



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

The County of Herefordshire District Council

**Moor House
Widemarsh Common
Hereford
HR4 9NA**

Lead Inspector
Sally
Woodget

Announced
27th June 2005 14:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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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 The County of Herefordshire District Council,
Adoption Service

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HR4 9NA

Telephone number 01432 262833

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Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable) Herefordshire Council

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Hazel Couch

Type of registration LAA

No. of places registered (if applicable)

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

n/a

Date of last inspection n/a

Brief Description of the Service:

The Herefordshire Adoption Service forms part of the Children's Service Directorate Family Placement Service and is a member of the West Midlands Family Placement Consortium . The Adoption service was established in April 2001 following the withdrawal by Worcestershire from the previous joint service, which had operated since local government reorganisation in 1998. The current Adoption team has an establishment of a team manager, for full-time equivalent social workers and a half-time play therapist. An additional worker is contacted specifically to undertake intercountry Adoption assessments. The Adoption Service provides for both domestic and inter-country adoptions. The Statement of Purpose reports that the primary focus of Hereford adoption service is to secure positive outcomes for children. The service recruits, prepares, assesses, trains and supports adoptive parents to meet the needs of children and young people needing adoption. The training for inter-country adoption is provided by an external provider, the "Inter-country Adoption Centre". Section 51 Counselling and birth parent counselling is provided by social workers in the Adoption Team. The service has recently developed a service level agreement with "adoption support" to provide a more proactive support service to birth family members.

SUMMARY

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

This was the first inspection of Herefordshire Council's adoption service. Two inspectors undertook the inspection over three and a half days, in addition to the observation of the panel. Detailed Self Assessment and Pre-Inspection documents were received from the Adoption Team Manager and this as well as supporting documentation has been considered. During the inspection the inspectors met with 4 adopters, staff of the adoption service, including the administrative staff, a group of child care social workers, managers of child care social workers, independent reviewing officers, the manager of the therapy service, the panel chair and the managers of the Adoption service. Files were read and panel minutes were seen. Questionnaires were received from 5 adopters, 1 birth family member, 13 placing social workers and 2 advisers.

This inspection came at a time when there had been considerable staff shortages over a prolonged period of time, which despite a number of recruitment strategies had not been resolved. It is in this context that a number of aspects of the service are seen as in need of improvement.

What the service does well:

Family finding for children was maintained at the highest priority ensuring good matches with families who are able to meet their needs. Childcare social workers reported that the agency was sensitive to the needs of the child and carried out "excellent matching". Other adoption agencies commented on the quality of the work from Herefordshire Council adoption agency, the "commitment of staff" ensuring good outcomes for children. Some assessments were excellent and most adopters reported that the preparation was a good quality and informative. The agency was responsive to the needs of children waiting and was able to undertake assessments of prospective adopters quickly where it was felt they were able to meet the child's needs. The adopters and social work staff commented on the value of child appreciation days, which helped to enhance their understanding of the needs of the child requiring adoption.

The panel process was sound and timely, offering good advice to staff and sensitive to the needs of children and adopters. The adopters were invited to attend the panel meeting and their views of their experience taken into account. Children were also invited to the panel where this was appropriate

due to their age and understanding and staff and panel members felt this was a rewarding experience for all concerned, it helped them to find out directly from children their views and comments about the process.

The manager of the service has a wealth of knowledge, expertise and skills about adoption and is passionate and committed to her work. She and her staff were highly praised for the level of support, advice and guidance they offered to social work staff, other agencies, adopters and children. Individual adoption social workers were highly praised by the adopters they supported. The medical adviser was also praised by staff and adopters, for her valued input in providing information to adopters and staff about the needs of children to be placed.

The quality of the information provided to adopters at various stages throughout the adoption process was good.

Training to staff has improved in the last year, and the agency has supported staff in undertaking specialist courses to enhance their knowledge about the needs of children requiring adoptive placements and about adopters attachment abilities. Staff reported being supported to undertake the qualifying awards in childcare social work.

Case files on adopters and children were well ordered and organised, issues of confidentiality were taken seriously and they were appropriate arrangements in place to ensure access to these records.

What has improved since the last inspection?

N/A

What they could do better:

The adoption agency has been significantly affected by staffing difficulties over a considerable period of time. This has affected the agency's ability to provide an efficient and effective service in a number of areas. The management must develop contingency plans to resolve the staffing situation both in the short and in the long-term.

