



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### **Blackburn with Darwen Adoption Service**

**Floor 4B Link  
The Exchange  
Ainsworth Street  
Blackburn  
BB1 6AD**

*Lead Inspector*  
Marian Denny

*Announced Inspection*  
19th September 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](http://www.dh.gov.uk) or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

*Every Child Matters*, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above.

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# SERVICE INFORMATION

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<b>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	Blackburn with Darwen Social Services
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	John Daly
<b>Type of registration</b>	Local Auth Adoption Service

# SERVICE INFORMATION

**Conditions of registration: Not Applicable**

**Date of last inspection** 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2003 carried out by the National Commission for Social Care Inspection.

## **Brief Description of the Service:**

Blackburn with Darwen Council operates its own adoption service, which is located within the authority's children's services. At the time of the inspection, the Head of Service, Family Support & Permanence had overall responsibility for the strategic management of the adoption service, with the adoption team manager undertaking the everyday management of the service and also acting as the Adoption Panel Adviser. Both managers were based in the Council's children's services premises, where all the children's teams, including the adoption team were located. The premises themselves were situated in the centre of Blackburn, easily accessible by car and public transport and were fit for purpose.

The main purpose of the Council's adoption service is to make arrangements for the adoption of children, to achieve this the following services are provided:

- the recruitment, preparation, training, assessment and approval of adopters.

The assessment of children's needs, the matching and placement of children to adoptive parents/families, support for children and adopters' post placement, post adoption contact, support and counselling for adults who have been adopted. The agency also offered an adoption service to step-parents and relatives wishing to adopt. A letterbox scheme, which supported the information exchange in adoption placements was also provided and maintained. The service also provided a counselling service to adults, who were seeking information about their birth family. In addition, independent support services were provided to birth parents through its service level agreement with After Adoption. It also provided an inter-country adoption service through its arrangements with the Blackburn Diocesan Adoption Society.

# SUMMARY

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

Blackburn with Darwen's senior management team demonstrated a real commitment to this inspection and had prepared for it in an excellent manner. All the pre-inspection documentation provided was thorough and arrived within the agreed timescales. Arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful and enabled inspectors to make effective use of their time. The facilities and resources provided were of a good standard and everyone involved in the inspection were most helpful and courteous.

Prior to the inspection, the pre-inspection material and the questionnaires, which had been returned to the inspection team were read and analysed. The information obtained from these documents has been incorporated into the inspection findings.

The inspection, itself, was carried out over four days and involved two inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed one adoption panel for half a day. Interviews were undertaken with the Assistant Director, who was also the Agency's Decision Maker, the Head of Operations, Family Support & Permanence, other senior personnel, team managers, adoption and childcare social workers and administrative staff. An elected member, who had lead responsibility for children's services, was also interviewed, as well as the adoption panel's medical advisor and chairperson. A selection of children and adopters' files were read, four adoptive families and one birth parent interviewed. A variety of agency records were inspected, administrative resources examined and the agency's office premises were seen. Security issues relating to both record keeping and the premises were also considered. In addition, the inspection team received fourteen questionnaires from prospective and approved adopters, six from birth family members, fourteen from placing social workers and three from specialist advisors. The responses received from these questionnaires, together with the information obtained from interviews with adopters have been reflected in the main body of this report.

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

The Council demonstrated an understanding and commitment to the corporate parenting role. The executive member of the Council, with lead responsibility for children's services was a good advocate and supported the development of good practice and outcomes for children. The authority's senior management team shared these aspirations and were working hard to realise them.

The Head of Operations recognised the improvements required in children's services and had a clear vision about its future development. Staff were able to communicate effectively with their manager and they respected him and had confidence that he would develop and take forward the children's services.

The management team had the experience and skills to manage and organise the adoption service in an effective and efficient manner.

The adoption service raised the profile of adoption in the local community and as a consequence received a steady stream of interested applicants, who represented the diversity within the community.

In the majority of cases, adopters were satisfied with their experience of the adoption process, for example, one adopter stated, "I could not fault the service provided by Blackburn with Darwen Council". "I would recommend them to anyone who wants to adopt a child".

There was a clear well structured preparation programme, which was routinely evaluated and changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters indicated that the preparation training was of "excellent quality" and had been extremely useful in "exploring adoption issues". The authority ensured the information meetings and preparation groups were also conducted in the predominant language of the ethnic minority groups and a number of adopters spoke extremely positively about this.

Similarly, adopters were generally positive about their assessment, indicating that it had been "thorough", "professional" yet "sensitive and carried out in a skilful manner."

The agency gave careful consideration to matching a child with adopters to ensure that good practice and outcomes were achieved.

The adoption fast track team was able to provide specialist therapeutic support to adopters and their children. Some good quality pre and post adoption support was being provided to some adopters and children.

The adoption panel was properly constituted and demonstrated a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work. The panel was well chaired, the administrative support provided was of a good standard and decision-making was thorough.

The agency's specialist advisers were extremely knowledgeable; child focussed and provided a good service to the adoption agency.

The life-long implications of adoption were recognised. The inclusion of birth parents/ families in the adoption process was reflected in the agency's policies and procedures and in the independent counselling services commissioned from After Adoption.

