



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

City of Salford

**Family Placement, Avon House
Avon Close
Little Hulton, Greater Manchester
M28 6LA**

Lead Inspector
Sean
White

Announced
24th - 26th May 2005

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
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Reader Information

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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	City of Salford Adoption Service
Address	Family Placement, Avon House, Avon Close, Little Hulton, Greater Manchester, M28 6LA
Telephone number	0161 799 1762
Fax number	0161 794 0197
Email address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	City of Salford Community & Social Services
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Carolyn Williams
Type of registration	Local Authority Adoption Service
No. of places registered (if applicable)	
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection N/A

Brief Description of the Service:

The Salford adoption agency is constituted as a service under current legislation that requires local authorities to provide or make provision for adoption services. The service operates within the Community and Social Services Directorate of the Council and is a member of a consortium with a neighbouring authority. It undertakes the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters whose wish is to adopt a child from this country and arranges for assessments to be carried out on people who hope to adopt a child from overseas. Provision is also made for adoption support. The agency is located in premises to the north west of the borough; the building is accessible to the public although public transport and car parking are somewhat limited.

SUMMARY

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

The preparation by the agency for this inspection was of an admirable standard and enabled the process to be undertaken efficiently and with the cooperation of everyone involved. The honesty and candour of everyone was very welcome.

The inspection was carried out over three days by two inspectors with an additional visit to observe the adoption panel. Senior personnel were interviewed, as were front-line workers and administrative staff; the lead elected member of the council was also interviewed. Four adoptive families were visited and their case files examined, children's adoption files were also inspected. Policies, procedures, professional practices and the department's recruitment procedures were inspected.

Completed questionnaires from adopters, prospective adopters, birth parents, professional advisers and placing social workers also informed the inspection.

What the service does well:

The statement of purpose, which clearly sets out the aims and direction of the service, was set out as a clear foundation for the agency's business. The children's guides provide a very accessible means of children being able to understand, and be involved in, their own adoption.

The agency has a rigorous system of recruiting and assessing adopters, "Understandably rigorous process", reported one adopter. It ensures that children are the focus of its activities and aims its recruitment practices at prioritising those people and families who are potentially able to meet the needs of the children waiting to be adopted. The assessments are thorough and reports well written, and the panel is an effective aspect of the quality monitoring process.

Decision-making was thorough and clearly a responsibility taken very seriously and enthusiastically by the Director. The agency's close and purposeful working relationships with children's social workers, which includes an adoption liaison worker, provides for a collective approach to matching and placing children with the most appropriate families.

The strategic and operational management of the service – which is viewed as of a high standard by workers - ensures a consistent approach to practice through effective support and guidance.

The employment practices of the council, seen as inclusive and enabling by workers, underpin the management competence. Monitoring the activities of the agency by the council was committed and thorough and enabled by an enthusiastic lead councillor.

Adoption workers were of a high calibre, experienced and knowledgeable in their field; as well as being professionally qualified, the percentage with post qualifying awards was impressively high. This demonstrates a significant

commitment to staff development by the agency. The service was supported by a very competent administration.

There were some good practices found in respect of supporting adopters; the allocated social worker remains as their link-worker throughout the assessment and approval process and up until an adoption order is made. There is an adoption support adviser who provides information and guidance on a range of support issues and there is a formal contract with a voluntary adoption support agency that can accept referrals for advice and support from anyone affected by adoption. The professional advice provided by the medical and legal advisers was of a high standard and workers pointed out that the medical adviser is very accessible and approachable.

Overall, the agency was a well-managed service that endeavoured to ensure that children were placed safely with the most appropriate adopters.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Not applicable; this was the first inspection of the agency.

What they could do better:

The areas of improvement that the agency should prioritise are in respect of the arrangements for enabling birth parents/families to be as involved as possible in their children's futures. This includes arrangements for supporting birth parents throughout the adoption process – there were several responses from birth family questionnaires saying that support had not been provided or offered. There were also instances of a less than dynamic approach to life-story work and enabling birth parents to know and understand what had been written about them, which, in turn excludes them from involvement. Although there were some aspects of working with birth parents that were positive, the overall approach was not well coordinated.

Similarly the agency needs to develop a whole service strategy for working with birth parents and providing adoption support for children and adoptive parents.

Although there were many positive comments made about the preparation programme there was some concern about its focus on couples and the potential to leave single participants a little isolated. A further improvement would be to re-assess the feedback forms to enable participants more opportunity to explain their experiences.

There were some management issues that, when addressed, would enhance an already good performance. These include a formal file audit system, supervision decisions recorded on case files, more personal adoption files (to include later-life letters), more specific factual details about employment histories on Forms F and training on the compilation of Forms E.

The premises used by the agency are generally not of a good standard. There is no permanent venue for preparation groups, the office base is difficult to locate and access, the working environment is cramped and secure storage of confidential information is very limited.

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 or by contacting your local CSCI office.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

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

Management

Scoring of Standards

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- Adopters are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)

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

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

EVIDENCE:

The agency had robust systems in place to determine the type of adoptive families required to meet the needs of children requiring placement. This was evident in the information provided for potential applicants – which was of a very good standard – and in the structured approach to prioritising and ‘fast-tracking’ the most suitable applicants. Adopters confirmed that during their preparation “ ... We were told about a little boy who was waiting for a new family, we expressed an interest in looking after him and we were fast tracked... we recommend Salford to all our friends.”

Early involvement in planning for children where adoption is a possibility, through close working relationships with children’s teams, was also seen as a strong element of the agency’s practice. The placement of children with ‘concurrent’ plans with potential adopters –who undertake a full assessment of their suitability to be foster carers- was seen as a very positive move in respect of avoiding delays.

There was considerable evidence to demonstrate that the agency has a rigorous and thorough approach to preparation and assessment. Case recording and assessment reports were noted, in the main, as being of a high standard; they were analytical and gave the clear impression that all necessary care had been taken to determine applicants' suitability to adopt. Areas where improvements could be made are in relation to ensuring that employment histories are explicit in respect of exact dates, and that parenting capacity is demonstrated clearly in all assessment reports. It would also be a positive move if the 'weight' accorded to referees were made explicit to give the panel and decision maker a clear understanding of the information provided.

The preparation training material covered all appropriate areas and most people who were either interviewed or responded through questionnaires found the groups informative and enlightening. There were some who did not totally agree with this opinion, however, who felt that the presentation of preparation training would benefit from a more dynamic approach. One response stated that as a single applicant she felt less involved than the rest of the group because, she felt, the approach was clearly geared towards couples. Nevertheless, it was made clear by adopters and applicants that they felt the preparation and assessment processes were inclusive and that they were supported throughout. Positive comment made by adopters included, "The staff are committed and keen", "Our social worker was excellent and we consider ourselves fortunate to have had her" and "The (social worker) is one of the best family placement workers we could have had". The agency would be able to determine attendees' opinions on preparation more effectively if the evaluation form used were to be re-designed to accommodate this. The agency should also monitor the size of the groups and the effectiveness of the training in relation to this.

One issue that requires urgent attention is the arrangements for venues where preparation groups are held. The agency does not have a satisfactory permanent venue and has used a variety of settings, some of which have not been suitable.

Information is provided to adopters about the matching, introductions and placement processes in a range of ways that enables them to understand the agency's responsibilities. The information in respect of children requiring placement was, in the main, of a reasonable standard; efforts are continuously being made to improve the quality of Forms E and matching reports, one practice being the allocation of an adoption service link-worker to each child care team to liaise with, and give advice on, all matters relevant to adoption – including the preparation of Forms E. The agency should continuously evaluate the quality of Forms F and invoke appropriate training wherever necessary.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted and there is a comprehensive procedure that clearly outlines its status, responsibilities and operation; these procedures contained all required information. The chairperson managed the

panel well gaining a realistic balance of informality and a robust oversight of business and the members, overall, demonstrated a sound understanding of adoption issues. There was clear evidence that the panel undertook its quality control responsibilities seriously. The decision making process was generally timely (the agency monitors all time-scales) and it was evident that decisions are made in receipt of all necessary information and that due rigour is applied to all judgements. It was clear that the decision maker is fully committed to her responsibilities in this area and takes a personal interest in adoption matters. There have been occasions, from time to time, when the panel has not been able to form a quorum; panel business was discussed on these occasions but the recommendations were not made until the next panel. This is not the most appropriate way of doing business even though it is accepted that to defer everything to another time would cause more strain on an already overburdened system. The panel meets every three weeks; the agendas, because of the panel's permanency brief, include long-term fostering and placement with family and friends business. This makes the panel's responsibilities somewhat over stretched and it struggles to ensure that there is always sufficient facility for items to be included on the agenda in the most timely way.