The agency needs to improve the number of adopters applying to them and due to the difficulties of placing their children locally, ensure they are appropriate people to meet the needs of the range of children available for

adoption nationally. The child protection policy needs to ensure that it includes procedures in relation to inter-agency placements.

Adopters have recognised that the agency is "seriously understaffed" and that there have been delays in undertaking assessments. One adopter reported "agonised waiting".

The information on adopters needs to be consistently comprehensive and include analysis of the information and this needs to be properly scrutinised. The number of children referred to the adoption service has dropped significantly in the last year from 23 to 7, but the number of looked after children in the local authority has remained virtually the same. The agency need to investigate the reasons for this occurrence and consider whether this trend is likely to continue as this has major implications for the organisation, management and development of the adoption service. The agency also need to develop an information system that provides clear and accurate data on the needs of children at the time when decisions about permanence are made so that this can be scrutinised in order to ensure that all children have the option of an adoptive placement where this is in their best interests.

Training is required for childcare social workers on permanency planning to ensure they are fully aware of all the factors that need to be taken into account when moving a child into an adoptive home and to ensure that information about the child and that birth family is appropriately recorded and contributes to the child's understanding of the situation in the future. Assistance is needed by child care team managers in scrutinising the documents prepared by childcare social workers for the adoption panel to ensure thorough quality assurance and timeliness.

The level of support for both adopters and adopted children need to be addressed. While there were examples of individuals appreciating the level of support they received, the agency should have a strategic plan to address the support needs of the service. Therapy services for children and adopters need to be improved to ensure a comprehensive range of therapy services to support adoptive placements and prevent possible disruptions.

The take-up of the services to birth parents was poor and whilst work was underway to create a more proactive service to birth parents further work to improve arrangements, particularly in relation to maintaining contact, is required.

The agency also needs to ensure that birth family members have the opportunity to comment on what is written about them before the information is presented to the adoption panel.

There needs to be clearer and more robust monitoring systems in place across the service. The council members need to be informed on at least a six monthly basis of the adoption service and members need to be involved and aware of the issues the service faces.

Systems need to be developed to ensure the quality and adequacy of the records and to ensure that decisions by supervisors are clearly recorded on these files. A system needs to be developed for information packs developed

for adopters at various stages in the process to be sent out and a process needs to be developed to ensure that information held on the national adoption register is kept up-to-date.

Complaints need to be dealt with in a timely manner in order to prevent further distress to complainants and their families.

Consideration needs to be given to ensure the adoption premises is accessible to people with disabilities

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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Management

Scoring of Standards

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 standard(s) 2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15 and 19.

The agency had a focused approach to ensuring that its practices are geared towards effective family finding for children and that they are placed with families who are able to meet their needs and promote their welfare.

EVIDENCE:

The manager of the adoption service had ensured that, despite pressures of carrying staff vacancies, family finding for children waiting for adoption and robust matching with adopters was given the highest priority. However staffing difficulties have had an impact on the delivery of service, one placing social worker felt that the adoption service was "significantly understaffed" and "have not had the necessary time to devote to home finding" for one child whose "needs are urgent and the chances of successful placement are diminishing".

Senior managers reported that during 2004/5 the Herefordshire adoption service placed 13 children for adoption, and that since 2001 had ensured that over 90% of children well placed within 12 months of their best interest decision. The further reported that the number of look after children adopted as a percentage of the looked of children's population in 2004/5 was 9.7% and that a further 11 children were placed with Herefordshire adopters by other

agencies. This is some evidence that Herefordshire adoption agency are committed to and effective in achieving good outcomes for children.

The adoption agency has systems in place to prioritise prospective adopters who are likely to meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents and a number of adopters had been "fast tracked" through the system to ensure timeliness in planning for specific children.

There was evidence of careful matching which reflected the child's cultural background. There were systems in place to ensure that relationship and attachment needs of brothers and sisters were fully assessed, and that these assessments were taken into account when decisions were made regarding children being placed separately or together.

The child's views and feelings, as far as they could be ascertained, regarding their age and understanding, were considered to be of enormous significance. Placing social workers from within the county as well as those from other authorities commented that the agency was "child focused" and "sensitive to the needs of children. They reported "skilful matching", "excellent matching" "careful matching" and "full and thorough matching".

