



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Blackpool Borough Council

**Social Services Progress House
Clifton Road
Blackpool
FY4 4US**

Lead Inspector
Sean
White

Announced
27th June 2005 09:00

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

Reader Information

Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
Further copies from	0870 240 7535 (telephone order line)
Copyright	This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI
Internet address	www.csci.org.uk

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.

This report is a public document. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the prior permission of the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Blackpool Borough Council Adoption Service
Address	Social Services Progress House, Clifton Road, Blackpool, FY4 4US
Telephone number	01253 477666
Fax number	01253 477528
Email address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Blackpool Borough Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Mandy Williams
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:

Blackpool Borough Council has operated an adoption service since it became a unitary authority in 1998. It is constituted under current legislation and provides a service for assessing and approving domestic adopters, matching and placing children for adoption, supporting adoptive families and placements, making arrangements for birth family support and managing contact arrangements. The assessment of people wishing to adopt a child from overseas would be contracted out to a voluntary organisation. It is a small service in a small geographical area and tends to place most children on an inter-agency basis through its arrangements with the consortium of which it is a member. It is managed within a recently constructed Children and Families Division of the Council and is managed and operates closely with other children's services. It is located on the outskirts of the town in premises shared by other Council functions and is easily accessible by both car and public transport.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over three days, plus an additional morning to observe the adoption panel. The inspection undertook an analysis of pre-inspection material - including questionnaires from all stakeholders; interviews with key staff, managers and an elected member; reading a random sample of case files and visits to adopters. Also included was the inspection of the records of the agency and an analysis of administrative and resource matters, including premises, record keeping and security.

Everyone involved in the inspection was helpful and courteous and the facilities and resources provided were of a good standard; this was appreciated. The preparation for the inspection by the agency was of a particularly high standard and demonstrated managerial efficiency and commitment.

What the service does well:

The adoption service in Blackpool operates within a well-organised and well-managed framework, and is appropriately integrated into the wider children's services network. The management structure, which places both the adoption team and permanence team (children's social workers) under one manager, enables a more integrated approach to planning for children. The well-presented statement of purpose and recently reviewed policies and procedures underpinned the management of the agency

The arrangements for the preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters were of a good standard; assessment reports were well written and case recording was thorough. The preparation and information sessions presented valuable information and were well received by participants - "We really enjoyed the days, they were informative and very well run", said one adopter. The agency's approach to assessment elicited effusive comments too - "Assessment was a good experience, worker superb, sensitive, excellent relationship." The adoption panel was suitably constituted, always met as a quorum, was satisfactorily managed and undertook its responsibilities with due rigour. Decision-making was timely and thorough, and the efficient administration of the panel was of a high standard.

The manager and staff were well qualified and very experienced in adoption and family placement; it was evident that there was substantial knowledge and skill in the service. The support systems, including supervision and training,

were well structured and workers felt that they had encouragement and opportunity for knowledge and skill development.

The approach to matching and placement of children was careful and considered. There were good matching reports, careful scrutiny at panel and well-organised introductions with the necessary levels of support in place. Very few of the placements have broken down.

The council has a satisfactorily robust staff recruitment procedure with all workers and managers being suitable to work in the adoption service; it was also apparent that it is a fair and competent employer.

Support systems for birth parents are available through an appropriately monitored contract with a local voluntary organisation and an initiative to enable more awareness of its availability demonstrated a commitment to enabling involvement in planning for children. Birth parents are also encouraged and enabled to participate in the development of life-story work. Support for adoptive placements is well established and an effective aspect of the service's work; adopters and children are provided with support to enable placements to be successful, including the use of specialists.

The general administration, resources and premises – including security – were all of an appropriate standard and fit for purpose.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Not applicable; this was the first inspection of Blackpool's adoption service.

What they could do better:

Although the arrangements for the assessment of adopters, deciding on a child's best interests and matching children with adopters are well managed and undertaken with due consideration, the operation of the adoption panel is not fully transparent. The practice of a 'briefing meeting', whereby the papers are considered by only a core group of members would benefit from minutes being taken of deliberations and from greater input by non-attending members. Panel minutes in general need to provide more information.

The recruitment of adopters, whilst meeting the needs of children generally, is not particularly well focused. The managers are aware of this and are planning a more coherent and strategic approach; this should be pursued without delay.

Staff training, although generally well resourced, has not included child protection issues for some time; this is an omission that needs urgent attention. The manager, albeit very experienced, skilled and qualified in social work, did not have a qualification in management at NVQ level 4.