The council was considered to be a fair and competent employer. Staff were of the view that the training provided was of good quality and they were fully supported in utilising the training opportunities provided them.

The quality of the administrative support provided to the adoption service was of a high standard. Adopters stated the administrative staff were "friendly and helpful" and were clearly a real asset to the agency.

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

There was more of an emphasis placed on performance management within children's services and care planning and decision-making processes had improved.

There had been an increased development of management information systems. The adoption agency had introduced a new I.T. system, which was being used across 22 Local Authorities and had the potential to accelerate effective matching of adopters and children between these authorities. The adoption agency was using this system to develop tracking systems for children and adopters.

The separation of adoption and fostering into two distinct teams had enabled the adoption service to focus more clearly on the core business and prioritise the work appropriately.

A recruitment officer had been appointed and the agency's recruitment strategy developed.

The agency had produced a children's guide which was in a child friendly format and able to meet the differing needs of children.

An adoption procedures manual had also been developed.

Written literature and leaflets for adopters had been completed, which clearly outlined the adoption assessment, approval, matching, introduction and placement processes. An adopters' handbook had also been produced.

Various support services had been developed for adopters, such as a newsletter, support groups, specialist therapeutic services.

Records, including archived records were safely stored and a number had been backed up.

There had been some improvement in the Personnel and Panel Members' files.

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

Adopters' assessments were generally good, though there were exceptions to this, which could be addressed through a more robust quality assurance system. The agency could improve their practice if the current pet questionnaires covered a wider range of pets currently being looked after in the



community. Health/safety checklists should also be expanded upon. In addition, the agency should ensure, where applicable, that the ten - day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment is held on file.

The agency had carried out a great deal of work with childcare staff to improve the quality of children's assessments, however they continued to be of variable quality and this should be addressed.

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work, however if this is to be effective and the services developed, issues of capacity within the adoption team should be addressed. In view of the likely future demands that will be made on this service, the resources allocated to the adoption agency should be kept under constant review. Similarly, the agency needs to review the current level of administrative resources provided to service the Adoption Panel.

Adoption support plans should be improved and developed.

The agency's child protection procedures should include specific references to children placed for adoption and staff provided with up-dated child protection training.

The agency had adoption panel policies and procedures, however these should be revised, if they are to meet the Adoption and Children Act. The agency had a properly constituted, well-organised and effective adoption panel. However, the agency may wish to alter its panel membership to more effectively represent the diverse population within the community. Panel minutes could be improved if they were more clearly structured.

The systems used for monitoring and controlling the adoption agency should be more robust.

Adopters' files should show clear evidence of managerial oversight, audits and case decisions. It is recommended that the audit tool currently used be revised to meet the specific needs of the agency's adoption records.

A greater emphasis should also be placed on the development, management and monitoring of the adoption records, as some of the files were not maintained in accordance with current legislation and regulations.

The procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff must be more robust. Personnel files and panel members' files were not kept in accordance with the adoption regulations and this must be immediately addressed.

The agency should also develop a disaster recovery plan.

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

The report of this inspection is available from [enquiries@csi.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@csi.gsi.gov.uk) or by contacting your local CSCI office.

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

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# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency had effected a number of successful placements. However, robust monitoring and quality assurance systems must be developed to ensure the child's welfare is promoted and safeguarded.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency had a recruitment strategy, which was designed to meet the range of needs of local children requiring adoption. In addition, there was a recruitment officer in post, who was responsible for the development and updating of both the fostering and adoption service's recruitment plans, to ensure recruitment activities were effectively targeted to meet the needs of the council's looked after children and young people. At the time of the inspection, a much greater proportion of the recruitment officer's time was spent addressing the needs of the fostering service. It is recommended that the adoption service should maximise the use made of its recruitment officer's services.

Evidence obtained in the inspection confirmed that the agency was extremely effective in presenting a positive profile of the adoption service within the community. Consequently, the agency received a number of enquiries from

interested applicants, who represented the diversity within the community. The agency's effectiveness in the recruitment of adopters within the community was such that they were able to place some children locally, as well as offering adoptive placements to other local authorities in Adoption 22 and nationally. There was also evidence of the agency using the consortium and other national facilities, such as "Be My Parent" and the National Adoption Register to meet the needs of children requiring adoption.

At the time of the inspection, a new management information system had been introduced, "Charms", which was being used to develop a formal children's and adopters' tracking system. These tracking systems will enable the authority to carefully monitor the care planning progress of all children in care and the progress of adopters' initial enquiries to placement. There were also arrangements in place for adoption staff to be involved at the outset of a child's care planning process, for example, in attendance at the looked after children's (LAC) reviews. The efficiency of these care-planning processes were also greatly assisted by the compact nature of the authority and the effective communication within the organisation. Evidence obtained in this inspection confirmed the adoption agency was fully aware of children locally requiring adoptive families. The service was also recruiting and prioritising prospective adopters, who were most likely to meet their needs.

There was clear, recorded evidence of children's wishes and feelings being taken into account in the care planning and matching process. It was also evident that a great deal of thought, care and sensitivity went into matching a child/children with adopters and children were well matched. In addition, the adoption service had an impressive record using the families for children model, of placing children who are traditionally hard to place with adopters. There was considerable evidence to confirm that the agency recognised the importance of brothers and sisters remaining together and took any decision to separate them very seriously. Consequently, frequent use was made of the fast track adoption team to undertake psychological assessments of siblings' attachments to support any professional decision-making.

The agency had a high rate of successful adoptions, which was partly attributable to some excellent direct, preparatory work undertaken by members of the fast track adoption team. However, not all children, who had an adoption plan, received the same high quality service and this should be addressed. Good matching and effective support to adopters also contributed to the high success rates of the adoptions made by the agency.

A formal preparation, assessment and approval process was carried out in respect of adopters and there was a clear commitment to ensuring foster carers, who adopt a child they have previously fostered, received the same services as other prospective adopters.

The information meeting and preparation training was organised and provided jointly with Blackburn Diocesan Adoption Agency. The preparation programme was clear, well structured, its content was of a good standard and the programme was routinely evaluated, with changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters' attendance and involvement in the preparation groups was recorded in the form F presented to panel.

Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from returned questionnaires, indicated that the preparation training was delivered in a speedy manner. The programme was said to be well organised and presented, with materials used being of an "excellent quality". Several adopters stated that in the information meeting and preparation training, staff had been available to address their linguistic needs and they had found this support extremely helpful. The venue used was spoken of in a favourable manner and adopters indicated that they were held at convenient times. A number of adopters stated that the introduction to the groups had been "warm and friendly" and the programme was "informative", "stimulating" and "enjoyable"; others stated that it had afforded them the opportunity to explore a variety of adoption issues, which had proved "enlightening" and an "invaluable" experience. Several adopters commented on how useful it had been to hear about the experiences of an adoptee and adopters. Indeed in two of the returned questionnaires, it was suggested that increased participation in the preparation groups of adopters, adoptees would be extremely beneficial.

A number of placing social workers/authorities stated that the agency had provided "good preparation training" and adopters had been "extremely well prepared" to adopt a child. Several also commented on the depth of adopters' understanding about the importance of maintaining a child's heritage and found adopters had a positive view regarding a child's direct contact with the birth parents and their families.

Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from the returned questionnaires, indicated that the assessment process had commenced in a timely manner. They stated that the assessment process itself had been "clear," "well structured," and had been undertaken at a "pace appropriate to their needs". One set of adopters though indicated that they believed the assessment process had been rather too "long and drawn out" and another set stated that they felt they had been "grilled" by the social worker, during their home study visits. However, adopters generally spoke positively about their assessment, which they described as "thorough", "comprehensive" and stated that staff had handled the personal issues that arose in a "sensitive," "thoughtful" manner. A number of adopters commented on the "knowledge", "skills" and "professionalism" of their adoption worker. The majority of adopters indicated that they had been kept fully informed of their progress through out the adoption process, though one set of adopters stated that they would have liked to have been kept more fully informed. A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of their written assessment (form F),

which they indicated portrayed them "very accurately". Several of the adopters stated that they had received a copy of their Form F. They were also aware that they had to send any observations regarding their assessment, in writing to the agency, within a specified period.

Placing social workers presented a similar picture, about the quality of assessments, as adopters. Several workers stated the assessments were "well written, "clear and detailed". One placing social worker stated that the prospective adopters' report had addressed the issues of equality and diversity extremely effectively. A number commented on the "thoroughness of the assessments" and stated that the adopters' written assessment very much brought the "family to life" and provided a "good", "accurate" picture of them.

Examination of a sample of adopters' files indicated though that the assessments undertaken in respect of prospective adopters were of variable quality, for whilst some were of a good standard in so far as they were detailed and analytical, others were less detailed and analytical. In two files, the prospective adopters had lived abroad prior to residing in this country, but no overseas CRB checks had been carried out. Clearly these checks are of crucial importance in the safeguarding of children and the local authority must ensure that such issues of practice do not occur again. In the sample of adopters files seen, only one file contained evidence of a 28 day or in the case of a more recent file, a 10-day waiver notice relating to the prospective adopters' report. This matter should now be addressed. Written Adoption Support Plans were found on files, however not all of these were dated or had been signed by the relevant parties. Discussion with the management team confirmed that these matters were to be urgently addressed.

The agency also gave consideration to ensuring applicants had the capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way, pet and health/safety assessments were consistently used and found on file. The agency may wish to consider developing these assessments though in order to enhance this aspect of the work, for example, in developing pet questionnaires to address the diverse pets currently being cared for by adopters. The health and safety questionnaire currently used do not address the possession and use of dangerous weapons and the potential dangers to young children from pull cords on window blinds. In view of this it has been recommended that these should be developed.

In view of the shortfalls found in some adopters' files it is recommended that managerial scrutiny of the assessment process should be increased, so ensuring all relevant matters in relation to the adopters' application have been addressed.

The agency was developing written information about the matching, introduction and placement process, as well as the support available to

adopters. Written information was also being provided regarding the Adoption Register. At the time of the inspection, this information was provided verbally at various points of the adoption process. Adopters indicated that the information provided had been helpful in enabling them to gain a good understanding of all the stages in the adoption process and the support services available to them. In examining the draft written information produced by the agency, consideration should be given to enhancing these leaflets through pictorial images, which more accurately reflects the multi-cultural nature of the community.

The agency's practice was child focussed, with careful consideration being given to matching a child with adopters, as evidenced in the agency's thorough matching meetings and the quality of their matching reports. There was evidence that strenuous efforts had been made to ensure child's permanence reports were of a good standard with the provision of training and mentorship to childcare staff. The reports seen though were of a variable quality, however, having said this the inspectors recognised that these reports had only recently been introduced and as with any new documentation were likely to improve as staff received further training and mentorship.

In the returned questionnaires, adopters stated that the agency had provided them with a great deal of information about the child. However, one adoptive family who was visited indicated that they had not received all the necessary medical information relating to their child and were still waiting for such information a number of months after the child had been placed for adoption. Several adopters indicated that they would have welcomed discussion about their children's medical condition with the agency's medical adviser as they felt this might have proved helpful in considering the implications for themselves and their family in caring for the child. It is recommended that the agency consider maximising its use of the panel medical adviser in such situations.

In examining a sample of children's files, there was clear evidence that work was being undertaken to prepare and enable them to move into their adoptive placement.

There was evidence that the agency had developed an effective system to record the adoptive parents' decision regarding notifying the agency, if an adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards.

The agency ensured adopters provide information about themselves through the completion of a family book and there was evidence of these books being used as an effective tool in preparing a child prior to placement.

The Council's Child Protection Procedures do not specifically refer to children placed for adoption and this must be addressed. In addition, it is also recommended that all adoption staff receive up-dated child protection training.



The agency had recently revised its written policies and procedures in relation to the Adoption Panel, which were available to all staff and panel members. Further revision of this documentation was required though to fully meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Information regarding the adoption panel was provided to adopters and discussed further during the preparation and assessment process. Prospective adopters were invited to attend the adoption panel, which was held in an appropriate venue and had a suitable waiting area for adopters.

Several Adopters' commented positively on their experiences of attending the panel stating that although they were initially "extremely nervous", they had found that the panel members were "welcoming", "friendly" and had "quickly put them at their ease". Panel members' questions were "appropriate" and they stated that the panel meeting was "well chaired".

The constitution and membership of the adoption panel was in accordance with the adoption regulations, however, the agency may wish to consider altering its panel membership to more effectively represent the community's diverse multi-cultural population. The agency also needs to ensure that all its panel members attend the agreed frequency of panel meetings. There was evidence to confirm that new panel members were provided with an opportunity to observe the adoption panel before commencing in their roles and they also received induction training. Panel members had also been provided with regular and appropriate training for their roles, for example, the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

A sample of panel members' files were seen and with the exception of one file, where the CRB check required renewing; all contained the documents identified in 11.3 of the National Minimum Standards.

Observation of the adoption panel demonstrated that it was well chaired and generally operated in an efficient and effective manner. However, whilst panel members received the panel papers in advance of the date of the adoption panel, not all the necessary documentation and information was always present, for example medical information/reports. This has resulted in the panel partially discussing cases and then deferring them until the next panel when the necessary information was available. This practice is clearly not acceptable and a recommendation has been made that this matter is urgently addressed.

The Assistant Director, in her role of agency-decision maker, is planning to arrange quarterly meetings with the head of operations and panel chairperson, which should prove to be a useful mechanism to feedback to the agency on the quality of cases being presented to panel and any difficulties that had arisen. The inspectors recognise the value of such meetings and would fully endorse this arrangement.

Panels were convened on a regular basis to avoid unnecessary delay in the approval of adopters or the matching of a child. The agency was also able to convene additional panels, if required, to deal with any urgent matters that arose. The selection of panel minutes seen were of a good standard though could be enhanced, if they were more structured.

The agency decision-maker took her responsibilities very seriously with all panel papers and minutes received and examined, prior to the agency's decision being made. In some cases there was evidence of the agency's decision made without delay and this decision was quickly and effectively communicated to the prospective adopters, the child and birth parents. However, in one of the files examined there was no evidence of an agency decision-maker's letter and the adopters seen were unable to verify that they had received such a letter. They also indicated that the child had not been made aware of the agency's decision regarding their future.

The agency decision-maker may also wish to consider signing this letter personally, as in so doing it clearly emphasises the importance of such a decision.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. However, in the sample of personnel files examined, not all the files contained all the information required by regulation, for example, in one file there was only one written reference and no evidence that a CRB check had been carried out. These matters were discussed with the head of operations at the end of the inspection, who agreed to ensure that they were urgently addressed.

All staff working within the adoption service, who had case responsibility, were suitably qualified and considerable childcare experience. They also had experience in carrying out assessments, as well as experience in adoption.

At the time of the inspection there were some unqualified members of personnel, who were providing practical assistance to staff in their work in the adoption agency. The inspectors were advised though that these employees had no case responsibility and were always supervised by qualified staff.

# Enjoying and Achieving

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

6 and 8

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

The agency provided a variety of support and specialist advice for adoptive families with a view to maintaining placement stability for children. Staffing levels within the agency needs to be continually reviewed though to ensure adoption support services are developed and of a qualitative nature.

## EVIDENCE:

Blackburn with Darwen's adoption service demonstrated a commitment to the provision and development of their support services, for example, there was a fast track adoption service, which consisted of one full-time and one part-time social worker post, a child support worker and the equivalent of one full-time clinical psychologist, use was also made of the council's educational psychologists, the panel's medical adviser, a play therapist and the post adoption support worker. In addition, the agency had commissioned a voluntary agency to provide some adoption support services to adopted children, adopters, as well as birth families.

At the time of the inspection a number of support services were provided, which included financial support packages for adopters, there was a monthly support group for adopters, a monthly support group for female Asian adopters and there were plans to develop a group for male Asian adopters. The agency arranged an annual social event, as well as newsletter and there were plans for this newsletter to be produced on a more frequent basis. Adopters had access to external post adoption training, however, there were also plans develop some in-house post adoption training. Therapeutic services could be accessed from the fast track adoption team, which included clinical psychological support, as well as the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS). In addition, where there were difficulties in placement, the agency was able if necessary to spot purchase therapy packages from independent

sources to support an adoptive family. Assistance with contact arrangements was provided to adopted children and their birth relatives. In addition, the agency had a service level agreement with a voluntary agency to provide an inter country adoption service to those adopters wishing to adopt a child from Overseas, which included the provision of all aspects of support.

Whilst written information regarding the agency's support services had only recently been produced, adopters had been verbally informed and generally appeared to have a good understanding of the services available to them. However, one adopter indicated there was a lack of clarity regarding the services available. Clearly the agency's newly produced literature regarding the agency's adoption support services should address this.

Adopters spoken with, together with information obtained from adopters returned questionnaires, generally presented a positive picture of the support the agency had provided them. A large number of adopters stated that they had been "well supported" by the agency. One adopter stated "one can pick up a 'phone and be helped", another adopter stated "the worker is always ready to listen and assist", several other adopters stated that the support provided by the agency ranged from "very good" to "excellent".

The manager of the agency should consider reviewing the current staffing levels within the agency, if the adoption support services are to be developed and of a qualitative nature.

Information obtained from the placing authorities and social workers indicated that adopters were supported. However, in one returned questionnaire, it was reported that the adoption worker had only visited once since the child had been placed with the adopters. It had therefore been left to the child's social worker to provide the necessary support to the adopters.

Adoption Support plans were found on all the files examined, however, these plans required developing and did not fully address some apparent needs of the children and adopters. The plans also needed to be much more eclectic in approach and more fully embrace multi-agency working.

The agency's preparation training, assessment and matching process provided adopters with information about a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self-image. It also enabled adopters to understand the need and to develop strategies in assisting a child to address all forms of discrimination. The importance of keeping safe information provided by birth parents and families was clearly addressed through out the preparation and assessment process and adopters visited clearly understood this. The child support worker in the fast track adoption team had the capacity to undertake direct work with a child, post placement. Some examples of the work carried out were seen and found to be of an excellent standard.

The agency uses the consortium's adoption disruption procedures, which clearly outlines the roles of the respective agencies. There had been one adoption disruption during the past year. This meeting had been well chaired and matters had been handled in a sensitive and thoughtful manner. There was evidence that the learning gained from this disruption had been carefully considered and used to inform the agency's future practice.

The agency had access to a variety of specialist advisors and services to meet its needs. These included a panel medical and legal adviser, educational advisors, clinical psychologists, a play therapist, the LAC nurse and interpreters. There were also plans to appoint and locate a nurse within the agency, who, in conjunction with the panel medical advisor would address the children's medical needs. Staff confirmed that both the legal and medical advisers were available for consultation, if required and they were described as being "extremely knowledgeable" and providing "a very good service". They also stated that these advisers were highly committed to their work and extremely "child focussed". Whilst there was some evidence to confirm that the adoption service makes appropriate use of these specialist advisers, it is recommended that using such advisers in a more proactive would further enhance the service, for example, maximising the use made of its medical adviser, the LAC nurse and other specialist staff.

There were no written protocols governing the role of all the agency's specialist advisers and this should be addressed.

## **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):**

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

The adoption agency demonstrated a commitment to developing and improving support to birth parents and their families. A coherent strategy for working with birth parents and families was required though if the outcomes of these standards were to be fully achieved.

### **EVIDENCE:**

The agency clearly recognised the life-long implications of adoption and this was effectively evidenced in their statement of purpose. Parents were provided with written information regarding the care planning processes for their child. Placing social workers worked in an open and honest manner with them and actively encouraged birth parents and their families to become involved in these care planning processes for their child. In addition, to the work undertaken by the placing social workers and adoption agency, there was a service level agreement with a voluntary agency to provide independent counselling and support to birth parents, where there was an adoption or twin track plan for their child. Birth parents were provided with a leaflet giving details of the services provided by this voluntary agency on behalf of the Council. The agency had adopted a proactive stance in respect of these leaflets and they had been made available in a variety of settings, for example, solicitor's reception areas etc. However, to facilitate the maximum take up of this service, it is recommended that the agency introduce a qualitative monitoring system in relation to this service. The agency had also commissioned the services of a local voluntary agency to provide a service to relinquishing birth parents. In situations where the parents were from an ethnic minority group, the agency was able to make different arrangements.

Birth parents were encouraged to contribute to information included in the child's written assessment. There was also an expectation that birth parents were made aware of the form's contents and able to comment upon the information contained in it. In the panel papers and files examined evidence of this practice was seen. Improvement in the quality of these reports is required and was discussed earlier in the report.

The adoption agency encouraged and facilitated both birth parents and their families to provide information and photographs of their child so that they might contribute to the child's sense of heritage through the completion of life storybooks. There was evidence of life story work being completed to a good standard and several good examples of life storybooks were seen. In the four families visited though, not all the children had a completed life storybook despite the fact they were in adoptive placements. During the inspection though the inspectors did hear from staff about the life story work they had undertaken and good examples of life storybooks were seen. However, since the completion of life story work is of vital importance for the child and greatly assists in placement stability, such work should be carried out in a timely manner, with every child who has a permanency plan.

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to maintain and update their child's heritage through direct or indirect contact via the agency's letterbox system. Evidence obtained confirmed that this system was well – organised, effectively managed and provided birth parents and their families with a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

The Commission received six birth parents/family members' questionnaires and a telephone interview was undertaken with one birth parent. Information obtained from the questionnaires presented a rather mixed picture regarding the service they had received. Responses from two birth parents / family members questionnaires was extremely negative, as both indicated that they believed they had not been adequately consulted, involved in the care planning process or kept up-to-date with the progress of the case. Neither did they feel they had been respected, listened to and were extremely dissatisfied with the service they had received. Information obtained in two other questionnaires was varied, for whilst they believed they had been involved in the care planning processes for their children and had been respected and listened to, they did not believe staff had been sensitive to their needs, nor did they believe they had been treated fairly and overall, were dissatisfied with the service provided by the council. However, in two other questionnaires the people concerned indicated the opposite, as they were fulsome in their praise of the adoption service, stating they "could not fault the staff", "they were brilliant with me" and both said they were "very satisfied with the service" that they had received.

# Management

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

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

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

The adoption agency was well managed and a good service was provided to children and adopters, however a more robust quality assurance system was required, if the agency was to ensure a good quality service and outcomes for children and adopters.



## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency had a statement of purpose, which contained all the information required under the Adoption Services Regulations 2003. The statement of purpose had been circulated to all staff and was available on the intranet. The agency's written policies and procedures had been revised in line with the Adoption Agency Regulations; though the inspectors were advised that revision of some of these documents was still required. However, the written policies and procedures seen accurately reflected the agency's statement of purpose.

The children's guide had been revised and was in a child friendly form. This guide is produced in a variety of formats to meet the differing needs of children and contained all the necessary information prescribed in the National Minimum Standards and Adoption services Regulations 2003.

The agency's statement of purpose clearly emphasised the importance of ensuring those enquiring about adoption were welcomed without prejudice and treated in a fair, open and respectful manner. This statement contained the agency's eligibility criteria, which quite clearly stated that the adoption service would not automatically exclude people on any grounds, other than those specified by Regulations. During the course of the inspection, evidence was obtained that these principles were reflected in the agency's practice.

The agency provided information to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This information was attractively presented though required a rather more welcoming, positive and encouraging approach in relation to the agency's eligibility criteria, the implications of adoption and the processes involved. However, the pack did provide some helpful information regarding the needs of local children, who required families.

Adopters indicated that the agency responded in an extremely "pleasant," "helpful" and "welcoming" manner to their initial adoption enquiries. They also stated that the information pack had been sent out "promptly", had been "clear", "informative" and met their initial needs. There was evidence that the agency ensured that all foster carers, who applied to adopt, received the same information as other adopters. Those adopters who wished to adopt a child from overseas were referred to the voluntary agency, whom the agency had commissioned to carry out inter country adoptions.

The agency had systems in place to ensure that prospective adopters, who were most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted were prioritised for assessments. However, it was recognised that both the agency's recruitment strategy and prioritisation systems would be further sharpened by the development of the council's management information systems regarding

their looked after children and prospective adopters. At the time of the inspection, these systems were being developed.

The head of operations was the nominated manager for the adoption service. He had a wealth of knowledge in the child-care and adoption field, as well as significant management experience. This knowledge skills and experience ensured the agency was managed in an effective and financially sound manner. Similarly, both the team manager and the senior practitioner in the adoption team had extensive knowledge of child-care and considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. Staff interviewed spoke extremely highly of their managers and clearly held them in high esteem. The managers were said to be "very visible" and their management style was described as being "open", "approachable", "helpful" and "very supportive". All the managers and senior practitioner were said to be enthusiastic about the agency's work and took a genuine interest in any issues discussed with them. All staff spoke highly of the leadership skills of their management team and had total confidence in their ability to develop the service. There were some anxieties expressed though that the two vacancies that currently existed within the senior management team might compromise the management and development of the adoption service. However, discussion with Senior Mangers confirmed that these posts were being advertised and there was some confidence that the authority would be successful in recruiting experienced staff to these posts.

There was evidence to confirm that the agency operated in accordance with its statement of purpose and was managed efficiently and effectively. There were written job descriptions available for the manager of the agency and well-defined managerial arrangements in place to identify, who was in charge when the manager was absent. There were clear roles for managers and staff, with well-established lines of communication and accountability. A supervisory and appraisal system was in place, which was used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence that staff were being supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies.

The agency ensured managers and staff were aware of their responsibility to declare any possible conflict of interests, which was clearly outlined in the council's code of conduct and available on the intranet.

There were a number of procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption service. A tracking system was being developed to monitor the care planning process for the child and adopters. There were also supervision and appraisal systems in place, which monitored the adoption workers' performance. The adoption team manager had established a file auditing system to monitor the agency's case records and ensure they met the required standard. The team manager and social worker though kept evidence of this file audit rather than placing it on the file. It is recommended that this practice should cease and in future the file audit placed on the agency's case record. Reviewing officers, who chaired looked after children's reviews, carried

out a monitoring and quality assurance role in respect of the adoption service. Similarly, the adoption panel carried out a quality assurance role in relation to the cases presented to the panel, as did the agency decision-maker. Information regarding the performance of the agency was regularly presented to the Senior Management Team. The elected member, who had lead responsibility for children's services, was also regularly up-dated on the adoption service. A six monthly and an annual adoption report was presented to the executive Committee of the Council. Interviews with members of the senior management team, as well as the elected member confirmed that councillors took their corporate parenting role seriously and carefully scrutinised all information presented.

Staff working within the adoption team were an experienced group of staff, with the necessary qualifications and experience to undertake the agency's work effectively. Adopters made a number of positive comments regarding individual adoption workers' practice, for example, they were described as "reliable", "knowledgeable", "professional," "extremely committed", "very child focussed" and "skilled in their approach to the assessment". One adoptive family stated that their worker had been "excellent" and stated that they "could not fault the service that they had received".

The childcare social workers interviewed showed a real commitment to providing a good, qualitative service to the children and their families. They stated that they worked well with the adoption staff and indicated that there was good communication between them. Some staff though were of the opinion that communication needed to be improved. Several childcare workers spoke positively about the knowledge of the adoption workers and said they had found them helpful and supportive. A number of staff provided evidence of excellent family finding in relation to several hard to place children and sibling groups. Similar views were expressed in the returned placing social workers/authorities questionnaires. One placing social worker though stated the adoption worker had not provided the support to the adopters, as a consequence it had been necessary for them to provide the required support.

The adoption agency did not have a workload management system in operation. However, staff were of the view that workloads were being appropriately and effectively allocated.

The administrative support provided to the adoption team was of an extremely good standard and greatly assisted staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. This was also reflected in the positive comments made by adopters, who described the administrative staff as "friendly", "helpful" and efficient. However, in view of recent legislation and the increased demands likely to be made on the adoption service, the administrative resources provided needs to be kept under review..

The managers and staff interviewed generally considered the Council was a fair and competent employer. The agency enabled staff to access internal and

external training and post qualification study, as part of their professional development. Adoption staff generally felt the training was of good quality and effectively met their needs.

There were written policies and procedures in place for case recording, as well as the maintenance and formatting of adoption case records. Examination of a sample of records indicated that these policies and procedures were being followed with the records seen generally well organised and in good order.

There were some shortfalls in the adopters' files though, for example, there were no case decision records or evidence of managerial audits on file. The inspectors were advised that all managerial audits were kept on a separate file and held by the team Manager. The adoption worker was also given a copy of the audit form. This matter has been referred to earlier in the report and a recommendation made in the appropriate section of this report. There were also some shortfalls in relation to enquiries being made to education and the Local Authority, which are fully detailed in the section of this report, entitled "Staying Safe". In one file some panel minutes were missing and in another the agency decision-makers letter. In one file, the adoption support plan had not been dated and in another all the necessary parties had not signed the plan. In one file, there was an incomplete form confirming the receipt of information appertaining to a child, which had been signed by the adopters. These adopters were seen and stated that they had signed the form without receiving the necessary information. They stated that this information was still outstanding at the time of the inspection. In several files the case records had not been signed by the worker, nor the manager and in others such signatures were inconsistently applied.

Similarly, with regard to the children's files some shortfalls were found, for example, in one file, the case decisions arising from the worker's supervision meeting did not cover the whole period the service had been responsible for the child, in another file, there were also some documents missing, for example the copy of the birth certificate. In one file, the statutory review minutes were missing and in another file, the childcare social worker did not appear to have carried out the statutory visits in accordance with the prescribed frequency though the adoption worker had undertaken visits. In another file, recording would suggest that the statutory visits did not appear to have been carried out according to legislative requirements, for example the social worker had not seen alone. In one file the child's date of birth was recorded differently in file documentation. In another file, the child's name appeared to be confused with that of another child. In another file, the case notes and emails found on the file did not appear appropriate. In one file there was no later life letter. A similar difficulty also emerged with regard to two children's life storybooks. It is recommended that the agency review the file documentation contained in a child's adoption file. The quality of the children's permanence reports were variable, the inspectors recognised though that this was a relatively new document for staff. The agency may wish to consider providing additional support to staff in the completion of this document.

The agency had a system in place to ensure confidentiality, which was in accordance with current legislation. Staff, panel members and specialist advisors were fully aware of this system and strictly adhered to it.

The Council had a written policy and procedure in relation to access to records, which met the requirements of the adoption national minimum standards and current regulations.

The agency had a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records, however this system required developing and a recommendation has been made regarding this.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff. There was evidence to confirm all the agency's adoption records were stored securely in locked cabinets.

Since the last inspection, the agency had begun safeguarding its records, including those that had been archived. The inspectors considered this action commendable. At the time of the inspection, the Council had a disaster recovery plan, however, the adoption agency had not developed a specific disaster recovery plan for their agency. Some attention should now be given to this.

In selection of staff files seen, two files did not comply with the adoption regulations. Similarly, the sample of Panel Members' files failed to comply with the adoption regulations, for example in some there were no references, in others no employment history and documentary evidence of relevant qualifications. The shortfalls found in both the Personnel and Panel Members files must be urgently addressed.

The adoption agency had identifiable office premises, which were fit for purpose.

# SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	
<b>Standard No</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>1</b>	3
<b>3</b>	2
<b>14</b>	3
<b>16</b>	3
<b>17</b>	2
<b>20</b>	3
<b>21</b>	2
<b>22</b>	3
<b>23</b>	3
<b>25</b>	2
<b>26</b>	3
<b>27</b>	3
<b>28</b>	1
<b>29</b>	3
<b>30</b>	N/A
<b>31</b>	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	A.A.R.2005, S.I.2005/389,Part 4, reg. 25 (8).	A 10-day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment should be held on file, where this is applicable.	01/01/07
2	AD4	A.A.R.2005, S.I. 2005/1712, 3 (f) (iii) & LAAS Reg. '03 7(1)(b)	The manager of the agency must ensure all statutory checks have been completed in relation to adopters, prior to approval and a child's placement.	31/10/06
3	AD4	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 7(a)(b).	The manager of the agency must implement and maintain robust quality assurance systems for all aspects of the adoption service.	01/01/07
4	AD5	A.A.A.2005, Reg.31 (2)(d)(5)	The manager of the agency must ensure Prospective adopters receive all the agency's information appertaining to the child.	31/10/07
5	AD2	LAAS Reg. 03 9(1)(a)(b)	The agency must ensure that its child protection policies and procedures	01/01/07

			specifically refer to the measures intended to safeguard children placed for adoption by the authority from abuse and neglect. They should also include arrangements to be made for persons working for the adoption agency, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the authority to have access to information that will enable them to contact the Commission regarding any concern about a child's welfare and safety.	
6	AD11 AD19 AD28	LAAS Reg. '03 6(2)(c), 11(3)(d), 15(1) & Schedule 3 & 4	The manager of the service must ensure that information is held on all persons who work for the adoption service in accordance with Schedule 3 and 4. This applies to all staff, panel members and specialist advisors, who provide services to the agency.	30/11/06
7	AD10	A.A.R.2005, S.I.2005/389,part 3, reg. 17(2)(b) &(c) & Schedule 1, part 2, (1-3) & part 4 (1-6)	The adoption agency should ensure all the necessary information has been presented to the Adoption Panel in a timely manner. These should include all necessary health reports in relation to the child, natural parents and brothers and sisters.	30/11/06
8	AD6 AD19 AD21	Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulation 2003, 10(a) & 10(b).	The manager of the service must ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent, experienced social work	01/01/07



			and administrative staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency.	
9	AD25	A.A.R.2005, S.I.2005/389,Part4, 22(1)	Where the adoption agency is considering a person may be suitable to be an adoptive parent, the manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005.	01/12/06
10	AD25	A.A.R.2005, S.I.2005/389,Part3, 12(1)(a-I) and LAC (97) 13	The manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up for a child, where the adoption agency is considering adoption for a child. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 2005 and the guidance provided in the local government circular.	01/12/06

## 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 service should consider maximising the use made of the recruitment officer.
2	AD4AD25	The agency should take great care in ensuring records relating to a child and adopters' personal details are accurate.
3	AD4	The status of Criminal records bureau checks should be clearly recorded.
4	AD4 AD25	All agency records should be signed and dated by the author, where relevant the manager and all other necessary people.

5	AD4	Consideration should be given to developing its health and safety checklist and pet questionnaire.
6	AD4	The agency should give consideration to enhancing their literature to reflect the diverse cultural nature of the community.
7	AD5	Consideration should be given to maximising the use of the Panel's Medical adviser.
8	AD5, AD8 AD25	The agency should ensure that clear and appropriate information is obtained for the child about themselves and life before adoption. This information should be provided in a timely manner and in accordance with their needs.
9	AD10	Further revision should be undertaken in respect of the Adoption Policies and Procedures so that they meet the requirements of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
10	AD11	The manager of the adoption service should monitor panel members' attendance to ensure the agreed frequency of panel attendance is met.
11	AD11	The agency should consider alter the adoption panel membership so that it more effectively represents the community's diverse multi-cultural population
12	AD12	The agency should consider reviewing the current format of the adoption panel minutes.
13	AD13	The agency decision maker should give consideration to signing the agency decision letter
14	AD6	Consideration should be given to adoption support plans being developed.
15	AD18	A written protocol governing the role of all specialist advisers used by the agency should be developed.
16	AD25	The agency should ensure all statutory visits to children are undertaken at the prescribed frequency and in line with relevant guidance and legislation.
17	AD25	The agency should consider reviewing documentation held on a child's adoption file.
18	AD27	The system to monitor the quality and adequacy of adoption records should be developed.
19	AD27	A disaster recovery plan specific to adoption should be produced.

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