Staff reported carrying out risk assessments to consider "the sphere of operation" (i.e. where they, their extended family and their friends lived, where they were likely to do their shopping, send their children to school and socialise etc...) of families living within Hereford to ensure the safety and confidentiality for both children and adoptive families. Hereford adoption agency need to place a large number of children outside the county. This significantly increases the workload for staff "family finding" for children waiting for adoption and ensuring there is thorough communication of information between agencies. Feedback from placing authorities recorded good working relationships with Herefordshire adoption staff who provided "clear guidance" and were "highly committed".

The agency's business plan indicated the service's recruitment strategy for recruiting adopters locally. These had not been implemented due to the severe staffing shortages. The recruitment strategy needs to be better developed to include the marketing strategy that will be used to attract adopters who will have the skills and competencies to care for children who are available for adoption nationally. The strategy needs to consider the number of adopters it will need to attract to enable the agency to develop reciprocal arrangements with other local authority adoption services.

Herefordshire Council social services child protection policy and procedures need amending to ensure they fully comply with the regulations, particularly in relation to interagency adoptive placements

The adoption service provides preparation and training courses for prospective adopters jointly with foster carers. Adopters reported that these courses are helpful and valuable and that the programme was comprehensive. Not all adopters had this view, one felt that the course "could have been more professional". Adopters reported that there were some specific sessions for prospective adopters and foster carers that were run separately in order to address specific and discrete issues for each group. Various professionals and specialist advisers provided input on these courses which adopters found helpful. The involvement of a birth parent to provide information about birth families views would be a helpful addition to this course and offer a good insight to prospective adopters about an adopted child's heritage and background.

Some adopters reported delays in the adoption process, one commented that the agency was "seriously understaffed" another that there were delays because there were "no social workers to undertake the assessment" and another reported "agonised waiting".

The standard of adopter assessments was variable, with some assessments requiring a more evidence based approach and a more analytical style. Contemporaneous notes need to be maintained on the file and details of dates need to be better recorded. The written record of the CRB check needs to indicate the status of the check undertaken. Further quality assurance and scrutiny of these assessments needs to be introduced. The decision-making procedure for managing an adverse CRB needs to be documented and shared with prospective adopters to ensure a fair and open process.

The standard of other assessments was excellent, incorporating the competencies of the applicants throughout the narrative of the report. The recent introduction of attachment style interviews had helped staff to address and explore particular issues and to allow them to understand better the experience and abilities that prospective adopters have or will need to develop to meet the emotional needs of children.

The adoption agency employs a sessional social worker experienced in undertaking assessments with adopters who wish to adopt from overseas.

The standard of form Es on children was also variable and childcare managers reported the difficulties of ensuring thorough quality assurance of this work within the timescales required. Senior managers need to consider how to best address this issue in order to ensure sensitive handling of the information to be included in such reports, to consider the outcomes for young people when reading this information in later life and to prevent delay in the presentation of this information before the panel to ensure timeliness of children.

The "Children's Services Handbook" sets out practice guidance, procedures and timescales for childcare social workers to assist them in carrying out adoption work. Training for childcare social workers on permanency planning is required on a regular basis in order to ensure that all staff fully understand the processes involved and also the significance of the reports written about children in assisting their understanding about their history in later life.

The adopters reported that they were given detailed information to help them understand the needs and background of the child and the use of Child/Life Appreciation Days gave them the opportunity to meet with all those adults and professionals who had previously been involved with the child. This provided adopters with the opportunity to discuss this and the implications for them and their family. Adopters reported that where other agencies had not provided all the information in an interagency placement, Herefordshire adoption service had been proactive in making efforts to obtain all the information required. Adopters reported also that the involvement of the medical adviser and in some cases the psychologist in providing information about medical and attachment difficulties on children linked with them and that this had been really helpful and supportive.

The observation of the panel and interview with the panel chair indicated appropriate constitution and membership and sound operation of the policies and procedures. Training opportunities for the panel were good, well thought out and valued by panel members and special advisers. The panel chair is developing systems to improve the quality of feedback to the agency and to provide information to attendees about the panel members, their background and their functions, to help them feel more at ease. The panel members were child focused and children were invited to attend panel and give their views where appropriate. The panel chair and professional adviser receive regular feedback from all attendees and have used this to address any issues that arise. In particular they have recently changed the venue of the panel meeting in order to provide better waiting room facilities. The agency decision maker receives all panel papers prior to the panel meeting and meets with the panel chair and professional adviser following a meeting, to discuss any issues that may have arisen. Following receipt of the panel minutes the decision is made in a timely manner. There are systems in place to convey the decision to all parties. The administration of the panel is effective and sound. Adoption staff and a child care staff reported that attending panel was a positive experience. One staff member reported that "the new panel chair was lovely" another stated that it was "brilliant that applicants and children could attend" another felt that "it was a realistic and supportive experience".