Although there was evidence of managers and elected members being aware of the work of the service, the arrangements for formal monitoring of its activities were rather limited. The agency only provides a written report on the adoption panel (rather than the whole service) and the executive was not provided with full information about the service on a six-monthly basis as required by the NMS. Case files, whilst generally well structured, were not subject to a formal audit; there was no monitoring tool in evidence for either adopters' or children's adoption files.

The development of life-story work/books did not, in all cases, begin early enough to ensure that crucial information was not 'lost' due to lack of cooperation of birth families during complex and painful care proceedings. All workers in the wider children's service should be alert to the need for early gathering of information that could be put together at some later stage.

The records of panel members did not include all the information required by regulations; there were some omissions on workers' records that also need to be attended to.

There was no evidence of a risk assessment being carried out in respect of the archived adoption records and their protection from fire and water damage.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Being Healthy - There are no NMS that map to this outcome

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing - There are no NMS that map to this outcome

Management

Scoring of 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)
- Adopters are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s) 2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15,19

The systems and practices in Blackpool provide for safe outcomes for children by ensuring that adopters are assessed and approved on the basis of their ability to meet the needs of children.

EVIDENCE:

The way that the service operates and functions is such that children can expect a positive outcome if they are to be adopted. The agency is clearly committed to ensuring that children are carefully placed and it undertakes its responsibilities with due care and attention to detail. The agency has a very low disruption rate.

The process of training, preparing and assessing prospective adopters was thorough, based on good practice and managed and operated by skilled people. There was a clear strategy for matching children with the most appropriate families with systems in place to avoid delays; this included 'fast-tracking' families through the process and using the preparation groups of consortium members when the agency did not have an imminent group. The quality of assessment and matching reports was generally good and demonstrated, along with the detailed case recording, that appropriate care and rigour is applied to the processes. The agency doesn't have a well-focused approach to recruitment of adopters, however; managers are well aware of

this and demonstrated their commitment to making arrangements that would have a more strategic approach.

The people receiving the service were very happy with the agency's approach to preparation, assessment and matching. Most of the respondents to questionnaires stated that they were very satisfied; typical comments were, in respect of preparation, "We thought that the three day training course was exceptionally good", and "...we have gained lots of knowledge..." And in respect of the assessment, "Our experience of the adoption process has been extremely positive" and "Our home study made us very aware of what to expect." There were some respondents, however, who were less complementary saying, for instance, "Not a very positive experience (too gloomy)". Nevertheless, discussions with adopters – some of whom had children placed with them – were unanimous in their praise. Comments received during interviews included, "Can't imagine we could have got a better service elsewhere", and, "It was wonderful to work with the Blackpool team".

The adoption panel, which is chaired independently, meets once in every month; this is sufficiently regular to meet the demands of the business it deals with. Its constitution was satisfactory and there have been no occasions in recent times when it has not achieved a quorum.

The panel operates to a recently revised policy and procedure – this was thorough, clear and addressed all required aspects of the National Minimum Standards. The Chairperson, who was very able and experienced in adoption matters, was clear about his role and responsibilities and conducted business in a professional and enabling manner. Members of the panel demonstrated knowledge and understanding of adoption and contributed effectively to the business before them. The medical adviser had a particularly committed approach to the proceedings. The panel adviser, however, was acting as if she was a full member and was being encouraged in this by the chairperson: this practice should be reviewed.

The way panel items are managed is somewhat unusual in that a core group of members (the briefing group) meet before the panel sits and prepares written questions (for social workers and applicants who will be attending) following an analysis of the papers. All other members are encouraged to submit questions or views to the group but this rarely happens. These questions are then distributed to the relevant attendees to enable them to be prepared for their appearance before the panel. This clearly made managing the agenda very efficient and demonstrated an inclusiveness that attendees were appreciative of. The written questions are part of the panel minutes - the responses to these being recorded as minutes of proceedings but there are no minutes of the deliberations of the briefing group – except the production of written questions. Whilst this model clearly works for the agency, the lack of thorough minutes of the deliberations of the briefing group and panel means that the decision maker is working without full information. Also the absence of any real input into the briefing group by the panel members who are not part of it could suggest that there is an over-reliance on the group to take on most of the

responsibility of the panel. Nevertheless, the panel was clearly focused on meeting the needs of children.

