



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Bexley Council Adoption Service

**Howbury Centre
Slade Green Road
Erith
Kent
DA8 2HX**

Lead Inspector
Rosie Dancer

Announced Inspection
9th October 2006 10:00

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	Bexley Council Adoption Service
Address	Howbury Centre Slade Green Road Erith Kent DA8 2HX
Telephone number	020 8303 7777
Fax number	
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Bexley Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 03/11/2003

Brief Description of the Service:

The Borough of Bexley is in South East London. The council's adoption service falls within the remit of the children's placement service which is part of the wider Children's Resources and Commissioning Division of the borough's social services department. The team also provides the council's fostering service.

The adoption service is a member of the southeast adoption consortium which is made up of six local authority partner agencies.

The adoption service's statement of purpose includes the following in its range of services:

- Recruitment, preparation and assessment of adoptive parents
- Matching adoptive parents to children
- Inter-country adoption assessments
- Approval of non-agency adopters
- Special guardianship
- Support and supervision for prospective adopters
- Counselling for birth parents
- Counselling for children for whom adoption is the plan
- Post adoption contact.

The children's placement service comprises

- A unit manager,
- A practice manager,
- 3 senior social workers (one of these posts is currently filled by an agency social worker)
- 11 social work staff, (one of these posts is currently filled by an agency social worker)
- 2 assistant social workers
- 4 administrative support workers.

SUMMARY

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

This is the second key inspection of the adoption service provided by the London Borough of Bexley. Prior to the fieldwork taking place supporting documentary evidence was sent to and read by the lead inspector. Questionnaires were received from 1 birth family member, 4 prospective adopters, 1 placing social worker, 1 placing authority and 3 Specialist advisers.

Two inspectors spent 4 days in the agency and interviewed, 6 sets of adopters, 3 in person and 3 over the phone, 1 birth mother, a group of placing social workers, a group of independent reviewing officers, administrative staff, some of the adoption social workers, the practice manager, one of the senior social workers, the unit manager, the service manager and the decision maker. The panel was observed and the chairperson was interviewed, an elected member was spoken to over the phone and a selection of files, including personnel files, adopter's files children's files were read during the course of the inspection.

The inspectors would like to thank the managers and staff for their cooperation with this inspection, both in preparing the evidence and timetable and during the course of the fieldwork. The helpfulness of staff at all levels enabled the inspection to be carried out effectively and efficiently.

What the service does well:

On a practice level adopters are provided with good support from the children's placement social workers.

Some excellent work was noted in the area of birth records counselling; this area of work requires a high level of knowledge and sensitivity.

Some sensitive work was noted in respect to direct work with children.

Social work staff from the family placement and fieldwork teams demonstrated that they were committed to achieving the best outcomes for children.

The monitoring by panel of the quality of the assessments and of the paperwork presented to it was good. It was noted at the panel observed that a number of issues had remained outstanding for a long time and panel agreed that formal reminder would be sent to the individuals concerned to ensure actions are completed.

What has improved since the last inspection?

A Child's guide has been developed.

The agency has developed a recruitment strategy although success has been limited in attracting people from a variety of backgrounds.

There is planned approach to the provision of training for panel members.

The agency now has a named person who is knowledgeable about inter country adoption matters and panel members have received training in this area of work.

The agency is now including a CAMHS worker in the preparation groups so that adopters are well informed about attachment and other mental health issues that children needing an adoptive placement could be experiencing.

The panel chair explains clearly to the adopters that panel make a recommendation about approval and that it is the decision maker who makes the decision.

The manager in post has a management qualification.

Information about the national adoption register has been developed.

What they could do better:

The overall arrangements for the management of the adoption work had been identified by the agency, prior to the inspection, as needing some restructuring. The plans for this need to be finalised and progressed to ensure the adoption work is carried out effectively and efficiently in all areas.

The agency needs to introduce better quality assurance monitoring systems in respect to practice issues or ensure that the systems in place are being implemented especially in the following areas:

- The quality assurance of the papers submitted to the adoption panel needs to be more robust. This would ensure the quality of information submitted is adequate, all required checks have been completed and that panel is fully appraised of all known information
- The file audit systems in place need to be implemented for all case files. This will ensure that any omissions or inaccuracies on files can be rectified in a timely way.
- Closer monitoring of some aspects of the support services to birth family members

- Closer monitoring and attention to timescales for adopters

While the arrangements for providing an independent counselling service to birth parents seemed clearer than was the case at the last inspection, the service needs to be further developed to ensure all birth parents needs can be met.