Many of the adopters' responses in questionnaires identified that there had been delays and/or cancellations, one respondent saying, "It was just over a year from application to assessment starting". The chairperson said that the panel should meet more frequently to be able to undertake its business in the most efficient way. There is considerable potential for delays in the manner in which the panel is constituted and arranged; serious consideration should be given to increasing the number of panels, either as a regular event or specific dates as and when necessary. The venue where the panel is held (at the agency's offices) is not very good; in particular the waiting facilities for attending applicants are poor and do not provide sufficient comfort or privacy.

The managers of the agency (service and team managers) had been in post for some considerable time so it was not possible to assess their recruitment. However, there was considerable evidence to demonstrate their suitability through updated CRB checks, qualifications and experience. The team workers demonstrated that they were appropriately qualified, and were a highly skilled and experienced group. Their insight into and knowledge of adoption was considerable and they were clearly up to date in their understanding and thinking. Post qualification awards are held by more than 50% of the team. It was also evident that new, less experienced workers could be absorbed easily into the team – which demonstrated a mutually supportive approach to team working – and feel comfortable that they would be given assistance to develop their skills and expertise in a 'safe' professional environment.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency's range of support systems was sufficient to enable and encourage successful adoptive placements for children and to help families through troubled times.

EVIDENCE:

Adoption support is a developing aspect of the agency's work. It was clear that there is a commitment to enhancing this area of responsibility and the manager has a strategic view of where she wishes the agency to develop.

All approved adopters retain their social worker until at least the adoption order is made; this enables the journey from application through approval, matching, introductions and placement to be consistently managed and supported. The agency has an adoption support worker in the team who is able to offer both practical support and advise on where other support services can be found. Therapeutic support for placements is available through the Salford Adoptive Families Support Service (SAFSS); a worker can be allocated to assist in the assessment of children where a match is being proposed and there are potential difficulties or attachment issues envisaged.

The agency has a contract with a voluntary adoption support agency; their services can be provided to families who require or request their support – this contract is currently being reviewed.

The medical adviser provides invaluable input into the support network. It was clear that, in addition to her panel responsibilities she is also a source of support and advice to all parties involved in the adoption continuum. It was said that she is very accessible and easy to contact. The quality of the medical input into matching and placements was considerable. Similarly the legal advice was found to be of a good standard with appropriate support provided to the agency and the panel.

Overall the support systems were, individually, of a reasonable standard and enabled placements of children to be safe and optimistic.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

Although there was clear commitment to developing services to enable birth families to contribute to their children's futures, the actual practice was inconsistent and lacked focus. This was found to be the weakest aspect of the agency's work.

EVIDENCE:

Although there was a clear commitment, and some good practice, in respect of working with birth parents, the overall picture was not as positive as other aspects of the agency's work. In the past it was the responsibility of the adoption service to offer independent support to birth families, but this arrangement no longer exists – mainly because the responsibility has been passed to a voluntary support agency, with which the agency has a contract. The take-up of support services to this agency, however, has been somewhat limited and there was some evidence to suggest that birth parents were not fully aware of its existence or relevance. Comments received in questionnaires included, "If I had been given support when I first asked for it things would be very different" and "I was promised letter box contact, to meet the adoptive parents and a referral to After Adoption. Despite a year later [sic] I am still waiting". The children's social workers have some input into working with birth families, but as is often the case with situations where the family is in conflict with the department, support is often difficult to provide and is resisted by families.

The agency did not have a systematic approach to working with birth parents and it became evident that although some good work was undertaken in some areas, the overall system was spasmodic and uncoordinated. There was limited evidence to demonstrate that life-story work was vigorously undertaken as soon as children became looked after, that families were routinely supported to be involved in planning and that their views were automatically sought and

recorded in respect of what was written about them. Birth parent were not routinely given copies of their child's Form E to read, for instance. Although there were systems in place to ensure that contact arrangements were appropriately made and the letterbox system was satisfactorily managed, there was a lack of integration with other important aspects of birth family inclusion.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The adoption agency is well managed at all levels and has a strategic and operational coherence that enables and encourages workers to provide and develop services to meet children's needs.

EVIDENCE:

The agency had recently produced a comprehensive and thorough statement of purpose that had been ratified formally by the executive of the council. It gives

a clear outline of the service's aims and objectives and includes all required information. The details it presents are understandable and provide a realistic overview of the agency's work and responsibilities. The children's guide is in two parts; one is a simple, colourful outline of adoption in Salford, the other being a personal, interactive workbook/diary that enables children to plot and consider their adoption throughout the process. Together they provide an excellent means of children being able to understand and be involved.

The information pack provided for people who are interested in adoption is of a very good quality and demonstrates the agency's positive approach to managing adoption. The information is well laid out, provides realistic and appropriate material – including statements from (and photographs of) people who have adopted – and outlines clearly who is able to adopt and the needs of children requiring placement.

The manager of the service and her supporting team managers are very experienced and qualified workers (this includes management qualifications). They all demonstrated a deep and convincing knowledge of adoption matters and are held in some esteem by their staff. One comment made in an interview with agency workers was, " They don't promote rubbish in Salford".

The strategic and operational management of the service was of a generally high standard; support and guidance through regular supervision, clear lines of responsibility and communication and effective working within available resources all demonstrated evidence of this. The managers may wish to formalise workload allocation and monitoring to add greater clarity to managing the collective responsibilities of the team. Case management, including case files, was of a good standard but there was no formal case file auditing system in place, neither were supervision decisions routinely recorded on files. Although there is a corporate file policy and procedure in place this does not meet the needs of the adoption service. Children's files were of a generally good standard but some consideration should be given to making them more 'personal' rather than mechanistic, to include for instance, 'later-life letters'.

The agency is reasonably staffed to undertake its range of responsibilities and the plans to create senior practitioner positions is a positive move. However, the continued retention of short-term fostering caseloads has a negative impact on effective workload management and should be phased out as soon as possible.

The administration of the service and the panel was of a good standard, very good in many areas; it was clear that the people responsible for the administration of the agency were clear about their roles and particularly efficient in operational matters. It was also made clear that responses to callers were handled in a particularly welcoming and professional manner.

There was almost universal appreciation of Salford as a good employer amongst the workers interviewed; people were very clear that they felt supported and appreciated by the organisation. One aspect worth comment is the practice of workers receiving letters of appreciation from the Director when she is informed of their good practice from another source – for instance if a

Judge makes positive comments about a particular worker's practice in Court Proceedings.

The oversight and monitoring of the service by the council was of a high standard. The lead member of the council was actively interested in adoption matters and was clear about the information he required to ensure services were being delivered effectively. Quarterly reports are received from the agency and there are regular meetings between elected members and senior managers to ensure performance is closely monitored.

Recruitment practices, including personnel file management were generally good but there were some required information absent in some cases and there was no recording of references being verified by telephone on staff files. Panel members' files were well ordered but did not contain all required information.

The premises from which the service operates are poor. They are not easy to find, are not easily accessible by public transport and parking is very limited, which causes friction with neighbours. The facilities for workers, in respect of equipment, access to technology etc are fairly good but the offices are cramped and have very little storage space. This is a particularly acute problem and serious consideration needs to be given to improving the keeping of case files, which are not kept in an adequately secure fashion and may be at greater risk of fire and water damage than is reasonable. All files set up since the mid 1980s are kept in the premises with no formal archiving system in place – although the team administrator is very good at maintaining an overview of file storage; she keeps a written catalogue that shows the location of records, which is cross-referenced to the Adoption Register.

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	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	Score
7	2
8	2
9	2

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

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
Standard No	Score
6	3
18	3

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

N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	29	14.4 1983 amended	Arrangements must be made to provide secure storage for all confidential adoption records that minimise the risk of damage from fire or water.	01/10/05
2.	28	11(3) 2003	All required information must be included on personnel and panel members' records.	01/10/05

RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	7	The agency should introduce a more focused approach to working with birth parents and encourage them to be involved in plans for their children. This should include the allocation of an independent support worker.
2.	8	A more rigorous approach to the compilation of life-story work should be introduced.
3.	9	Greater efforts should be made to ensure that birth families are aware of all available support networks.
4.	25	Supervision decisions should be recorded on case files.
5.	27	A quality audit system should be introduced in respect of case files

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