity. Material already produced was of a good standard. Systems were not yet in place to easily record information on the responses and enquiries received following specific advertising. New plans being developed should include this aspect to inform future practice.

Barnet is a member of the North London Adoption Consortium, which was working well, and was proving helpful in sharing resources and training events. It was more limited in providing a source of approved adopters, as all the member agencies were in competition for families for sibling groups, and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. A joint recruitment website was being explored by the Consortium.

The quality of Child Placement Reports seen was variable, but said to be improving by managers and the panel chair. Some lacked accuracy and chronological accounts of information. There was a need to ensure a consistency in the quality of the reports produced, as these are essential in ensuring clear and accurate information is available for the child in the future. Training in writing and understanding the purpose of the new Child Placement Reports should be provided in the annual training programme on a regular basis.

The team runs information meetings to link in with two planned sets of preparation groups a year. Applicants can also join groups ran by members of the consortia to avoid delay.

Feedback received from adopters through questionnaires and interviews reflected a positive initial response to enquiries by workers, and "excellent" preparation groups. Adopters expressed satisfaction with the content, and quality of presentation. An extra day had recently been added to the programme to include adoption support and medical issues.

A number of good quality Form F's were seen, which were analytical, thorough and clearly summed up applicants strengths, and issues of concerns. Only one was seen that was competency based, and this was well completed. There was evidence, however, that there was confusion over the system for applying for and recording CRB's. In two cases seen, CRB checks were not received before panel approval. In one case, a check was accepted that had been applied for by the female applicant's place of work, and the agency's own check was received two months after approval. In another case, the CRB had been returned on the male applicant, but not on the female applicant, and was received two weeks after panel.

Evidence on adopters files of up to date CRB's having been obtained was generally poorly recorded. The standard memo does not make clear whether the check is enhanced, the date received or the disclosure number.

It was also noted that a number of adopters CV's did not provide details of the months of employment as well as years, or clear evidence that gaps in CV's had been discussed.

Eight of the twelve questionnaires received from adopters commented about the length of time the overall process had taken, including waiting for preparation groups, allocation of social worker, changes in social worker, and changes in panel dates. Although managers monitored adopters' feedback to ensure any dissatisfaction with the service was addressed, this was a high percentage of service users who had responded, expressing dissatisfaction with this part of the service provision. The system for tracking adopters' progress should be developed to aid improvement in this area, and to provide a more equal and consistent service for all users.

Care is taken to ensure that children are matched with and placed with families who are best able to meet their needs. There was evidence that adoption team social workers work well with children's social workers and that there are clear processes in place to effect appropriate matches. However, some siblings had had plans changed to permanence due to a lack of available adoptive families. There was a good awareness, understanding and knowledge amongst staff in matters of diversity, including the ethnicity, cultural and religious needs of children. Efforts were made to address these, and were integral to the agency's practice, policies and procedures.

A number of good matching reports were seen, which were thorough and detailed. Adopters reported that they were given relevant information about the child being considered for matching.

The adoption and permanence panel was held monthly. The membership met the new regulations, and there was an experienced, independent chair. It also included an adviser from the local CAMHS service, and an agency representative from the disabled children's team. The panel adviser is the adoption team manager. This had resulted in a clear conflict of interest for the manager on some occasions. The agency may wish to review whether an adviser, independent of the work of the team, should be considered. The quality of the discussion at the panel observed was surprisingly limited, although sufficient time had been provided for a full discussion. Paperwork, on one case, which was recognised by both panel and members of staff presenting concerned to be inappropriate for the task was accepted to prevent further delay on one case, and in another case the medical adviser informed the panel that she had not been aware of the child prior to receiving the panel papers, and had only seen an initial health assessment. The adviser made it clear that

this would not be acceptable information for a match with adopters to go ahead, but as it appeared to be a healthy baby did not feel it should delay a recommendation to the child to be placed for adoption. It has already been mentioned from file evidence that adopters had been approved without up to date CRB checks.

The structure of panel discussion, and the format provided for the recording of the minutes does not provide sufficient structure in ensuring that all areas are sufficiently covered and rigorously recorded in checking the information available in crucial areas. Approved adopters also commented that "the panel should have more training in how to "interview"/ ask questions, and organise this stage of the process", and "The panel made us feel very nervous, were not welcoming and the atmosphere was tense which added to our nerves on the day".

Adopters attend panel, but do not have a separate waiting room, waiting in a corridor at the top of the stairs, and are expected to go home before the recommendation is made. The chair did not go out to greet the adopter attending at the panel observed.

Quality assurance issues on work presented to panel were being taken up, and fed back to the agency, through quarterly meetings with the panel chair and the assistant divisional manager. There were appropriate working policies and procedures concerning panel. Written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers had been completed since the last inspection. An induction programme was provided for new panel members, and an appraisal system had been introduced. Annual panel training had taken place, which included training on the new legislation, and a session on "Keeping Children Safe". Panel feedback forms were given to social workers attending panel.