The manager of the adoption service has had all references and status checks carried out and is a suitable person who is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Adoption social work staff are appropriate people to work with children and young people, and there are systems in place

for undertaking all relevant references and checks which follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people. The systems for recording the CRB checks need to be addressed to ensure that the outcome is clearly noted in every case.

The adoption agency has had three disruptions within the last 12 months and it was evident that lessons have been learned from these incidents and fully discussed at panel meetings and team meetings to inform future practice.

The adoption agency needs to ensure that all panel members and sessional workers have appropriate status checks and references undertaken in line with the standards and regulations.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 6 and 18.

The agency provides some good support to adopters to encourage successful placements but needs to develop a more coherent and comprehensive support strategy and approach overall.

EVIDENCE:

Adoption support is a developing aspect of the agency's work. It was clear that there is a commitment to enhancing this area of responsibility and the manager has a view of where she wishes the agency to develop. An adoption support social worker was employed a year ago however staffing problems have meant that this member of staff has had to be involved in other work such as assessments and home finding. Also a large number of adoption support assessments of adoptive families living in Herefordshire area previously unknown to the Adoption team had been received and this work had been time-consuming and complex.

The adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas are provided with information about intercountry adoption support services such as "OASIS" and "CACH"

All approved adopters retain their social worker until at least the adoption order is made; this enables the journey from application through approval, matching, introductions and placement to be consistently managed and supported. One adopter reported that adoption social workers were "extremely helpful" and another stated that they "offered full support over the inter-agency placement".

The level of inter-agency placements has led to an increased amount of work for the adoption social workers in order to ensure thorough and accurate communication between agencies. Children with more challenging needs are increasingly being placed which has an impact on the support services available locally. One adopter identified the need for more support services. Another adopter reported that the "support group" for adopters run by adopters was "unhelpful and cliquey and everybody moaned about their

adopted children". Another adopter reported that their support networks had completely changed following the placement of their child and requested that information and training is provided for families and friends of prospective adopters in order to help them understand what they were going through, so they would be better able to support them. Another suggestion from an adopter was to give plenty of notice about meetings and to improve the quality of information sent, in order to motivate and encourage adopters to attend/take part in seminars and training.

The agency need to develop an adoption support strategy to take into account the level of interagency work it undertakes and the support needs of families caring for children with challenging needs.

Therapy services are insufficient. The manager/psychologist of the therapy services reported greatly missing the valuable work of the play therapist , as were childcare social workers and adoption social workers, whose post has been vacant now for some months. It was generally felt that the work of the psychologist needed to be extended in order to provide a comprehensive assessment and therapy service to children to be placed for adoption. The local CAMHS service is not sufficiently well developed to carry out the discreet and subtle work that needs to be undertaken with young children who have attachment and behavioural difficulties.

The Adoption manager has been able to spot purchase support/therapy packages from independent sources through her adoption support budget in order to support families where there are difficulties in the placement. One adopter reported that they had to do all the research to find out about the support facilities available for them, but that the agency had been responsive in providing financial support for this.

The adoption agency need to develop a comprehensive strategy for developing a range of therapy services to support adoptive families and a system for evaluating the effectiveness of therapy services that are purchased on a one-off basis.

There had been one disruption of a placement made with Herefordshire adopters and it was evident that the family had been provided with appropriate information and support. In the case of two placement disruptions for children, therapy services have been provided as a matter of priority.

The medical adviser to the adoption service is clearly valued for her contribution and commitment to providing accessible information to adopters and social work staff alike.

The legal adviser contributes to the panel and is available for consultation by staff and adopters.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 7,8,and 9.

The agency has a clear commitment to developing and improving services for birth families to enable them to contribute to their children's future for them to develop a positive sense of their identity. However the practice was inconsistent and lacked clear focus.

EVIDENCE:

There are a number of different strategies in place to ensure that the service to birth parents is provided.