Clear protocols in respect to specialist advisers need to be developed and should detail the roles and responsibility of the specialist adviser to the adoption service and how staff can access the service. These should be signed by all parties.

The records of Supervisors decision making should be detailed and include the discussion the actions points agreed and who is responsible for carrying out the actions.

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

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

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

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

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

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

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- 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 the following standard(s):

2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19

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

There were some inconsistencies in practice in some areas that need to be addressed in order to ensure that safe, secure and stable placements for all children are made and maintained.

EVIDENCE:

A detailed recruitment strategy, dated 2005 – 2007, was in place. The services of an independent publicity officer had been used last year and it was noted that a good range of advertising means had been utilised. The strategy had been reviewed in August 2006. The review identified that some positive results had been achieved in respect of recruitment of adopters through the various activities. The review also identified which activities generated the most enquires and it was planned that throughout 2006/7 these activities would continue.

It was noted that despite attempts to reach people from a diverse range of backgrounds the majority of people applying to adopt were couples from a white British background. The agency should further evaluate the recruitment activity to establish if there is more that could be done to attract a wider range of people.

Where adopters are thought to potentially be able to meet the needs of a child or children waiting for a placement there is system to prioritise these adopters for preparation and assessment to ensure a placement can be made in a timely way.

Where there are no suitable in-house adopters for a child placement choice can be widened through the use of consortium adopters and the use of the adoption register.

Evidence was noted to show that overall a thorough approach is taken to matching children with adopters. The children's placement workers and children's social workers work well together to ensure that realistic and well-considered processes are in place to achieve appropriate matches. Adopters meet with the workers involved in the case to discuss all available information about the child. The medical adviser will meet with adopters where there are medical issues to consider and the adopters are enabled to make an informed decision about the match. Two completed questionnaires returned from adopters did not feel the matching process was robust. One of these adopters called the process "random". As questionnaires are returned anonymously it was not possible to explore this further.

It was noted that workers from the child and adolescent mental health team (CAMHS) can be involved in the matching processes as can other professionals where required. It was noted that consideration of placing siblings, including later siblings of children already placed, were fully considered. In the past 12 months where it had been assessed as being in the children's best interest all sibling groups had been placed together.

Some adopter's views about the family finding process were not so positive. Reports were received by some adopters that they felt the agency was not proactive on their behalf. This is a difficult situation to address, as clearly the needs of the children for a placement have to take priority over the needs of the adults in the process. The agency should consider if there is a need to be more proactive on behalf of adopters in family finding or if the issues raised could be resolved by keeping adopters better informed about activity being undertaken on their behalf.

Information evenings are held. It was noted that the frequency of these information evenings could mean a long wait of up to 5 months for some people; this needs to be addressed.

The application to adopt is accepted after some of the statutory checks have been carried out. The manager was made aware that formal applications must be made by adopters prior to the commencement of any checks.

There is a formal process for the preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, which includes a 4-day preparation programme and home study. A

birth parent and an adopter are involved in the sessions and adopters are informed about the needs children waiting for a placement may have. Attachment issues, behaviour management and issues around loss are among the issues discussed during the preparation sessions.

The preparation is evaluated at the end of each programme and changes had been made as a result of adopters' comments. In terms of quality assuring the programme it would be good practice for the manager to observe the sessions periodically.

Some positive comments were made about the preparation process.

A placing social worker who returned a questionnaire stated, "The adopter was very well prepared."

One adopter said of the preparation course that "preparation was useful, we never fully appreciated what was involved before."

A second adopter said, "Bexley offer excellent preparation groups."

It was acknowledged that for some domestic and inter country adopters there could be a long wait before they attend a preparation group; some adopters also raised this as having been an issue. It was stated that domestic adopters could attend the consortium groups if Bexley's is full; one couple said that they had not been offered this. Bexley should be more proactive about ensuring all adopters are provided with an opportunity to commence a preparation programme in a timely way.

Those wishing to adopt from overseas attend a consultation day and preparation groups provided by a voluntary adoption agency. Social workers from Bexley children's placement team carry out the home study. Bexley charges a set fee for the assessment and approval of inter country adopters. Adopters are informed of charges, in writing, prior to the commencement of the work.