Decision-making was timely and carried out with due rigour and attention to detail; the decision maker was clearly committed, both professionally and personally, to the success of adoption placements and took due care when reaching her judgements. The arrangements for the administering the panel were very efficient and it was evident that everyone involved in panel business was very appreciative of the way that the arrangements were managed and coordinated.

The manager of the agency was suitably experienced and knowledgeable to undertake her responsibilities and the staff of the agency were appropriately qualified to work with children; there are sufficiently robust recruitment procedures in place to ensure that all necessary checks are carried out.

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) 6,18

The agency has an effective approach to providing support that enables adopters to feel valued and children to have successful placements.

EVIDENCE:

The agency's approach to support was very strong. Approved adopters continue to receive input from their assessing social worker up until an adoption order is made; adopters - who made it clear that they felt the agency valued them, appreciated the levels of support. One adopter said that, "Nothing was too much trouble". There were some instances of less continuity in support when, for instance, assessments were undertaken by non-permanent staff and cases had to be transferred following approval. The agency attempted to keep such instances to a minimum though. Further support is contracted out to a voluntary support agency; the services provided by this agency were carefully monitored.

There was a vacancy for an adoption support worker at the time of the inspection but it was anticipated that this post would be filled in the near future. In the meantime other members of the team were undertaking such duties.

It was also clear that when placements experience some difficulties the agency ensures that appropriate support is provided from whatever source is necessary. This was noted in one particular situation and it was evident that intense back up was being employed to support the placement.

The agency is fortunate in having a committed medical adviser who, the workers feel, is, "Very approachable and accessible" and a helpful legal adviser that provides assistance both to the panel and to social workers.

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) 7,8,9

The agency encourages birth families to be involved in planning for their children and makes arrangements for them to be supported throughout the process in order that they can feel included.

EVIDENCE:

So far as it is possible birth parents and families are given the opportunity to be involved in the planning for the future of their children.

Life-story work was an important and developing aspect of the agency's work. Using experienced and trained workers in family centres to undertake the detail of this work enables life-stories to be developed in a coherent way and some of the work seen was of a high standard and recognised as important and 'real' by the child. Some of the adoption files did not have any evidence of life-story work being compiled and during the inspection it became clear that the collection of material does not always start at the earliest opportunity. One worker said that it was much easier collecting material when joint working between the assessment and permanence teams occurred. The agency should give this some consideration and develop a greater awareness of the importance of life-story work in its assessment teams.

The arrangements for contact were clearly recorded in case files and the letterbox system for indirect contact was very well organised and managed following a recent review of the system.

Arrangements for supporting birth parents and families are contracted out to a voluntary support agency. All questionnaires received (three) from birth families were negative in their responses and indicated that they were either not given support or were not aware where support could be provided. The agency is aware of the potential for birth families to be aggrieved and unwilling to engage with the service and, as a consequence, has contacted all local solicitors that deal with children's matters and provided them with details of

adoption support provision in the hope that this would be more acceptable to birth families. This was noted as an innovative approach.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for standard(s)

1,3,14,16,17,20,21,22,23,25,26,27,28,29

The agency was managed, in most areas, to a good standard, which enabled the service to operate in an effective and purposeful way to meet the needs of children requiring adoptive placements.

EVIDENCE:

The management of the agency was, overall, of a good standard – both operationally and strategically. It was clear that the team manager was very experienced in adoption matters and brought a clarity and purpose to the work

of the service but, although qualified as a social worker, did not have a management qualification; she is, nevertheless, held in high regard by her team, "I think [my manager] is excellent", said one worker.

There was a statement of purpose in place that had been reviewed as recently as April 2006 and had been formally approved by the executive of the council. It clearly outlined the aspirations and operations of the agency and was written in an easy to read style. The children's guide to adoption was well presented and gave a realistic overview of the issues involved; it also provided contact details of other relevant agencies and explained how a child could complain. The guide, however, is only understandable by older children, and although the agency states its commitment to developing a guide(s) to enable more children to be provided with information relevant to their level of understanding, this has yet to be achieved.

The policies and procedures of the agency, many of which had been recently reviewed and revised, supported the statement of purpose and most indications were that the agency operated in line with these.

The information provided for prospective applicants is of a very good standard; it gives a clear indication of all the implications and processes of adoption, including profiles of the kind of children requiring placements, and it also specifies the range of people that the agency wishes to recruit. It is a very well - presented pack that that is welcoming and clearly aimed at providing all relevant information in an accessible and encouraging format. This is supplemented by an applicant's pack that details the half-day introduction to training session; this pack demonstrates the thoroughness of the approach to recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters.