Independent reviewing officers reported that birth parents are invited to children's reviews and encouraged to take an active part in planning for their children and particularly in the undertaking of life story work.

Arrangements for support are made at the child's four-month review where adoption is identified as the care plan and if the Hollybush Family Centre have already been involved with birth parents, arrangements may be made for a centre worker to undertake this role, with appropriate supervision. These workers may be actively involved in assisting birth parents to contribute to their child's life story.

Adoption social workers may also receive allocations to provide counselling to birth parents however take up of this service was poor.

The adoption service has a service level agreement with "adoption support" to provide independent adoption support to birth parents. The statistical information provided on the previous year's work by this agency revealed there had been no new birth parent referrals. The Adoption manager has therefore set up a new service level agreement with this agency to provide a more proactive service for birth parents.

There was no evidence that birth parents had seen or had the opportunity to comment on what was written about them or their circumstances in the child's form E, before the information was passed to the adoption panel or onto adopters, and this needs to be addressed.

There was some evidence that staff at the Hollybush Centre had been involved in helping birth parents to write letters for the letterbox scheme, not all birth parents had received this service. One birth parent felt that staff were not easy to contact, not reliable and did not provide the help they needed promptly. This birth parent also commented that the letterbox service was slow and needed to be improved.

Social workers reported some arrangements for direct contact between sibling groups and some between adopted children and birth family members, however the numbers were low. The adoption agency needs to consider how it intends to work with the independent provider, birth parents and adoptive parents to ensure agreed plans for contact are supervised appropriately (where necessary) and maintained and to devise appropriate roles and responsibilities for all staff involved. The adoption agency also need to develop a leaflet for birth parents outlining the services that are in place to provide information, advice, support and counselling to them locally and also information about national support groups and services.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 1,2,3,14,16,17,20,21,22,23,25,26,27,28and 29.

There was a lack of strategic planning in the management of the staffing crisis which was affecting the ability of managers and staff to manage the work of the adoption agency effectively and efficiently.

EVIDENCE:

The adoption agency has a clear written statement of purpose, which describes their aims and objectives and their facilities and services. The managers recognised that the statement was, in places, aspirational, but that in other parts, it reflected the agencies operational functions. The reason for this was

due to staff vacancies which have had a considerable impact on the adoption team's ability to deliver some services. The Statement of Purpose was reviewed, updated and formally approved by the executive side of the council in June 2005.

The adoption agency was using a Children's Guide that was created by the West Midlands Family Placement Consortium. This document is suitable for children over the age of seven or eight years old. This did not include local information about the agency as required by the regulations. Two further children's guides, one for children over five, the other for children under five, have been produced by Herefordshire Council adoption agency. These documents require further work in order to ensure they are more child focused. It is suggested that associated pictures are used, as well as words, to tell the story, to ensure that children of different ages and abilities are able to benefit.

A number of information packs had been produced and are given to prospective and approved adopters at various stages in the assessment and approval process. These packs included useful information and step-by-step guides in order to ensure adopters were fully aware of the arrangements and procedures. However a number of adopters have not received these information packs and better systems need to be devised in order to ensure that these packs are sent out at the appropriate times to ensure that all adopters are fully informed. Complaints procedures need to be included in these packs to ensure that adopters are fully aware of their right to make their views and feelings known about the adoption service.

The adoption manager has the necessary knowledge and experience of childcare and adoption law and practices. The adoption manager is presently studying towards a certificate in management and it is intended this training will be completed later this year.

All staff without exception, reported that the manager was "committed", "passionate about adoption", "accessible to staff", "responsible", "knowledgeable", and "supportive". It was clear that staff both in the adoption team and across the childcare teams valued her experience, skills and knowledge in the adoption arena and her commitment to providing a good service for children. The manager displayed good people management skills and an ability to keep her staff motivated and focused despite the difficult staffing conditions.

There are clear roles for managers and staff and well-established lines of communication within the family placement team. Feedback from staff interviewed across Herefordshire council's childcare services department however revealed that they felt that the senior management team were less accessible, less responsive and out of touch. Senior managers however demonstrated that they were aware of the issues affecting the adoption service and had recently attended team meetings to try and discuss and resolve issues arising.

There are huge staffing problems across the local authority social services department, which have also affected the adoption team for some considerable period of time. Measures to address the staffing issues had not been successful to date. Social workers were stretched, pressured and working overtime as a matter of goodwill to meet the needs of the adoption agency. The team manager was also involved in carrying out social work tasks such as family finding for children in order to prevent delay in children's plans. It was clear that these staffing problems had impacted on a range of services and the strategic development of the adoption agency such as; the front-line adoption duty service, the delivery of information evenings for adopters, the recruitment of adopters, delay in undertaking assessments of adopters and the development of the adoption support services. Whilst it is commendable that the manager has prioritised the needs of children awaiting placement, the service is not being run in accordance with the statement of purpose and the present position is unsustainable and untenable.

The number of children referred to the adoption service had fallen from 23 in one year to seven in the last year. Whilst various theories were suggested about the reasons of this such as; the effect of the kinship care policy and court decisions; further work needs to be undertaken at a strategic level to investigate these statistics and consider any themes or trends in relation to the overall development and size of the adoption agency. The agency also need to properly review the current staffing situation in view of their statutory responsibilities and the impact of a number of changes in legislation, taking into account also the plans for the adoption support strategy (including therapy services) and the marketing and recruitment strategy.

Herefordshire Council social services department have recently been through a job evaluation exercise and it was clear that some staff were "unhappy" with the outcome of this. Some staff reported concerns about progression and stated that "one staff member had left the service" for this reason. The department does not presently have a system of senior/expert practitioner grading and it is suggested that this is reviewed to consider whether it would assist in retaining experienced staff in the adoption service.

Whilst efforts had been made to address the chronic staffing difficulties within the adoption team over the last few years, these have not yet been resolved. Plans to "grow our own" adoption social workers may be a useful longer-term solution, however managers have a responsibility to ensure there are contingency plans to resolve the staffing situation both in a short and in the long-term. As the situation has been critical for some time it is suggested that further advice from consultants should be considered to address this issue swiftly.

The administrative staff reported the difficulties of operating the National Adoption Register locally and procedures for updating information about children and adopters referred to the National adoption register need to be

addressed within the written procedures to ensure that both children and adopters information is up-to-date and matching criteria is accurate to ensure good outcomes for children.

There are systems in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency, it is intended to increase the frequency of reports considered by the executive side of the council from yearly to six monthly to enable management to monitor the progress and outcomes of the services provided.

The adoption agency has systems in place to determine, prioritise and monitor workloads and assign tasks to appropriate staff. As already stated staff fully appreciated the support, advice and guidance provided by their manager. Professional supervision and consultation was supported by informal arrangements for support by their manager, which adoption social workers highly valued. The adoption social workers were committed and enthusiastic and supported to undertake appropriate training to enhance the service provided to children requiring adoption and to adoptive families. One member of staff had undertaken training in adult attachment style interviews to improve assessments of prospective adopters abilities and skills and another had recently undertaken a "Dan Hughes" course to understand better the attachment needs of children who require placement.

Adopters reported feeling well supported by the social workers and clearly valued the input provided to them by their social worker. A number of individual social workers in the adoption team were praised by adopters and by childcare social workers for their hard work, support and commitment.

The amount of administrative support provided to childcare teams and the adoption team was an issue and staff reported that roles and responsibilities were not clear. Clearly where social work staff are already under pressure adequate clerical and administrative support is vital to enable them to carry out their duties in an efficient and effective manner.

Staff reported that training opportunities had improved over the last year and good for support staff undertaking PQ awards. Herefordshire Council social services department and strategic housing department have a corporate training programme for staff. As already stated further ongoing training is necessary to ensure that all childcare social workers have the opportunity to attend permanency planning courses. All staff have the opportunity to attend regular team meetings, and further lunchtime meetings are scheduled to keep staff up-to-date with any changes in practice or legislation. Unfortunately some staff are unable to attend these lunchtime meetings due to their location and this needs to be addressed. Child-care staff indicated the need for court skills training and this is intended.

Case records on both adopters and children were well ordered and organised. In some cases supervisors had signed case notes, which indicated regular

oversight. However this was not found in all cases. A system needs to be developed for decisions by supervisors to be recorded on case files. The case recording on some files was excellent. There is no system however to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and ensure that remedial action is taken by necessary and this needs addressing. The adoption agency has excellent systems in place for ensuring confidentiality and appropriate access to records and all staff are aware of these.

Three complaints had been received by the adoption agency within the last 12 months, one had been dealt with swiftly and resolved at an informal level, the other two complaints had exceeded the agencies deadline for investigating and resolving the issue, causing a degree of distress to the complainants which in one case could have impacted on the stability of an adoptive placement. The agency needs to comply with their own policies and procedures for managing complaints and ensure that these are scrutinised on a regular basis.

The system for archiving adoption records is well set up and there are good systems in place for tracking and accessing documents. However a risk assessment needs to be undertaken to ensure safety from fire and water damage.

The premises of the adoption agency are appropriate for the purpose but further work needs to be done to ensure disability access issues are addressed. The agency has a disaster recovery plan, which includes the provision of the premises and the safeguarding the backing of records.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.	2	Local authority adoption service regulations 2003. Regulation 9 (1) (a) (b) and (2) (a) (b) (c) and (d)	The adoption service must prepare and implement a written policy about the arrangements for protection of children placed for adoption and set out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect with specific reference to inter-agency placements.	30th September 2003
2.	19	Local authority adoption service regulations 2003. Regulation 11 and 15. Schedules 3 and 4.	The adoption service must ensure that full and satisfactory information is provided and up-to-date records are maintained on each person who works for the purposes of the adoption service, including all panel members and sessional workers.	30th September 2003
3.	21	Local Authority Adoption Service Regulation s 2003 .	The Local Authority must ensure that there is, having regard to the size of the authority and its Statement of Purpose, the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who may be,	30th October 2003

		Regulation 10 (a) (b)	or have been, placed for adoption by the authority, a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent, and experienced persons working for the purposes of the adoption service.	
4.	25	Adoption Agency Regulations 1983. Regulation 14 (4)	The adoption agency must ensure that a risk assessment is carried out to ensure the safety of archived records which minimises the risk of damage from fire or water.	30th September 2003
5.				

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.	2	The adoption agency should have a written plan for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of a range of children waiting for adoption nationally, in order to obtain reciprocal arrangements with other adoption agencies and choice for children waiting for adoption locally.
2.	4.7	The adoption agency should prepare adoptive parents, addressing the issues they are likely to encounter and identifying the competencies and strengths they will have or will need to develop.
3.	4.8	The adoption agency should ensure that the outcomes of all CRB checks are noted and that the level of the check is recorded. The decision-making procedure for managing and an adverse CRB check needs to be documented and shared with prospective adopters to ensure a fair and open process.
4.	19.5 and 28.2	The adoption agency should ensure that CRB checks undertaken on all staff and record the outcome.
5.	6	The adoption agency need to develop a clear strategy for supporting adopters taking into account the increased demands of interagency placements and growing number of children with challenging behaviours.
6.	6	The adoption service should develop a comprehensive therapeutic service to children with emotional and

		behavioural difficulties who are to be placed or have been placed for adoption and to their adoptive families and a system for evaluating the effectiveness of this service.
7.	7.5	The adoption service should ensure that birth parents see and have the opportunity to comment on what is written about them or their circumstances before information is passed on to the adoption panel or to adopters
8.	9.1	The adoption agency need to develop a clear written strategy for working with and supporting birth parents and birth families (including siblings) both before and after adoption. This includes providing information about local services and national support groups to birth families.
9.	20.7	The adoption agency should ensure that child care staff are supported to undertake ongoing training in permanency planning training to improve the quality of the reports on children requiring adoption and ensure that all staff fully understand the processes involved and the significance of the reports written about children in assisting their understanding about their history in later life.
10.	17.3	The executive side of the council should satisfy themselves that the adoption agency is effective and achieves good outcomes for children and received written reports six monthly to be able to monitor progress.
11.	20.8	The adoption agency should ensure it has an adequate level of clerical and administrative support to enable staff (both adoption staff and child-care staff) to carry out their duties in an efficient and effective manner.
12.	21.4	The adoption agency should ensure that staff policies encourage the retention of salaried staff.
13.	25.5	The adoption agency should ensure that decisions by supervisors are recorded on these files are legible, clearly expressed, signed and dated.
14.	27.3	The adoption agency should develop a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and ensure that remedial action is taken when necessary.
15.	16.2	The adoption agency should ensure that it is run in accordance with the statement of purpose. (This is related to the staffing difficulties).
16.	1.4	the adoption agency should develop a children's guide that is suitable for all children for whom adoption is the plan, available in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children.

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