The assessments of adopters were of a variable standard. Some good examples were noted that showed significant issues had been fully explored with adopters, information had been analysed and all checks had been carried out. These assessments led to a clear view having been formed about the capacity of the applicants in parenting children with a range of needs and the assessments identified particular areas of strengths and areas where support may be needed.

Other examples viewed had shortfalls in one or more of the following areas:

- A lack of discussion and analysis of significant issues in adopters lives and how these may impact on their ability to parent a child from the care system
- Not including months in the employment details of applicants which makes it difficult to check out if there have been any gaps in employment
- Not all health and safety questionnaire included issues of the safe storage of guns (ones carried out prior to January 2006) dangerous weapons and the dangers for children from pull cords on window blinds
- Some checks on applicants not having been completed prior to presentation at panel
- The issues surrounding diversity concentrated mainly around race

While a recording system has been introduced in respect to when adopters CRB checks adopters are due to be updated, the system relies on staff memory to initiate new checks; a more effective system should be developed.

The manager had recently introduced a system whereby a second opinion visit is carried out before the case is presented to panel. This is good practice as it allows for an independent view about the assessment to be provided and should help address the issues identified above.

There are policies and procedures in place in respect of the functions and handling of the panel. While progress reports on cases are presented to panel every quarter the arrangements need to be included in the policy and procedure document.

Prospective adopters are invited to attend both the approval and matching panel. Adopters are invited to complete a questionnaire about their experience of attending the panel and the results of these are fed back to the panel twice a year.

An independent chairperson chairs the panel. This is a relatively new development in Bexley, the chairperson begun in February 2006. There were some indications that the lines of communications between the agency and the chair could be further developed. For example in line with new legislation the panel should be consulted about developments in the policies and procedures of the agency.

The panel observed was well chaired with all members contributing to the proceedings and a difficult decision about the deferral of a case due to lack of information was sensitively handled.

While the constitution of the panel met regulations a more practice based membership among the social work representatives should be achieved.

In addition as the panel adviser is the children's placement service unit manager and line manages the quality of the adopters' assessments consideration should be given to appointing a more independent person to be the panel adviser. There is a conflict of interest where managers of adoption services are appointed to the adviser's role.

Two files for panel members were viewed. From the evidence on file it seemed that both members of the panel commenced before CRB checks had been received; this must not occur. There were also gaps in information required such as employment history and references.

There is an induction process in place for panel members which includes an expectation that all new members observe a panel. It was noted that the recently appointed chairperson did not observe the panel prior to chairing it and it should be ensured that observation of panel prior to joining is a requirement.

There is a training plan in place for panel members; some of this training is includes social workers from the agency. There had been a recent session in Inter country adoption issues for panel members.

The panel is held on a monthly basis. Some social workers and adopters stated that, in their view the frequency of the panel had lead to delay for some cases. It was surprising to hear this, as there are procedures to convene extra panels if required. The agency should explore if this has been the case and take remedial action if necessary.

The administration of panel appeared efficient. Papers are generally circulated to members who are known to be attending panel in a timely way. The decision maker gets the panel papers after the panel. It would be more appropriate, to allow her to appraise herself of the business prior to panel, for her to receive the papers at the same time as panel members.

The panel minutes were of a good standard. The recommendations and reasons for them were clearly detailed. There should be a separate minute for each child, not 'joint' minutes for siblings and the age range, gender and numbers of children adopters may be considered for should not appear as being part of the recommendation.

There is also an "action point" document that details actions required to be taken by the agency; for example amendments and corrections to reports. This document is presented to each panel and enables the progress on actions to be

closely monitored. This is good practice and evidence was noted to show that a robust approach was being taken in following up outstanding issues.

The decision making process seemed efficient. It was noted that on a few occasions decisions had not been made promptly but in general decision-making appeared to be prompt and adopters reported this to be the case.

It was noted that the letters sent out to relevant people, such as adopters, children and birth families members, would benefit from some revision to ensure a sensitive approach is taken to informing people about such an important decision.

The manager of the service was clearly knowledgeable about adoption issues and it can be assumed that she is qualified as evidence of her registration with the GSCC was on her personnel file; evidence of her qualification in social work was not on file, neither was evidence to show that she had an up to date CRB. It was established by other means that there was an in date CRB for her.

Social workers reported that the manager is "approachable" and "helpful".

Staff working in adoption work showed, through discussion with them, that they were knowledgeable about adoption issues. They also showed a good understanding about the impact adoption can have on individuals lives and were child focused in their approach to the work.