The decision maker is provided with minutes of the panel meeting, and decision sheets after the panel has met. He meets with the team manager within three days, and any issues of concern are discussed, and a decision made within appropriate timescales. In contentious cases, a full set of panel papers are provided prior to the meeting. There was evidence on files that decisions were made and letters confirming these decisions were sent out within the required seven days. Adopters confirmed that they were contacted for an oral decision to be conveyed within the two days as stipulated in guidance. In one case examined, which later resulted in a complaint, adopters were not approved by panel, but no reasons were given to explain this decision in the letter sent out. The panel chair and decision maker should ensure that applicants are clear why they have been turned down.

There was evidence that panels with heavy agendas started early to ensure recommendations that children should be placed for adoption were not delayed. As a number of adopters complained about changes to dates or delays booking a date, the system should be reviewed to ensure that cases are

not booked into panel unless all relevant paperwork and checks are complete. There was a process for monitoring the timescales of cases being presented to panel. In addition, the team manager provides quarterly reports to panel, as a further monitoring tool, to ensure plans for children are being appropriately progressed. The agency's policy also states that disruption meetings should be held, and the appropriate reports taken back to panel for discussion. However, there had been no disruptions in the last year.

The manager was suitably experienced and qualified, and had recently completed an NVQ Level 4 management qualification. It is recommended that the deputy manager also complete one.

Telephone enquiries, to verify references, were being carried out for new staff, but needed to be consistently recorded on personnel files.

The agency must ensure that all relevant checks have been carried out on all staff before commencing employment.

# 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 and 18

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The adoption agency is developing a cohesive approach to a range of support services for adoptive parents within the borough to ensure appropriate placements are made and maintained.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency is developing its adoption support services. Managers were aware that take up of future services could increase, and there is a need to monitor the take up against their capacity to provide the range of responsibilities it carries in line with new legislation. The deputy team manager took the lead role on adoption support

There were excellent links with the local CAMHS, and families interviewed commented favourably on this service. However, there was evidence that the provision of specialist educational provision for children in adoptive families in the borough could be problematic. One family seen, who were receiving post adoption support from Barnet, was very positive at the sensitive and helpful assistance received from the adoption team, but were far from complimentary on the willingness of the education service to recognise the particular difficulties that the impact of adoption had had on their child, and his ability to respond to mainstream education. It is important that communication and joint working relations be developed with education to build a cohesive and comprehensive adoption support service.

The agency is a member of Adoption UK, and the agency also has a contract with the Post Adoption Centre to provide access to a range of services and training for adopters. There are plans to provide a programme of post approval training with other members of the consortium. In the past year, a number of

Barnet adopters had attended the Adoption UK course, a "Piece of Cake", and attended workshops on attachment, medical and educational issues. A course in Parenting Skills run by Coram Family was also being offered, as well "Preparing for Placement" run by Adoption UK. Adopters interviewed had also been invited to the agency's annual adoption picnic, and a barbeque.

There was positive feedback from adopters and staff on the quality of medical advice available to adopters. However, the medical adviser does not see all the children with adoption plans herself, and although additional help has been arranged, there are clearly problems in communication in the system, as discussed earlier. At two cases heard at the panel observed, there had been problems accessing medical information. The agency should ensure that the medical adviser, prior to panel meetings, receives all available medical information.

Staff and managers said they generally received a good service from the service's legal advisers. There had been some confusion over the interpretation of the new legislation in some areas, but as case law developed this was improving.

The quality of adoption support plans was said to be improving, and ongoing training should be provided on completing realistic reports.

Adopters felt that the agency had provided them with good support and advice to enable them to develop their parenting roles, and help to manage any difficulties they were experiencing.

All of the social workers carry out adoption support work, and operate the letterbox service, provide birth records counselling, and manage all contact agreement arrangements.

Other specialist advice is sought from appropriate sources, including education, special needs, or consultants on cultural and religious issues.

The agency is a member of the Inter-country Adoption Centre, and most of their intercountry adoptions are carried out by Norwood adoption agency on its behalf.

## **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,and 9

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Although the agency demonstrated its commitment to supporting birth parents and involving them in their child's adoption through appropriate policies and procedures, and some positive initiatives, a more consistent approach to practice needs to be maintained.

### **EVIDENCE:**

No birth family questionnaires were returned. A birth mother was interviewed.

There was a lack of clear evidence of significant interaction between the agency and birth parents, or of a proactive approach to engaging birth families, both in case recording, and in paperwork being presented to panel. There were no contributions by birth parents to Child Permanence reports seen, and recording of the efforts made to engage them were limited. The birth mother interviewed had not felt that she was kept well informed, and was unsatisfied with the level of service received during the adoption proceedings. She said that she was not given information on support services during the court process. At the panel observed, the panel did not specifically check that birth family members had been offered counselling, or had been given the opportunity to contribute to the Child Permanence Reports. Where possible, improvement was needed in involving birth families in gathering information for the child on their family background.

The agency's policies and procedures are clear about the need to maintain a child's heritage. It was also evident, from discussion with staff, that workers view life story work as important; however, the quality of life story work was reported to be variable. The importance of gathering information about the

child, and helping the child to understand the reasons for being placed in a new family should be prioritised within the competing demands of the placing social worker's role. Training should be included in the annual training programme for workers carrying out life story work themselves, and those supervising foster carers in this important task.

A comprehensive range of leaflets giving information for birth parents were available at the time of inspection. These included information on adoption support services, Family Talk help line and Barnet's letterbox system. The Family Talk service was established in 2005 offering independent advice, counselling and support for birth families through After Adoption, and was arranged via the Consortium. The take up had been poor, and there was recognition by staff that it may well not have been promoted enough. The contact with this service was under review at the time of the inspection.

There had been improvements in the organisation of the letterbox service, and the birth mother interviewed commented that she that she was now supported in providing appropriate information for her child to receive in his adoptive family, and trusted that the system set up to exchange information between herself and her child's adoptive family would continue to take place as arranged.

# 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,and 29

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence, including a visit to this service.

The agency had good leadership. However, there were inconsistencies in some areas of practice and organisation that impact on the agency's ability to provide an efficient service in all areas.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The Statement of Purpose had been improved, and now covered all the areas required, with an attached appendix. The executive formally reviewed the document in March 2006. It is recommended that the section on monitoring the service is further developed and an organisational structure chart is included.

A Children's Guide had recently been produced, which was colourful and attractive. It would need to be read with the 0-6 year old age group for which it was intended. A guide for older children was about to be developed, which would be available as an interactive CD Rom, as well as a printed format, and was due to be completed by the end of the year. The guide included details on how to make a complaint, how to contact the Commission's Children's Rights Director, and how to access an independent advocate.

Policies and procedures had been updated to reflect the changes in legislation, and are operational and available electronically to staff.

A good range of information about the adoption process was provided to prospective adopters, and interviews and questionnaires received confirmed this. It is recommended that clearer written information is provided for prospective adopters once they are approved, particularly on the process of being considered for children from other agencies.

The adoption service has grown over recent years, with two extra posts and the establishment of a deputy manager post, which carried deputising responsibilities in the manager's absence. Both managers were carrying a heavy workload. It was planned that the team manager would shortly be passing on responsibility for kinship cases to another team, and that the lessening of her workload would then allow the deputy manager to concentrate on the development of the post adoption service.

The manager was suitably experienced and qualified.

Appropriate tracking systems for monitoring children's progress through the adoption process were in place, but it was recognised that more detail was needed within the system to better provide the data needed to analyse future need. A new permanency strategy was also being developed, to enhance the structures already operating. Data Performance Management was monitored through the Children and Young Persons Strategic Partnership Board on a quarterly basis.

The system to track the progress of prospective adopters also needed to be further developed and tightened, particularly the progress of statutory checks on applicants.

The authority had retained a suitably skilled and experienced staff group in the adoption team over recent years. The situation generally in Children and Families had improved, and greater stability in the workforce was having a positive impact on the quality of work and service delivery. The ratio of agency workers was now low, and there was more stability at management level.

The majority of staff indicated that they were kept well informed by their direct managers, who listened, and were approachable. However, staff in the adoption team felt that they were still not fully integrated into the children and Families service although direct communication with LAC teams had improved since being located in the same offices.

Staff commented that that they received regular supervision, both formal and informal. Staff in the adoption team felt they worked in a supportive setting where they valued sharing ideas and skills with colleagues. Newer workers felt they had been protected, and had received a reasonable induction into the service. There was a workload management system, but there was some confusion amongst workers about this, as not all teams in Children and Families appeared to operate it. Staff had regular appraisals.

25 % of current adoption social work staff had achieved a PQ qualification. Staff felt their personal development was encouraged, although pressure of work, and availability of places often impacted on their ability to attend further training. LAC staff were positive about the range of courses on offer, but adoption staff felt that the in house training was often not relevant to the work they carried out. Staff from the Looked After Children teams also expressed an interest in being more included in the training offered by the North London Adoption Consortium, and all staff recognised the quality and relevance of these events to their own work. More opportunities were now available to staff to maintain ongoing communication between different teams since the relocation of the LAC teams to the same offices as adoption and fostering. Opportunities should be available through the Children and Families workshops for all staff to share ideas, feel involved in future initiatives, and discuss practice issues, and implications of changes in legislation together. A number of staff commented that further IT training would be helpful.

The agency had all relevant staffing policies. New IT equipment allowed flexibility in working arrangements, and the subject of staff safety had been taken seriously with the issue of electronic devices to staff, which monitored their movements when away from the office. The security of the building had also been improved, with security personnel being trained by police. The politeness and helpfulness of reception and security staff was observed over the course of the inspection.

Those case records examined were on the whole well organised and structured. There was evidence on most files of supervisor's decisions being recorded, but evidence of file audits taking place was more variable. There

were electronic signatures and dating of ongoing recording and reports. The IT system in place had an appropriate back up system in operation.

Children's adoption files did not hold all the information listed in guidance. Photographs kept on file were not routinely identified and dated.

Three complaints from service users were examined. There were long delays in dealing satisfactorily with one of these, and there seemed to have been some confusion as to who was dealing with it. The complaints process should be monitored to ensure that cases are dealt with within appropriate timescales.

Staff files held most of the information required. On two files there was evidence that staff had started before CRB's had been returned. There was no record of interview notes on some files, and where only years had been listed, and not months in an applicant's history of employment, there was insufficient evidence that these gaps had been queried. Memos confirming CRB's should include the disclosure no., whether enhanced, the date received, full name, address and date of birth of applicant to ensure there is no confusion.

The adoption archives are located off site; files can be recalled with 24-hour notice. The building is staffed during office hours, and is linked to a security system during the evenings and weekends. Records are kept in filing cabinets, in a locked room. There are fire alarms fitted. The filing system was in order, and was well maintained, and operated efficiently. No written risk assessment had been carried out, but there was a Business Continuity plan.

There were plans to improve the working environment for the adoption team, by locating them on another floor, where there was more space available. Senior management were planning to allow staff flexibility in how they used this space to best meet their needs, and that of the service. The premises were considered fit for purpose, but it is hoped that the move to increased space be completed as soon as possible to improve the working conditions for staff. The adoption panel, training events and meetings were held at other venues. Staff commented on the difficulties in the system for booking other premises within Barnet. This system should be reviewed. Some adopters interviewed had attended an adoption panel in Barnet House, when other accommodation was unavailable, and felt the rooms used were not user friendly, or in good repair.

# 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>	2
<b>9</b>	2

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

<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>	3

<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>1</b>	3
<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>	2
<b>26</b>	3
<b>27</b>	2
<b>28</b>	2
<b>29</b>	3
<b>30</b>	N/A
<b>31</b>	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	AD2	AAR 2005 7(2)(b)	The agency must ensure consistency and accuracy in the quality of the Child Placement reports produced. This is essential in ensuring clear and accurate information is available for the child in the future.	31/03/07
2	AD4	AAR 2005 23(1)	The agency must ensure that all checks on adoptive applicants are received before panel approval.	28/02/07
3	AD8	AAR 2005 15(1)	The agency must ensure that a more proactive approach in engaging birth families in the adoption process must be evidenced in practice, alongside an improvement in gathering information for the child on their family background.	30/04/07

## 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	Systems should be developed to record information on the responses received on specific advertising to inform future practice.
2	AD15	A consistent system of recording telephone checking of references should be maintained.
3	AD4	Staff and adopter's career histories and CV's should include months as well as years, and explanations of any periods of unemployment.
4	AD12	The agency should ensure that the medical adviser, prior to panel meetings, receives all available medical information.
5	AD12	The structure of panel discussion, and the format provided for the recording of the minutes should provide a rigorous structure to ensure that all areas are sufficiently covered and recorded in checking the information available in making recommendations.
6	AD12	The facilities for adopters waiting to go into a panel meeting, and the system for greeting, introducing and conveying recommendations should be reviewed.
7	AD13	The decision maker should receive a set of panel papers at the same time as panel members to ensure he is in receipt of all relevant information.
8	AD13	The system for booking panel dates should be reviewed to ensure that cases are not booked into panel unless all relevant paperwork and checks are complete.
9	AD13	The reasons for panel recommendations and agency decisions should be clearly explained to adopters in writing.
10	AD8	The agency should ensure that all children placed for adoption have life-story work undertaken.
11	AD1	It is recommended that the section on monitoring the service in the Statement of Purpose is further developed and an organisational structure chart is included.
12	AD23	Ongoing opportunities should be available through the Children and Families workshops for all staff to share ideas, feel involved in future initiatives, and discuss practice issues, and implications of changes in legislation together

13	AD25	Children's adoption case files should be maintained more effectively, and include all information required under regulations.
14	AD27	The agency should develop a more consistent approach to auditing files.
15	AD28	Personnel files and panel members' records should include all required information

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