



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Nottingham City Council Adoption Service

**York House (2nd Floor)
Mansfield Road
Nottingham
NG1 3NS**

Lead Inspector
Rosemary Chapman

Announced Inspection
2nd-6th October 2006 09:30

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	Nottingham City Council Adoption Service
Address	York House (2nd Floor) Mansfield Road Nottingham NG1 3NS
Telephone number	0115 915 1723
Fax number	
Email address	sonia.cain@nottinghamcity.gov.uk
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Nottingham City Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Sonia Cain
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration: None

Date of last inspection 2nd December 2003

Brief Description of the Service:

Nottingham City Council has a joint fostering and adoption team based at York House, which is a City centre location. The fostering service was inspected at the same time as the adoption service and is subject to a separate report.

The adoption service comprises a recruitment team, an assessment team, support teams (who primarily support foster carers), a home finder, a post adoption team and the City Adoption Section. The service:

- a. Places children for whom adoption is the plan, with suitable adoptive families
- b. Recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive families, including those who wish to adopt from overseas
- c. Provides a range of support services to adoptive families, birth families and adoptive children
- d. Provides counselling, information and advice to birth families and adopted adults, including birth records counselling.
- e. Undertakes non-agency adoptions
- f. Assists with tracing and provides intermediary services.

SUMMARY

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

This is the second inspection of the adoption service provided by Nottingham City Council. Prior to the inspection fieldwork taking place, supporting documentary evidence was sent to and read by the lead inspector. Questionnaires were received from 8 prospective and approved adopters, 5 placing social workers and 2 specialist advisers.

Two inspectors spent 5 days in the agency and interviewed:

The home finder

The team managers for all the teams in the adoption service

Administrative staff

The post adoption team and team manager

The Director of Children's services

The elected member with portfolio responsibility for looked after children

The recruitment team (undertaken by the fostering inspectors)

Assessment team social workers

The nominated manager

Placing social workers

Independent Reviewing Officers (undertaken by the fostering inspectors)

The agency decision maker

The adoption support group workers

A group of birth mothers at the drop-in group

Four adoptive families were selected to be case tracked and this involved reading their files, the files of the children placed with them and a home interview. A further 2 families receiving adoption support were also case tracked.

In addition, one of the adoption panels was observed, the chairperson was interviewed and a selection of files, including personnel files (undertaken by the fostering inspectors), adopters' and children's files were read during the course of the inspection. The premises and archive storage were also inspected.

The inspectors would like to thank the managers and staff for their cooperation during the inspection and the hard work which they put in when organising both the pre-inspection material and the inspection programme for the joint inspection. The openness and helpfulness of staff at all levels enabled the inspection to be carried out efficiently and effectively.

What the service does well:

The agency has good systems in place for recruiting, preparing, assessing and approving appropriate adopters and home finding for children. These include committed and enthusiastic staff who are appropriately qualified and trained, good analytical assessments and a very thorough and effective adoption panel. One adopter commented that they wished to adopt again with Nottingham City and had "recommended them to friends considering adoption".

The agency provides a variety of support to adoptive families, including training, support groups and direct work with families.

The work with birth mothers is particularly good and demonstrates a lifelong commitment to them. There is an independent counselling service available pre adoption order, then a drop-in group at any time post adoption order. The agency has undertaken research to inform the social work practice on contact issues and has a robust letterbox scheme in place.

The agency is well managed and managers and staff are experienced, qualified well trained, supervised and supported. The social workers in the agency are vibrant, committed and enthusiastic and adopters speak highly of them. One adopter commented: "the social workers were professional and very approachable". Another said: "she listens attentively and will attempt to give a reply to all our questions and concerns". The service is very child focussed.

There are very good systems for monitoring and evaluating the work of the agency to ensure a good service to adopters and children. Diversity issues are well addressed at all levels.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Since the last inspection, the agency has improved its links with the fieldwork side through regular meetings between the manager and panel advisers and from input on training days. There are also more formal meetings between the manager and the panel chairs, the agency decision maker and the legal and medical advisers.

There is now better partnership working and a willingness to put the needs of looked after children on the agendas of other agencies.

The City Council has now developed its own post adoption service and this has provided information, advice and support to fieldwork social workers on issues such as contact.

What they could do better:

Minor additions to the assessments of adopters, such as addressing competencies in a more explicit way and taking up employer references in all cases, would further improve the assessments.

Minor adjustments to the panel minutes would make the detailing of the membership clearer, and ensuring panel members see the panel minutes at the next panel, would be of benefit. Finalising the panel policies and procedures, formalising the induction process and ensuring all notifications are sent out would further improve the panel process.

Developing written protocols for the role of specialist advisers and providing the Children's guide in different formats are also recommended.

The files could be improved by a more formalised file audit system, clarification of what constitutes a child's adoption file and more information on panel members' files are required. Notification of plans for adoption should be in place on all children's files.

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

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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

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The systems in place for the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters promote the making of safe placements for children.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy in place. There is a separate recruitment team, whose remit is to recruit both foster carers and adopters. They have a written strategy, which is monitored and evaluated. There are good links with the home finder and a clear understanding of the types and numbers of children who will require an adoptive family. Recruitment is targeted to meet these needs, and if families come forward who can offer a much needed resource, then the agency responds flexibly and will put a lot of time and effort into undertaking their assessment, at times at considerable geographical distance.

There was evidence that children are placed with their siblings where appropriate and with families who can meet their needs, including cultural and religious needs. The agency has a home finder, who is responsible for finding families for all children for whom adoption is the plan. This is an effective

system, and she is involved at an early stage in the children's plan. She is also aware of prospective adopters so can begin to think about potential matching situations. Placing social workers really appreciated this service and commented that the home finder "is fantastic, she returns calls, she forward plans and has a really good idea of the adopters and a really good idea of the children".

The agency has a formal, thorough assessment, preparation and approval process. Adopters commented that the preparation training was "interesting and informative" and "well organised and useful". It is regularly evaluated and adapted to meet the needs of the service, where this is identified. There is also a day for family and friends, to enable them to have information about adoption. The assessments seen were of a good standard and looked at the applicants' ability to parent an adopted child in a safe way. They were evidence based, extremely thorough in terms of checks on ex partners, with evidence of stringent efforts made to follow up information given. Second opinion visits are well established and there is a comprehensive health and safety questionnaire, which includes pet ownership. Diversity is extremely well addressed and covers all aspects of diversity. The only recommendations would be to address competencies in a more explicit way and to take up employer references on all applicants, not just those who work with children and vulnerable people.

Adopters spoken with were very happy with the service they received and one couple said their social worker had been "brilliant", another said "lovely and very sensitive and supportive" and they were "well informed all the way through".

Adopters are given appropriate information about children prior to placement and life appreciation days or information sharing processes are undertaken in all situations where this is deemed necessary. There is a good pro forma used for adopters who are taking very young children under fostering regulations, which makes the situation, including risks and benefits, very clear. Adopters prepare information about themselves to share with the children and some very good examples of child friendly family books were seen.

The policies and procedures in relation to the adoption panel are in the process of being re-written and these should be shared with the panel chairpersons and panel members once they are completed.

Adopters have been offered the opportunity to attend the adoption panel for some time and the procedures for this make attendees as welcome as possible. An experienced adopter acts as a volunteer to wait with them prior to and after the panel, there is a book of photographs and information about the panel members, the panel chair meets them and introduces himself before they come into the panel room and he then gives them the recommendation in

private. Adopters commented that "it was much better than expected" and that their social worker had prepared them well.

The panel is properly constituted with a range of experiences within the membership. New panel members observe a panel and the panel adviser talks to them about their role. It is recommended that this induction process be formalised and recorded on their files. There is an annual training day with agency staff and other briefings throughout the year. Panel members have undergone an appraisal, the evidence of which was seen in their files. All panel members had up to date CRB checks and had signed confidentiality statements.

Panels are efficiently organised and placing social workers confirmed that emergency panels were held to prevent delay if necessary. Panel members receive their papers about 10 days in advance to give them chance to read them fully. The minutes are extremely good and give a thorough reflection of the case discussion and reasons for the recommendations. Minor amendments were recommended to the panel adviser i.e. recording the panel adviser, minute taker and legal adviser separately to the membership and detailing social work members from other agencies as such, rather than independent members. The minutes should go to all panel members, rather than just the chair, to be agreed at the next meeting.

The agency decision is made very quickly after the panel and the decision maker reads the papers, sees the draft minutes and talks to the panel adviser. Notifications are generally sent out quickly, but there was evidence that one adopter had not received anything in writing and there was no notification to birth parents evident on a child's adoption file. Thus the system needs to ensure that this does not happen. It would also be good practice for this to come from the Agency Decision Maker rather than the team manager.

The manager and staff of the agency have undergone appropriate recruitment and selection procedures and have evidence of their suitability in their files. Social workers are qualified, experienced and well trained and demonstrated a child-focussed and enthusiastic attitude to their work and an understanding of why certain processes are followed.

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. There is a range of support available to adoptive families, which promotes the maintenance of secure placements.

EVIDENCE:

There is evidence of good support to adoptive families. They are well prepared prior to placement, through the initial preparation training and home study. They can also access subsequent training on a range of relevant topics. There is a well-established and responsive adopters' support group, which has a varied programme, including social events and specialist speakers, to reflect what adopters have said they would like. This group is also being extended to adopters post adoption order, at their request. Adopters spoken with were aware of the support available to them at any time and were confident that they would be able to access it.

The agency has an out of hours service every day of the year, staffed by workers from the team.

There was evidence of a quick response to adopters who request post adoption support and this included a thorough, written adoption support assessment, which had been shared with the adopter. The adopter interviewed confirmed she had been asked what sort of support she felt she needed, was offered more help than she required, she can telephone the worker whenever she needs to and said: "I can't fault them".

The post adoption team was developed in January 2005. Prior to then, a joint City and County team undertook the post adoption aspects of the service. The team have been undertaking research to enable them to highlight the needs of their adopters and children and inform their practice, they have done "The

Piece of Cake" training twice, they contribute to the newsletter sent to all adopters and have undertaken direct work with families. They feel they are still developing this service.

The agency has a low disruption rate, and the files of the 2 disruptions which have occurred this year were inspected and contained evidence of disruption meetings chaired by an independent chair. The panel adviser has also undertaken a very good analysis of all the disruptions which have occurred in recent years to try and draw out themes and provide learning to the agency.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advisers, including medical, legal, educational and CAMHS, but it needs to develop written protocols to govern their role

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

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The lifelong commitment to birth parents facilitates and enhances their ability to make a positive contribution towards their child's heritage and thus give good and accurate information to children about their history.

EVIDENCE:

The agency was able to demonstrate a clear lifelong commitment to birth parents. As part of its post adoption service, there is a long-standing fortnightly drop-in group for birth mothers, which was observed as part of the inspection. Many of the mothers spoken with had their children adopted many years ago and were still attending the group as a means of support and help with dealing with their feelings.

The agency has a service level agreement with a local voluntary adoption agency to offer an independent counselling service for birth parents pre adoption and there was evidence in some of the files inspected that useful work had been undertaken on their behalf by this service.

Placing social workers try to engage birth parents during the court process and record their views where possible on the child's placement report. There was also evidence that efforts are made to obtain information for a child's life story book.

The agency has a robust letterbox system in place to facilitate indirect contact between birth families and their adopted children. This includes assistance with letter writing when needed. Some placing social workers and adopters spoken

with were not aware that contacts could take place on more than one occasion a year, however, so this needs to be clarified.

The post adoption team have also undertaken research on direct contact and a worker in the team can become involved at an early stage to provide advice to children's social workers when making decisions about contact issues. Evidence from research can also be used to give weight to decisions about contact in court proceedings.

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

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The agency is well managed at all levels and this ensures that a safe and effective service is provided to adopters and children.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has a statement of purpose, which has recently been reviewed and updated.

The agency has also developed a Children's Guide to adoption, which is well written but this needs to be available in other formats to meet the needs of all children for whom adoption is the plan.

Applicants receive clear written information about the adoption process and the types of children needing families. One adopter commented that she chose Nottingham because "they were better on the phone, informative and friendly". It is clear from the range of adopters available that applicants from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences are welcome. There are a number of single adopters and same sex couples, for example. Staff confirmed that they could prioritise applicants who may meet the needs of specific children.