The personnel files viewed in respect to staff did not provide evidence to show that a full range of recruitment checks had taken place in every case, although some of the workers had been in post prior to the recruitment processes being regulated. It would be good practice for the agency to audit the staff files and where there are gaps in areas such as evidencing qualifications this information should be obtained and placed on file.

There is a system for verifying the references; this would be more effective if a member of the management team carried this out. This would then allow for clarification in respect to any issues around social work practice to be discussed with the referee.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

6, 18

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

A clear strategic approach needs to be taken to the development of the support service. However, the practice seen was overall of a good quality and the support provided to families has contributed to the stability of placements.

EVIDENCE:

The practice manager of the children's placement service held the role of Adoption Support Service Adviser. This was discussed with managers of the service and it was agreed that a more senior manager within the service should undertake this role. This should allow further developments in the service to be planned and a robust monitoring system to be introduced.

Adoption support plans are developed and are subject to review where there is a need for this. Some detailed support plans were noted which were clearly aimed at ensuring the stability of placements.

Social work support to families is provided up to and beyond an order having been granted.

Support Services which have been developed in Bexley include:

- Access to workshops/support groups either via Bexley or the consortium
- Access to information about resources which may be useful such as videos, books and information about other specialist services
- Opportunities to network with other adoptive families through support group meetings and social events such as an annual picnic
- Newsletters and other written information

- There is a daily duty system in place and out of office hours adopters can access the emergency duty team
- There is some further training available to adopters post approval
- A drop in session is held on a weekly basis to which younger children are welcome

Adopters spoken to who were in receipt of support after an order had been made spoke about the commitment and professionalism of their worker, with one stating that the workers and the manager of the service had been sensitive and professional in their approach.

Overall most adopters were satisfied with the support Bexley was providing to them and their children. One adopter stated, " I am confident that Bexley will be there, support is fantastic."

Adopters have access to external organisations that can provide advice and support including a registered adoption support service and a voluntary adoption agency specialising in overseas adoptions.

The agency has a procedure in the event of difficulties occurring in placements or where a disruption of a placement occurs; this includes providing support to all involved.

The agency has the services of a medical adviser. She sees all children for whom adoption is the plan and meets with adopters to discuss the children's medical needs. The adviser was highly thought of by most social work staff and described as accessible to all. There were indications that some difficulties were emerging in respect to the tight timescales in place; the agency and the medical adviser should discuss how these issues could be addressed.

Legal advice is readily available through the borough's legal service department.

The CAMHS offer a monthly consultation service for social workers whereby they can discuss cases. Adopters can also access this service, which was described by social workers and adopters as being a good source of support to placements.

There is also a dedicated nurse for children looked after and access to the expertise of an educational professional.

Clear protocols should be developed in respect of the advisers and the services they provide.

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 adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Not all birth parents are consulted about the type of support service they need; this results in a lack of positive involvement in adoption plans for some parents. Quality control issues in respect to assessment reports of children and "later life letters" need to be addressed to ensure all adoptive children have access to clear information about their situation.

EVIDENCE:

When a plan for adoption is being considered by the agency a permanency planning meeting is held. It was stated that at this meeting that the options for parents are considered in respect to the provision of a counselling service.

The child's social worker is the first option for parents in terms of counselling. It is recognised that for some parents and workers this would not be appropriate. In these cases a referral can be made to a social worker in the family placement service. For parents with a learning difficulty some evidence was noted to show that there was access to an advocate from the disabilities team. However, it was stated that the stringent criteria for accessing this service meant that few parents could obtain a service from this team.

Bexley does not have an agreement with an external agency but it was stated that on a case-by-case basis such a service could be accessed, on behalf of parents. A birth family member commented that they would have welcomed the chance to receive such a counselling service.

Some children's permanence reports viewed were noted as being sensitively written and it was clear that these social workers had a good understanding about the purpose of these documents. However, some reports viewed were overly reliant on either large extracts from court documents or complete court

statements from psychological experts. The agency and panel had noted this and as a result training was being provided for social workers and their supervisors to ensure that all are aware about the expectations in respect the style these reports should be written in.

There were also two reports noted which did not provide the reader with a clear view as to why the parent could not parent the child to a good enough standard. The quality assurance role in respect to these reports needs to be further developed.

While birth parents views are being clearly recorded in the child's permanence report, it was stated that the reports are not shared with birth parents. Birth parents should have an opportunity to read what has been written about them before reports are presented to panel.

Some excellent examples of life story work with children were noted. Social workers were committed to carry out this important work and reported that time is allowed for them to carry out direct work with children and to develop life story books.

Some excellent examples of later life letters were also noted. Some social workers had written more than one style of letter, one for the child to access at a young age and one for much later on in life.

However, it was stated that for some children later life letters, in particular, are subject to delay. A robust approach to monitoring the timeliness and quality of this work should be established to ensure that all children who are adopted benefit from a clear understanding about their situation.

Birth parents are encouraged and supported in meeting with adopters. Adopters spoken with showed a good understanding and commitment to ensuring that children were aware of their history.

At the time of this inspection there were 80-90 letterbox contact arrangements. Staff reported that time to carry out this work can be an issue. Birth parents seem well supported in keeping contact arrangements; the support provided included help with writing letters to children.

In addition to the indirect contact arrangements it was reported that there are 10-15 direct contacts a year and that many of these are arranged by adopters.

These need to be incorporated into the monitoring systems to ensure that they are carried out, are of a good quality for all involved and are subject to a formal review.

There has been some progress made since the last inspection in supporting and involving birth parents in the adoption process. However, consideration

needs to be given to involving birth parents at an early stage in thinking about the options for support and the ways in which they can contribute to the planning for their child. Their needs should be reviewed throughout the process and it should be made clear to them that they can access a service at any stage, even after an adoption order has been made.

There was some excellent work noted in respect to the counselling and intermediary service provided to people affected by adoption. The cases viewed showed that the work had been carried out in a sensitive and well planned way.

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 adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

While there were difficulties identified in respects to aspects of the management of the agency the management team had identified many of the issues and plans to address these were well advanced.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has a statement of purpose in place. This document sets out the work the agency undertakes, is subject to review and has been approved by

the executive. Some amendments are needed to ensure the statement contains all required information as set out in Schedule 1 of the Adoption Service Regulations 2003.

The borough uses the BAAF children's guide for older children who are to be placed for adoption. This guide needs to include information about adoption support services, local information and the complaints procedure to comply with the regulations.

The borough also has developed a guide for younger children.

All of the above information needs to include the address for the CSCI adoption team in Manchester.

The agency has produced clear information for both domestic and inter country adopters. The information outlines the process and includes the eligibility criteria. There is also information provided to foster carers who want to adopt. There are clear arrangements in place to inform adopters about the adoption register.

While the manager was clearly knowledgeable and skilled it was clear that there were difficulties in managing the adoption work. Some of these issues had been recognised by the management team and at the time of the inspection, in line with more general restructuring in the borough, the options for the delivery of the adoption service were being considered.

The difficulties noted included:

- Competing demands between fostering and adoption work. It was reported that on occasion, especially in a crisis situation, the fostering role took precedence over the adoption work. This was a concern expressed, by workers, at the time of the last inspection and this needs to be addressed as part of the restructuring plan
- The significant changes in and additions to legislation in the adoption field have led to increasing demands on the placement team in respect to the level of work and the knowledge and expertise required. It was stated that this had begun to lead to difficulties emerging in overseeing practice
- Workers had limited opportunities to build up the level of expertise required due to the wide role the workers have in the fostering and adoption role

It is promising to note that the difficulties emerging in the management of the expanding workload in adoption work had been recognised and options were being considered. The agency must keep the commission informed about the future developments when decisions have been reached.

There were clear arrangements in place in respect of who is in charge when the unit manager is not available.

The majority of social workers spoken to reported that they found their immediate managers approachable; there were some workers who stated that they felt that more senior managers were more "distant".

Some workers were concerned about case transfers being made from the children teams to the placement service at the time of the 1st review after placement. The concerns were about consistency of worker for children. However, some examples were noted whereby the child's original social worker remained involved at some level when this has felt to be in the best interests of the child. This was a concern stated by some social workers at the last inspection and this needs to be addressed as part of the restructuring plan.

Overall, despite competing demands for the social workers involved in adoption work, workers were able to demonstrate a committed approach to achieving appropriate and stable placements for children.

Most adopters were positive about their social worker.

One set of adopters stated that their social worker was "reliable-brilliant we were really lucky"

A second stated although there had been difficulties with one social worker their worker now was "great" and "keeps in touch with us".

A third stated that their social worker was "reliable and organised."

The support to social workers by the administrative workers was described as good in terms of the calibre of the individuals but limited in terms of the numbers. It was noted that as a part of the reorganisation the arrangements for admin support were to be reviewed; the decisions made should be included in the notification required under standard 20 in this report.

There were mixed views from the social workers with whom we met during the course of the inspection about the systems for allocation of cases. Some staff reported an open approach to allocation, with cases being discussed and people feeling they had been fully consulted with. It was reported that discussion revolved around their ability to take the work in respect to capacity and their skills and knowledge. Other staff members felt that the allocation system was not open and transparent and felt that there was little scope for discussion about which cases were allocated to whom.

All social workers reported regular supervision with one social worker stating that she received "excellent" supervision from her manager. Team meetings are held on a regular basis and written notes are made of each meeting.

Staff cited that peer support was excellent and it was clear that there were good relationships between the workers.

Staff reported that they had access to the whistle blowing, disciplinary and grievance policies and procedures

There are systems in place for monitoring and controlling the agency. These include:

- Monthly monitoring of social care and adoption data by senior and operational managers
- Quarterly monitoring of adopters and children's progress through the process
- Quarterly reporting to the Scrutiny Committee in respect to adoption activity
- Feedback from adopters about their experience of the process
- Second opinion visits to adopters
- File audit systems

In addition the Scrutiny Committee was giving consideration as to what additional information would be useful for them to be provided with. Especially in terms of practice issues.

Areas noted that would benefit from a more robust approach include:

- Quality assurance of the panel papers prior to them being submitted to the panel members
- The file audit systems in place need to be implemented for all case files
- Closer monitoring of some of the aspects of the support service to birth families and the post adoption contact arrangements
- Closer attention to the timescales for adopters at some stages of the process

The training opportunities in Bexley were overall reported as being good. There is a training plan in place and training in the new adoption act was reported as being well delivered and informative. Staff reported that access to specialist training in their role as adoption workers was satisfactory.

Bexley has in the past and continues to support staff through their social work training and a number of qualified social work staff working for Bexley had benefited from this scheme.

While some of the formal training is included in the caseload management system, such as PQ work, not all training is included and social workers reported that while they have a commitment to attend training it can mean that attendance at training sessions is compromised due to other

commitments. It should be considered if some time could be allocated within the caseload system for training.

Staff working in the children's placement service reported that it had been sometime since they had attended training in child protection and it should be ensured that all staff attend this training on a rolling basis.

Case Record on adopters viewed were generally well ordered although not all files had a contents list. Some of the files viewed had been subject to a recent audit and gaps had been noted; some files had no evidence of having been audited. There were some gaps on adopter files, for example:

- Some supervisors decisions had been placed on files but some lacked details of the discussion and actions required. Where discussions about cases have occurred between a worker and a specialist in the team these discussions and decisions made should also be clearly recorded and retained on file
- Not all case recording had been signed in full by the writer; this should occur on all recording.
- Some of the recording was too brief to be of any use
- Not all of the files viewed contained signed panel minutes
- Not all of the files viewed contained the decision makers letter about the applicants approval
- The recording of the outcome of CRB checks would benefit from more detail being included such as the date of birth, address and level of check undertaken, the disclosure number and the signature of member of staff who has seen the original

Adoption files on children viewed were developing well overall. No files were viewed which had been archived so all of the files were works in progress. None of the files viewed had been subject to audit and one file viewed had some photographs of the child which were not dated.

There is an access to records policy and procedure in place in relation to adoption.

There is a detailed policy in respect to recording. It was stated that separate records were maintained of allegations and complaints, an adopters file with details of a complaint they had made and a child's file was viewed which contained details of a child protection allegation. Both issues appeared to have been dealt with appropriately.

The archive arrangements were viewed and the storage facilities were good. There were clear arrangements in respect of accessing files and the security arrangements were satisfactory. All files are scanned prior to the paper file being archived. A written risk assessment in respect to ensuring that the risk from fire and water damage was minimal was provided to the commission prior to the report being sent in draft to the agency.

Files kept in respect to panel members and staff had some gaps in information; this has been discussed in the staying safe section of this report.

The adoption agency operates from identifiable premises which are secure and are open to the public during office hours.

The placement team administrative staff had made good efforts to develop a database that allowed monitoring of some of the adoption work. However, at the time of the inspection the systems were disjointed. An efficient "adoption module" needs to be introduced that incorporates all of the adoption activity.

A disaster recovery plan in respect to children's services is in place; this plan includes the arrangements for the adoption work.

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	2
9	2

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	3
4	1
5	3
10	2
11	1
12	2
13	3
15	3
19	2
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	2
3	3
14	3
16	3
17	2
20	2
21	2
22	3
23	2
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	3
30	N/A
31	N/A
32	N/A
33	N/A
34	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? Yes

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Voluntary Adoption and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003 or Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1	AD4 AD8 AD17	AAR 2005 regulations 25 and 16	The assessments in respect to adopters and children must be subject to a more rigorous quality assurance process prior to presentation at panel.	29/12/06
2	AD11 AD19 AD28	AAR 2003 regulations 6, 11 and 15	An audit of all personnel files must be carried out and it must be ensured that missing information is placed on files. Panel members must have been subject to all recruitment checks prior to sitting on panel and evidence must be retained that this has occurred. A requirement was made following the last inspection in respect to the recruitment of staff.	29/12/06
3	AD1	AAR 2003 regulation 3	The statement of purpose and the children’s guides need some additions and amendments to endure that they meet regulations.	29/12/06
4	AD20 AD21	AAR 2003 regulations 4, 7 and 10	In line with the comments in the body of the report the agency must ensure that the developments in the delivery	29/12/06

			and management of the adoption work provide an effective and efficient service in all areas. The agency must inform the commission of the arrangements for the adoption work once plans have been finalised.	
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RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	AD2	The agency should further evaluate the activity in respect to the recruitment of adopters to establish if there is more that could be done to attract a wider range of people.
2	AD4	The agency should consider if there is a need to be more proactive on behalf of adopters in family finding
3	AD4	Adopters should have the opportunity to attend an information evening within 2 months of their initial enquiry.
4	AD4	The manager should ensure that an effective reminder system is developed in respect to updating adopters CRB checks.
5	AD4	The manager should ensure all adopters are provided with an opportunity to commence the preparation programme in a timely way.
6	AD4	Formal applications must be made by adopters prior to the commencement of any checks.
7	AD10	The arrangements for reporting the progress of cases to panel should be written into the panel policy and procedure document. The lines of communication between the agency and the panel chair need to be developed and the agency should ensure that panel are consulted about developments in any policies and procedures governing the exercise and the function of the agency and panel.
8	AD11	The agency should consider who should undertake the panel advisor's role to ensure independence in the quality assurance aspects of this. The agency should achieve a more practice based membership of social work representatives on the adoption

		<p>panel.</p> <p>It should be a requirement that new members observe at least one panel prior to joining the membership.</p>
9	AD12	<p>The agency should establish if any cases have been subject to delay due to the frequency of panel and take remedial action if required.</p> <p>The panel papers should be provided to the decision maker prior to the panel hearing.</p> <p>There should be a separate minute for each child and the age range, gender and numbers of children should not appear on the minutes as being part of the recommendation.</p>
10	AD13	<p>The content of the letters sent to inform adopters, birth parents and children about the decision made should be reviewed.</p>
11	AD19	<p>A manager of the adoption service should carry out the verification of references as a part of the staff recruitment process.</p>
12	AD6	<p>The agency should ensure that a senior manager fulfills the role of ASSA and that the service is underpinned by a clear development plan.</p>
13	AD18	<p>The agency should review, with the medical adviser, the arrangements for her role.</p> <p>Detailed protocols need to be developed in respect of the specialist advisers and the services they provide.</p>
14	AD7	<p>Birth parents should be provided with an opportunity in every case to read what has been written about them and their family and evidence that this has been offered should be kept.</p>
15	AD8	<p>A robust approach to monitoring the timeliness of later life letters should be established.</p>
15	AD17	<p>As above</p>
16	AD8 AD17	<p>Clear monitoring systems need to be established in respect to the administration of indirect and direct contact arrangements.</p>
17	AD9	<p>Birth parents should be fully involved and consulted about what support they need at an early stage of the process.</p>
18	AD20	<p>The managers should discuss the caseload management system with the social workers to identify if any of the allocation systems across the teams need review.</p>
19	AD23	<p>The manager should consider if the caseload management system could include some more time for "day to day" training.</p>
20	AD23	<p>The manager should ensure that all staff attend refresher training in child protection.</p>

21	AD25 AD27	Case files for adopters and children should be subject to regular audit and any shortfalls identified should be addressed.
22	AD29	An efficient "adoption module" needs to be developed on the IT system.

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