Although the agency was not fully staffed the day-to-day arrangements for allocation of cases and workload monitoring appeared to be working efficiently; there is no formal system in place but workers felt satisfied that management arrangements were equitable and supportive. Staff supervision was undertaken regularly, (one worker reporting, "the quality of supervision is very good") and brief records were placed on file; these records did not give a clear indication of why decisions were reached and should be expanded in the amount of information provided. The workers in the team demonstrated skills, knowledge and understanding of adoption matters; they were enthusiastic and committed to their task and clearly mutually supportive. They felt that they worked for a fair employer (despite a current grievance in respect of pay parity) and felt supported in their work.

Resources for training were found to be sufficient to provide a range of development opportunities for workers and there was a general appreciation of the agency's approach to improving performance through training. The agency has already met the target for social workers achieving Post Qualifying Awards and should have exceeded this by the April 2006. There had not been any recent training in child protection. Given that adoption workers may not have

had recent experience of working directly in child protection it is important – because children placed for adoption are as vulnerable as any child – that adoption workers are up to date with such issues.

Although there were clear indications of informal scrutiny and quality control, with a strong commitment to 'getting things right' at all levels of the organisation – including elected members – there were few formal mechanisms for monitoring the work of the agency. The scrutiny board does not receive six-monthly reports on the adoption service, although a report on the activities of the panel is produced and performance information is included in a general report on children's services. The lead elected member, who was clearly committed to children's services, recognised that the corporate parenting group needed to develop further its knowledge of adoption. There was no formal audit mechanism for monitoring case files. Nevertheless, there were avenues of communication whereby informal monitoring took place – senior managers and elected members were clearly up to date with planning and activity – and there were no serious consequences found regarding quality control. Further work should be done, however, to ensure that monitoring is rigorous and transparent in order that the organisation can be formally satisfied that it is meeting its responsibilities fully.

The case files of adopters/prospective adopters and the adoption files of children were well laid out, comprehensive and generally easy to read and find information. As indicated above, however, there was no formal auditing tool evident that checked files for content, layout and quality. There were some omissions noted – no health and safety checklist on one file, no record of 28 day waiver on one file, no clear evidence of life story work or later-life letters on children's files, for instance – that would be picked up with a rigorous audit methodology.

The records of staff employed by the agency were of a generally good standard and contained most required information; the recording of CRB details, however, did not include the status of the checks in all cases. Records of panel members did not meet the regulatory requirements in many areas; this requires attention.

The premises from where the adoption service operates were, in the main, satisfactory and fit for purpose. They are located on the outskirts of town but are easily accessible by both car and public transport. The facilities were of a good standard although there were some issues of comfort and environment that workers felt could be improved upon. The administration systems and facilities were of a good standard overall but the agency should bear in mind the amount of photocopying required in respect of preparing panel papers and the limited facility for doing this on occasions. File/record storage and security was satisfactory and the facilities for backing up and storing electronically held information were safe. A risk assessment in respect of protection against fire and water damage should be undertaken, however, because none was evident.

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	3
8	2
9	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	2
4	3
5	3
10	3
11	3
12	2
13	3
15	3
19	3
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	4
18	3

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	3
3	3
14	2
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	3
22	3
23	2
25	3
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	2
30	N/A
31	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.	28	11(3)(d) 2003 regs	All information required by Schedules 3 to this regulation must be kept in a record for each adoption panel member.	01/10/05

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	A more coherent and strategic approach to recruiting adopters should be pursued.
2.	8	Efforts should be made to begin the collection of life-story work as soon as possible following a child being looked after.
3.	12	All panel members should be encouraged to submit their views or questions to the briefing meeting and minutes of all of the adoption panel's business, including the briefing meeting, should be recorded as fully as possible.
4.	14	Arrangements for the manager to undertake NVQ level 4 management training should be pursued as soon as possible.
5.	17	The executive of the council should receive a report on the management and outcomes of the service every six months.

6.	23	All staff should receive training in child protection matters with updates being provided as necessary.
7.	27	A formal system of file monitoring should be introduced.
8.	29	A risk assessment in respect of the protection of records from fire or water damage should be undertaken.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

11th Floor, West Point
501 Chester Road
Old Trafford
Manchester, M16 9HU

National Enquiry Line: 0845 015 0120

Email: enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk

Web: www.csci.org.uk

© This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI