



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Suffolk County Council Adoption Service

**Endeavour House
Russell Road
Ipswich
Suffolk
IP1 2BX**

Lead Inspector
Sue Nott

Announced Inspection
8th – 10th November 2005 09:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
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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 Suffolk County Council Adoption Service

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

Name of registered manager (if applicable) Lyndsay Davison

Type of registration Local Auth Adoption Service

Category(ies) of registration, with number of places

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection This is the first inspection under the LAAS Regs 2003

Brief Description of the Service:

The Suffolk Adoption Agency is part of Suffolk County Council's Children and Young People Services directorate. The agency is constituted as a service under existing legislation that requires local authorities to provide or make provision for adoption services. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters. It matches and places children with adopters, provides post adoption support, and birth records counselling. Adoption work is undertaken by a central adoption team based at Thorndon and, from December 2005, a new, separately located adoption support team will also be established. The agency is a member of the East Anglian Consortium of Adoption Agencies. It also commissions other services to provide independent counselling and support to birth family members, to develop adoption support networks, and to provide consultation and therapeutic services to adoptive families where appropriate. Suffolk also commissions PACT adoption agency to provide a service to applicants who wish to adopt from overseas.

SUMMARY

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

This inspection was the first inspection of the adoption service provided by Suffolk County Council. The agency had prepared well for the inspection. The pre-inspection information provided was of a very high standard. The cooperation of everyone involved enabled the inspection process to be carried out effectively and efficiently. It was particularly appreciated that the adoption agency was able to rearrange the inspection timetable, following the cancellation by CSCI of the previously arranged inspection dates, due to unforeseen circumstances.

The inspection was carried out over three and a half days by two inspectors, with an additional day for attending panel. Senior personnel were interviewed, as were front-line workers and administrative staff; the lead elected member of the council was also interviewed. The lead inspector observed one of the two adoption panels. Four adoptive families were visited and their case files examined; Children's adoption files were also inspected. Policies, procedures, and professional guidance were inspected, including the department's recruitment procedures. There was also an opportunity to meet with representatives from partner agencies.

Twenty two questionnaires were returned from adopters and prospective adopters. Six questionnaires were received from birth family members, two of which were from birth mothers. Questionnaires were also received from twenty one placing social workers in respect of fifty children linked, matched or placed in the last twelve months. Questionnaires from specialist advisers also informed the inspection.

What the service does well:

There was a strong commitment to the improvement of the service with adoption being seen as a central factor in the overall placement strategy for Looked After Children. A modernisation process had been undertaken with an expansion of resources to better meet the needs of children and adoptive families.

Information to staff, and prospective adopters is very thorough. There is an excellent website with clear information about the adoption process, with the professional adviser undertaking regular updating. Several adopters commented on the "helpful website".

Processes for matching children to adoptive families were well established and adopters referred to being given comprehensive information. There was also a commitment to developing effective family finding systems for those children who have been waiting for placements. Recruitment practices were being reviewed in order to broaden the range of adopters to meet the needs of the children needing placement.

The permanence panels were effectively chaired and there was evidence of sound practice. It is particularly commendable that birth parents and children have been encouraged to attend panel wherever possible.

There was evidence of strong leadership now in place within the adoption service. Effective links had been established with the children's mental health services and the corporate services for the educational needs of children. The adoption agency was also working with specialist partner agencies, for example Family Futures, and Adoption UK, to broaden the range of support to adoptive families. Best value reviewing and re-evaluation of externally commissioned services was integral to the overall strategic approach of the agency, with a commitment to the improvement of services to provide good outcomes for children.

Practice was underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures. The accessibility of user friendly guidelines, and the approachability of the management team in the adoption service enabled staff to feel supported in their adoption work. Training opportunities for staff were also valued and a system of regular supervision and appraisal was well established, ensuring that the needs of staff for continuous professional development were well addressed.

The adoption service was supported by an excellent administration system and systems had been put in place for satisfactory monitoring, which helped reduce any possibility of drift for the children needing placements. There were good systems for case records, with information being well ordered in well laid out files. There was a very thorough and positive approach to ensuring that records would be securely stored and retrieved efficiently for adults who have been adopted.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This is the first inspection of adoption services under the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003.

What they could do better:

The shortfalls in the service that were noted during this inspection and within the questionnaires received back from adopters and from birth family members have, in general, already been acknowledged by the agency and plans have been put in place to address these.

The adoption service needs to develop more effective strategies to recruit adopters from black and minority ethnic communities. At this point there has been minimal recruitment of adopters from small but diverse population groups within the county, although there are a number of dual heritage children waiting for adoptive families.

Although assessments of adoptive applicants were generally thorough there was some variability in the quality of the Form F's seen. It is noted that the agency has commissioned assessment training for the forthcoming year in recognition of the fact that some staff have more limited experience.

Support to birth family members is an area of development for the agency. An independent consultant is currently reviewing the services available and will report by March 2006. Consideration should also be given to improving the opportunities for social workers to develop and implement their skills in undertaking life story work with children, in order that they can appropriately prepare children to move on through enabling them to understand and maintain their heritage.

There have been some significant organisational changes happening in the adoption team and in the childcare teams. Consultation processes with staff could be strengthened to support them through the changes in service provision. As plans for integrated locality teams move forward, with closer interdisciplinary working established between health, education and social care, the adoption agency will need to ensure there are effective systems in place which maintain the confidentiality of adoptive placements.

Although there were satisfactory procedures for addressing complaints, the system for collating complaints within the adoption service should be reviewed in order that themes and issues could be more readily identified. A number of adopters also reported that they had never been told how to make a complaint and it is suggested that the agency should review its process for informing adopters about the procedures for making complaints.

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

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

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Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

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

The adoption service has safe recruitment and assessment processes and adopters are given preparation to provide homes that will meet the needs of the children.

EVIDENCE:

There was a written plan for 2005/6 for the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of the range of children locally. Strategies were being further developed with the aim of increasing the range and diversity of adopters approved within the county. It was reported that children with a disability and children from black and minority ethnic groups were hard to place. At the time of this inspection there were five children of dual heritage with a best interests decision for whom the agency would be seeking placements outside its own resources. A previous initiative with an independent agency to recruit an increased number of black and minority ethnic group adopters had produced disappointing results and this arrangement was being reviewed. Prospective applicants from minority communities were fast-tracked but only one was identified at this point.

The matching of children to adopters was achieved promptly wherever possible and overseen by the County Matching Meeting chaired by the Head of Adoption. Matching processes were underpinned by clear policies and guidance for staff. These included guidelines about seeking children's views and a procedure for children to put their views to panel.

The adoption service had close links within the regional consortium and staff confirmed that they were supported in seeking placements outside the county if this was required. Staff in the adoption team had a family finding role with links to specific children who were to be placed for adoption. Family finding plans had call back dates to avoid drift and to trigger decision making about widening the search. The recently introduced database CHARMS was also hoped to become a positive aid in identifying adopters to meet the assessed needs of the children.

The preparation of adoption applicants is undertaken by members of the adoption team, and in general adopters spoke highly of the content of the programme. Comments included: "It was very informative and gave real advice", and "it was useful and sometimes even enjoyable". Four preparation groups are run during the year, held in a centrally located training venue alongside the adoption team office. The distance to this training venue was an issue for some adopters. One wrote, "...the location of the venue was at the limits of acceptability". The manager reported that it is now planned to hold information evenings in Ipswich, and it may be that consideration should also be given to varying the venue for preparation groups.

Assessment reports read were generally of a good standard although with some variability in quality, particularly in the written organisation of information gathered. There was a thorough approach to checks and references. Four references were requested from applicants, with more in some cases. The practice of contacting previous partners was well established although there was less clarity about whether previous partners should be contacted if there were no children. Health and safety assessments were documented but the form was limited in some areas, and should be reviewed. Assessment and preparation included an emphasis on safe care practices. Some reports seen would have benefited from a more detailed summary of the adopters' vulnerabilities, as well as their strengths, in the concluding social worker assessment section of the Form F. However, comments from placing social workers included several references to reports "identifying areas possibly needing extra support" and "very informative and thorough". Their views about the quality of the reports were unanimously very positive.

Adopters' comments about the assessment also reflected some variability, one referring to the "over the top intrusion", and two referring to not feeling sufficiently prepared for the emotional impact. One praised their adoption worker who "tackled any 'personal' issues that needed discussion with discretion."

The adoption service had a systematic approach to matching, with meetings held regularly to consider the needs of the children waiting. Childcare and adoption team staff reported that the process was clear. Adopters in general confirmed that they had been given good information about the child or children that were proposed as a match. One wrote about the "quickness and the honest information relating to the child's circumstances and background".

Some comments suggested there was a need to ensure the role of foster carers in the adoption process is monitored and supported. One adopter commented on inaccurate information from the foster carer about the child's likes. Another referred to the "foster parents' apparent desire to keep the child as long as possible!" Poor practice in another foster home was a concern to the adopter and the circumstances had not been adequately documented in the child's record. Other adopters wrote about the "excellent foster carers" and the positive ongoing relationships that had been established.

In many cases matches were confirmed very soon after approval and frequent references were made by adopters to this as "amazingly" and "surprisingly quick". Where approved adopters were not quickly matched, there was for some a lack of clarity about contact from the adoption service. "Social services never contacted us to say they were still looking for a child – it was always us chasing them". More positively, in another example the adopter reported that they saw their social worker every six weeks during this frustrating waiting period. It is understood that the agency has recently introduced information leaflets, "After panel – what happens next?", covering the post approval process which are sent to adopters at the appropriate stage. This information was seen to be of a high standard.

There were procedures to document ongoing contact needs, but at the time of the inspection there was no specific system to ask adoptive parents whether they were prepared to agree to notify the agency if their adoptive child dies during childhood or soon afterwards (as at Standard 5.3), and this is recommended. It is, however, acknowledged that at various points, including letterbox arrangements, the expectation is implicit in the documentation that adopters complete.

There are two adoption panels, each meeting four weekly. Both have the same experienced independent chair. The panels also consider permanence plans, and have been set up to comply with fostering as well as adoption regulations. The adoption panels had clear policies and procedures. The observed panel was seen to be well conducted, and included an informative presentation about an audit conducted on Form Es.

It was noted as excellent practice that a number of birth family members had attended panel as well as a small number of children. Procedures were in place to support this process. Adopters' comments about attending panel

indicated how very daunting was the experience, "more scary than getting married", and "attending panel seemed particularly stressful and we wondered why after such intense assessment why this was necessary." Another said it was a "nervy time but fulfilling".

Membership of panel included individuals with relevant experience of adoption matters although it was noted that there would be benefit if the panel also included more diverse representation in terms of gender and ethnicity. It was evident that the quality assurance role of the panel was being well established in the adoption service. Panel processes were described as evolving, with a system of regular evaluation just introduced. Staff commented that panel was greatly improved, that it was a "listening panel" and they felt it gave helpful feedback, "put in a nice way." There was an annual joint training day with staff. A panel member appraisal system was also being introduced.

The minutes of panel were of a good standard, and panel processes were supported by excellent administrative systems. The agency decision maker showed considerable commitment to carefully fulfilling the responsibilities of the task. An induction process had been planned for the transition to a new agency decision maker who was to take up the duty soon after this inspection.

There were arrangements in place to convey in writing the decision to the parents or to the adopters and the good quality of these letters was particularly noted. Care needed to be taken that good systems should be in place to ensure that the relevant letters following panel should be placed on the files.

Documentation was seen during the inspection to confirm that the manager and staff of the adoption service had satisfactory CRB disclosures. It was also confirmed that there was a system established for the renewal of CRB checks every three years.

The manager of the adoption service stated that a proforma had been established to document that the recruitment process includes telephone enquiries to verify the written references.

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 18

The adoption service supports adoptive families and makes a developing range of services available to them to meet their needs.

EVIDENCE:

The reorganisation of the adoption service was soon to be implemented at the time of this inspection, with a new team established with the specific remit of adoption support. The manager of the new team, although appointed, was not yet in place. The team was to operate on different premises to the present adoption team.

The adoption team workers had long established systems for supporting adoptive families which included ongoing contact, support groups for adopters and events for families. A range of post approval courses was available and books and other resources could be accessed through the County's 'Knowledge Centre' based in the council offices in Ipswich.

The strategy being established aimed to identify a more cohesive approach to adoption support. Adoption UK had recently been commissioned to develop and expand support services, including for example, running the support groups and establishing a buddy scheme. Adopters themselves identified gaps in adoption support, one referring to "no literature, training or ongoing support for our birth child.....this issue needs addressing urgently," and "courses...too far away". Other adopters referred to "excellent ongoing support...well above the norm!"

Practical and financial help was provided to adopters to facilitate the setting up of the placement, with ongoing support if required. One adopter visited remarked how much it was appreciated that this was given without the need to

ask. Three responses in the questionnaires indicated that some adopters did not know anything about adoption allowances and had seen no guidance.

Prospective adopters were given support in understanding the need for helping children address discrimination. This included input about addressing educational needs, and the regular involvement of an educational adviser into the preparation programme was described as "empowering" to adopters. An information pack about educational matters was provided to adopters to help them support their children in school.

The corporate services to support the educational needs of looked after children had been established in a new team. The adoption service was closely liaising with this team and it is understood that a positive dialogue had been established. It has been a helpful and timely opportunity to ensure the needs of children placed for adoption would be better promoted within the new structure. One of the families chosen for visiting during the course of this inspection had not received sufficient support from the education service in terms of admission and clarification of educational support needs. This had placed unwarranted stress on the adopter at this crucial early time of the placement.

Systems for linking with other specialist services were also being revisited, or were newly established. Some valuable links with the children's mental health services were being set up, although there was some frustration about waiting lists. CONNECT is a specialist team within CAMHS which works with Suffolk's Looked After Children and can provide particular services for children who are placed for adoption and have been adopted. More dedicated time available for adoptive families was being negotiated. A monthly consultation day was available to the adoption service.

An independent service, Family Futures, has also been commissioned to provide a consultative, and in some instances, a therapeutic service to children and their adoptive families.

There was evidence that in the event of a placement disrupting, the adopters and child were offered support. In one case there was a particularly lengthy delay in holding a disruption meeting and the manager acknowledged that this was not helpful, although had been largely as a result of the response from the other agency involved.

The adoption service had access to medical advice and it was repeatedly reported by staff and adopters that the quality of this was "excellent". All adopters were offered the opportunity to meet with the medical adviser and she also made a significant contribution to the preparation programme. There were regular meetings with the second medical adviser, and with the adoption manager and professional adviser. Legal advice was also seen as valuable and accessible.

The adoption service was also linking with the corporate Social Care Equalities Officer, and this was reported to be helpful in terms of informing staff about issues of race, culture, and disability, and in considering recruitment needs.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

7,8 and 9

Services to birth families were to be further developed. The involvement of birth parents in adoption plans was being promoted.

EVIDENCE:

The agency acknowledged that it saw the service to birth parents as an area for development. An independent agency had been commissioned to provide counselling and support to birth families but a low take up of this service had been noted. The adoption service had commissioned an overview of the service by an independent social work management consultant, to be completed by March 2006.

Wherever possible, birth parents were involved with the planning and their views were recorded. In five cases birth family members had attended panel and the service is commended for enabling this process. There was a commitment to facilitate the participation of birth parents and to improve the support services available to birth families.

In some files seen, it was not always clearly documented whether the birth parent had been given the opportunity to see the report that went to panel. The agency acknowledged that their recent audit found that most birth parents had not signed the Form E. Birth parents who completed questionnaires for this inspection gave mixed responses about the service they had received, one reporting positively and the other stating they had been given wrong information and had been treated unfairly and "was left in the dark about what was to come". This parent also said they had "no idea how to complain". The four questionnaires received from other birth family members indicated that they felt a lack of support from the agency. "The whole family were left to get on with life as if nothing had happened."

During the inspection, evidence was given that birth families are enabled to contribute to their child's heritage. There were however some examples where there was insufficient evidence that life story work had been satisfactorily carried out. With one family visited this was described as very frustrating for the adopter who felt concern that they still did not have a photo of the child's birth parent. Another family said that they had been given some temporary material. The agency had a commitment to developing this area of work; life story work training was available to social workers, and a worker with special experience had been commissioned to do this work with some children. It was nevertheless the case that this remains an area for improvement. Social workers acknowledged that for some, life story work "does get put on the back burner".

Several examples were heard about very positive meetings of adopters with the birth family. One adopter wrote about the skilful work with the birth mother undertaken by the child's social worker to "make a potentially difficult and awkward meeting very comfortable".

As previously stated there was shortly to be a new team with the specific remit of adoption support. It was planned that this team would be taking over the operation of the letterbox service which would be more closely overseen by a social worker and manager.

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.

The leadership and management arrangements now in place were effective and would enable the further development of the service to meet the needs of the children.

EVIDENCE:

There was a comprehensive statement of purpose which was being updated to reflect the changes in legislation. The latest statement of purpose had been issued in July 2005, and presented to full council in September 2005. It was available in hard copy and on the agency website. The adoption service had a Children's Guide and other books for children about the adoption process.

Policies and procedures were seen to be comprehensive and very user friendly. They were readily accessible to staff who made a number of references to the clarity of the information and guidance. The procedures for birth records counselling and adoption support matters were to be further developed and revised to fit more readily into the new team arrangements and legislative requirements.

Information available to adopters was also of a high quality. The adoption pages on the council's website were excellent and the professional adviser had a commitment to regularly updating the information. Adopters generally reported that their enquiries had received a prompt response. Typical comments were that they had a "very enthusiastic and interested response", and "useful telephone conversation". The information packs were sent promptly.

There was a system, through the regular team meetings and information from the county matching meetings, to prioritise prospective adopters who were most likely to meet the needs of children waiting. Adopters who had been familiar with practice in Suffolk over some years commented on the considerably improved approach to welcoming adoptive applicants without prejudice. "We've been treated no differently to any other adopter and our qualities as parents have been put before our sexuality".

The Head of Adoption was a recently appointed, professionally qualified and experienced manager, who conveyed enthusiasm and vision about the developments in the service. She has had relevant management training and is currently enrolled on a management course that will lead to a management qualification. Staff reported that the Head of Adoption was "approachable and highly visible". There were good lines of communication. Systems of delegation were clear.

As previously stated a new adoption support team was to be established, commencing its work in December 2005 with a newly appointed incoming manager. The new management team were to have regular meetings and the Head of Service linked closely with the Children's Service Management Team. There was also a system for adoption team workers to keep regular links with

the different childcare teams, and some childcare social workers described this as a very helpful relationship.

Childcare teams were described as often under considerable pressure, arising from staffing problems, relating to vacancies or to the inexperience of workers. Several adopters referred to having visits cancelled, or not being given the required documentation, because of pressures on the childcare social workers. Some adopters made reference to the high quality of the service they had received from their child's social worker and their own worker, but there were frequent examples of where this had not been the case, and that once placement was made it became "another one off the books" and other priorities took over.

The adoption service had also been affected by staff shortages. Some of the critical comments made by adopters and prospective adopters concerned delays in the assessment process, and difficulties in getting hold of some staff. One adopter wrote about being "left over a year to get on the preparation course". One commented "if we hadn't been more insistent it would have taken longer", and another that they "had to badger due to staff shortages".

In managing this pressure on staffing, there were delays in allocating referrals for Section 51 counselling within the team, and this was causing unacceptable delays for people requesting this service. A worker responsible for the family finding role for children who could not be placed within Suffolk's own resources was shortly to retire, and the re-allocation of this work was going to be an increased pressure on the team. Independent workers had been used for some Section 51 referrals and for some assessments.

The capacity of the adoption team had been acknowledged as a limiting factor in being able to provide sufficient placements for Suffolk children waiting for adoptive homes. The Head of Service had been supported in achieving more satisfactory staffing levels. There had been significant investment in expanding the service and staffing levels within the adoption team had considerably improved. There continued to be a gender imbalance, with no male adoption team workers, and no black workers. Some assessment training had been commissioned in recognition that the service had recently taken on several social workers without previous adoption experience.

There had been, and were proposed to be, a number of changes in the adoption team as well as in the broader childcare services. The adoption service was shortly to be split into two teams working from two sites. Many positive aspects about this were heard, although it was clear that some team members had found working as one central team very valuable. The months ahead were expected to be a challenging time of change as the teams divided and new roles became established.

Concerns about the possibility of more home based working, of 'hot-desking', and of threats to peer support networks, were heard from childcare teams and

adoption social workers. These changes, or rumours of changes, needed to be managed with some care. Some staff indicated that, in their perception, there had been little consultation about future working practices. A newsletter was used to update staff, but there was a continuing challenge to the council in keeping staff on side in ensuring effective delivery of services within the overall shift to multi-disciplinary working.

There were procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency. Data about adoption matters was now being recorded on the newly introduced data base CHARMS and this was expected to provide very effective material for monitoring purposes.

A report was sent to the executive of the council every six months. A new administration was in place, since May 2005. The council's leader and a newly appointed Director were both highly interested in adoption whilst acknowledging being on a learning curve about adoption issues. This was a valuable opportunity for adoption matters to be established as key in the overall placement strategy of the council.

Staff in the adoption service had excellent administrative support. There was a less positive view about the accessibility of IT, with some staff sharing one computer between four. The Head of Adoption acknowledged there was a shortage of IT equipment and that that this should be rectified when the new team is established.

All staff spoken to confirmed that there was a regular pattern of supervision and an appraisal system which explored their developmental needs. Staff described how pressures within the childcare teams did not always allow time for supervision to be sufficiently reflective about practice.

Recruitment and retention strategies included family friendly policies which staff referred to positively. There was also an excellent range of opportunities for staff to achieve qualifications. 45% of the adoption workers had the Child Care Award. Information provided about training undertaken by staff and proposed training was evidence of a strong commitment in the council to ensuring staff were enabled to maintain ongoing professional development. Discussions with teams confirmed that training opportunities for staff were valued. Particular praise was given to the New Starters' group which newly appointed workers attended during their first year.

Whilst this inspection found that there were valuable opportunities for the professional development of staff, areas of training need were identified in some cases which were relevant to adoption practice. These include:

- >the provision of child protection updating for all adoption staff
- >training in preparing the child's adoption report for panel, including writing skills
- >diversity training. The manager confirmed that all adoption staff would be required to attend diversity training as a refresher within the next year.

Case records seen in respect of children and adopters were generally found to be very well organised. There was an effective contents log sheet in adopters' files. Some gaps were noted, and signatures were sometimes illegible. The introduction of a file audit system is recommended. There was infrequent evidence on the adopters' files of decisions made by supervisors. The agency had recently purchased fire and waterproof cabinets to minimise the risk of damage to files.

Discussions with staff, and evidence seen on files, indicated that the agency gave attention to the confidentiality of adoption information, although flaws in practice were seen. In one example the LAC review was sent to the birth parent with the adopters' address. In another of the cases chosen for visiting, the education authority sent the adopters' address to the birth family. Procedures and practice across all aspects of the children's services need to be reviewed to ensure better practice.

There was a system for collating complaints and allegations. A review of this system for recording may be helpful to establish a clearer overview of areas of concern; for example service users expressing frustration about delays in assessment or allocation were often dealt with, appropriately by the adoption manager, but with no collation of the level of concern, which could usefully inform discussions about resources. It was also noted that ten of the twenty two questionnaires returned by adopters indicated they had never been told about the council's system for addressing complaints. A review of how this information is provided to them is recommended.

A sample of personnel files and adoption panel members' files were examined. It was acknowledged that there was work to be done in particular in ensuring that the panel members' files included all the required information.

The adoption team office base seen during this inspection was in a building with satisfactory security arrangements and the manager confirmed that the team to be established in December would also have appropriate security with separate key padded accommodation. The buildings are fitted with intruder alarm systems.

The adoption service has its own computer database – CHARMS. All children's services computer access is by individual password. Adoption computer records have additional security and are only accessible to identified staff. The IT system is backed up every 24 hours.

The adoption service was able to demonstrate a thorough approach to the arrangements for authorising access to adoption records. Staff spoken to in the records management service who were responsible for archiving arrangements were also well informed about the nature of the records and the requirements for special security. Plans to move the archive were being discussed and proper attention was being given to the specifications required

in the next location. A system was being set up to back scan all records, commencing with children's services, particularly adoption records.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

BEING HEALTHY	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	Score
7	3
8	2
9	3

STAYING SAFE	
Standard No	Score
2	3
4	3
5	3
10	4
11	4
12	3
13	3
15	3
19	3
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	3
17	3
20	3
21	3
22	3
23	4
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	4
30	N/A
31	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? N/A

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	AD28	11,15	Panel members' files must include all details specified in Schedule 3 and 4.	31/03/06

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	AD5	The adoption service should have a system for asking adoptive parents whether they are prepared to agree to notify the adoption agency if their adoptive child dies during childhood or soon afterwards.
2	AD2	The agency should develop effective recruitment processes which will meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally, including children with a disability and children from black and minority ethnic groups.
3	AD8	Arrangements for staff to satisfactorily undertake life story work should be strengthened.
4	AD20	Consultation processes with staff about organisational changes should be reviewed.
5	AD25	The adoption agency should introduce a systematic file

		audit system.
6	AD25	The adoption agency should review interdisciplinary guidance and practice in respect of the confidentiality of adoption information.
7	AD27	The adoption service should review its system for collating complaints, and its process for informing adopters about the procedures for making complaints.

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