The agency is well managed and the manager has the necessary experience, skills and qualifications to provide an effective service. All staff have clear roles and responsibilities and the systems for communication are good across the different teams, to ensure the best outcomes for the good of the agency as a whole. Staff commented: "it's all about good communication and we've got that".

There are very good monitoring systems at all levels. The portfolio holder is well informed and well aware of the work of the agency. There are clear systems in place to provide him with information, including regular meetings with senior staff and performance indicators. He demonstrated an awareness of how to interrogate this information to provide an accurate reflection of how the service is progressing. There are also very good information and tracking systems in place to which the manager has regular access. Adopters have been surveyed and the results of this survey have been analysed with points for future action, the disruptions have also been collated and analysed. The adoption panel evaluate and comment on all the reports which come to them and the results of this have also been collated. There are regular meetings between the manager and her equivalent in the placing side of the agency and there are formal meetings with the panel chairs, legal and medical advisers and agency decision maker to provide a mechanism for feedback to the agency on the quality of the work.

Staff appear to be managed and organised effectively as there was no evidence of delays. Staff confirmed they receive regular supervision which is of a good standard and that their support from managers is good: "our managers are good, very supportive both in personal and professional issues". They have a budget to access external training and staff were generally happy with the level of training available to them.

There is a reasonable number of administrative staff to undertake the roles and this has been recently reassessed and a decision taken to appoint more staff. They said: "we are very busy but people are keen to listen and support us – we have got very good managers". The administrative staff felt part of the process, were involved in training and said, "It is a nice place to work and

people are very open". Staff felt they would benefit from more computer equipment, however.

Staff felt the Council was a fair employer although the issue of unequal pay was raised by some, both in terms of other authorities and in comparison with the fieldwork services.

The records on adopters were well organised, legible and contained evidence of case decisions by supervisors. However, there is no formal file audit system and this needs to be developed. The archived child's file inspected, which was set up by the adoption team, complied with the regulations apart for a missing notification to birth parents. However, the child care file is called the adoption file and did not comply with the regulations. Therefore the system for organising the children's adoption files needs clarification.

Appropriated records are maintained in relation to complaints and allegations. Records are stored securely and there are appropriate policies and procedures in place in relation to recording and access to records.

The panel members' files were well organised and well structured. However, some of the required information was missing from some of them, for example, the level of the CRB check, gender, date of birth, proof of identity, proof of qualifications and missing references.

The premises are located in the City centre, which provides good access for prospective and approved adopters and birth families. All staff employed in the agency are in the same building. The premises are secure, as is the storage of the archives, although it is recommended that this be risk assessed in terms of damage from fire and water.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	4
8	3
9	3

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

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

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

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	3
3	3
14	3
16	3
17	4
20	3
21	3
22	3
23	3
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	3
30	N/A
31	N/A

No

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	AD13	AA Regs 2005 19 and 33	The agency must ensure that written notifications are always sent to adopters and birth parents.	31/01/07
2	AD25	AA Regs 2005 12	The agency must ensure that the system for the child's adoption file is clear and that the file complies with the regulations.	31/01/07
3	AD28	LAA Regs 2003 11	The agency must ensure that the information in the files of panel members comply with schedules 3 and 4.	31/01/07

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	AD4	Employer references should be taken up on all applicants.
2	AD4	The assessments of adopters should be more explicit in addressing competencies.
3	AD10	The panel policies and procedures should be shared with

		all panel members once they are finalised.
4	AD11	The agency should formalise the induction process for panel members and record this on their panel members' files.
5	AD12	The panel minutes should more clearly reflect the membership and go to every panel members to be agreed at the next meeting
6	AD13	The agency should consider sending the notification from the agency decision maker rather than the team manager.
7	AD18	The agency should develop written protocols to govern the role of their specialist advisers.
8	AD1	The agency should develop the Children's Guide in different formats to meet the varying needs of the children being placed for adoption.
9	AD20	The agency should consider providing more computer equipment for staff.
10	AD27	The agency should develop a formal file audit system.
11	AD29	The agency should undertake a risk assessment in terms of the storage of the archives, to ensure that damage from fire and water is minimised.

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