



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Westminster City Council Adoption Service

**1st Floor
4 Frampton Street
London
NW8 8LF**

Lead Inspector
Linda Plummer

Announced Inspection
20th March 2007 10:00 am

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Adoption*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Westminster City Council Adoption Service
Address	1st Floor 4 Frampton Street London NW8 8LF
Telephone number	020 7641 6710
Fax number	
Email address	jrowe@westminster.gov.uk
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Westminster City Council
Name of Nominated manager (if applicable)	Janine Rowe
Type of registration	Local Authority Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 1st September 2003 with a follow up visit in January 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

A Local Authority adoption service, known as the New Families Team, located within the Children's Services Directorate of the Council.

The Agency recruits and approves domestic adopters, identifies and places children for adoption and offers post-placement and post adoption support services to all parties.

A Letterbox System and the Independent Service to birth relatives is out-sourced to a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

Membership of Adoption UK is provided for adopters.

The Agency provides an assessment service to borough residents who wish to adopt from overseas.

The Agency also holds the files of a defunct Voluntary Adoption Agency and provides a counselling service in respect of these cases.

Access to Records and an Intermediary service is also provided for the Council's own adoption placements.

There are excellent links with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

SUMMARY

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

This announced Inspection took place over 4 days from 20 to 23 March 2007, and included a Panel observation on 22 March.

Inspectors met with social work managers and practitioners in the adoption service and their administrative colleagues as well as with child care social workers, Independent Reviewing officers, the Agency Decision Maker, Panel Chair and the elected member with Cabinet responsibility for Children's Services.

A selection of case files were read along with Panel Members' files and Personnel files.

The building used by the adoption service was inspected as were the Archives.

A range of literature was studied including Policy documents and recruitment material.

Visits or telephone calls were made to 4 sets of adopters and 2 recipients of adoption support services. It was not possible to speak with any birth relatives. Questionnaires were sent to social workers (17 -11 returned), agency advisors (2 – both returned), adopters (24 – 10 returned) and birth parents (13 – 1 returned).

The Inspectors extend their thanks to all involved in the Inspection for their openness and responsiveness and time willingly given to facilitate the process.

What the service does well:

An in-house CAMHS service for looked after children provides additional support for adopters and children who could be adopted.

Financial support is available to adopters to facilitate placements. Over 100 adopters receive 'significant financial support'.

There is written recruitment plan for adopters targeted to meet the needs of the children waiting for adoption.

A midway review session is held during the adopters' assessment to confirm that all is going well and/or to identify any particular issues which need addressing, thereby contributing to the overall effectiveness of the process.

Panel functions efficiently and effectively with a range of specialist input. Panel is competently chaired and very well-administered. Planning for children is therefore enhanced.

Applicants attend the Panel at which their approval is being considered and also for a match with a child. This helps to make the process more transparent

to adopters, facilitates their involvement in the planning for the child and assists the Agency personnel in making informed decisions about a child's future care.

The Agency seeks feedback from service users to inform service development (at Information evenings. Panel attendance and post approval)

The Agency has a system for monitoring the decision-making timescale and for updating CRB checks on personnel, thus contributing to timeliness in planning for children and a safer workforce.

Adoption support plans are identified for all children when being matched to enhance placement stability.

The Agency provides an independent service for birth relatives of children for whom adoption is the plan, as part of the commitment to valuing the role and contribution of the birth family.

The Agency more than meets government targets for numbers of Looked After Children adopted.

The Agency offers flexible working practices to retain staff and enhance efficiency.

No disruptions of adoption placements have been reported in the last 4 years, suggesting sound matching processes and successful support packages.

There are good internal links with child care social workers, CAMHS and education helping to provide an holistic approach to meeting children's needs.

The Council runs a number of initiatives as a Corporate Parent and the Cabinet Member for Children's Services is well-informed and very committed to achieving good outcomes for children, adoption being one of the acknowledged routes.

The Agency is a member of a local Consortium maximising the efficient use of adoptive resources.

The council as a whole engages staff in Performance Management processes to enhance service delivery and staff skills.

'(The agency) is well-resourced and encourages analytical, thorough work, with a focus on each individual's needs' (children's social worker)

What has improved since the last inspection?

The Inspector's follow-up visit in January 2006 found that the agency had taken action to address the issues raised in the 2003 Adoption Inspection.

There has been a change of management and other new staff have been engaged. The adoption service no longer functions as discrete Business Unit, but has been brought back into the Children's Services Directorate. This move places adoption as the 'cornerstone' of the department's work to safeguard and protect children. (Director, Children, Young people and Families)

The adoption team is housed with child care social workers and education and CAMHS personnel, improving working links and knowledge.

The adoption service provides (regularly repeated) training events eg on writing the Child Permanence Report and on undertaking Life Story work, adding to staff expertise in planning for children.

'Communication between teams is very good, especially given that the team I work on is based in a different office' (social worker)

Adopters are recruited to meet the needs of the wide range of children for whom the Council is responsible, and recent initiatives have secured a potential pool of adopters sufficient to meet agency needs throughout 2007.

Post adoption support was brought in-house in June 2006 and a strategy for development has been devised, including written guidance on formulating an Adoption Support Plan.

An audit has been conducted of all letterbox arrangements (some 70 files) to identify if any intervention was needed to assist with arrangements.

The Agency continues its membership of the local Consortium and has supported the creation of a Co-ordinator post to enhance collaboration and further initiatives.

Discussions have been established to consider birth relative services across the Consortium.

The Statement of Purpose was revised in line with Inspection recommendations.

An Independent Panel Chair was appointed January 2006, this person having been an Independent Panel member for 3 years previously.

Systems have been introduced to monitor agency decision-making timescales and the validity of CRB checks on relevant personnel, with the aim of ensuring timeliness and ongoing staff suitability.

What they could do better:

The Panel Members' handbook needs to be updated to be Adoption and Children Act 2002-compliant.

The structure and content of Panel members' files could be improved.

The Agency needs to ensure that all Panel members have signed a confidentiality statement and that this is placed on file.

The Agency should consider introducing an explanatory leaflet for applicants attending Panel.

The introduction of progress report on cases for Panel can help to put Panel's role into the wider context.

The Agency should reassure itself that there is no unacceptable delay for children's cases in obtaining a Panel slot.

The Agency may wish to audit the service provided to those seeking to adopt from overseas in view of negative comments received in questionnaires.

The reliability of the monitoring of decision-making timescales needs to be checked as Inspectors found some evidence of delay.

The actual date (not just month) of dispatch ought to appear on the copy notification letter on file.

The Agency should consider introducing Life Appreciation Days as part of the matching process and revisit its use of Concurrent Planning.

The Agency should take the adopters' application form prior to preparation group (as stated in ACA Guidance Chapter 3:17).

As part of the assessment process, the Agency should introduce a question on guns/weapons to the Health & Safety questionnaire; reconsider their approach to former partners (not just where there are children); and ensure adopters are specifically asked if they will notify the agency if the adopted child dies –so birth parents can be informed.

The CRB check on Nominated Manager should be confirmed at enhanced level (currently, the memo on file does not specify).

The Agency is asked to consider whether references might usefully be obtained for internal candidates for posts.

The Medical Advisor's direct work with adopters is much valued. The Agency might use the Panel Member's Annual Review process to ensure the post holder has appropriate support to carry out his functions.

Further development of the Children's Guide could be considered, by referencing examples from other agencies.

The Agency is advised to undertake a risk assessment on current archive arrangements.

Some input might usefully be applied to the maintenance of Case Records, such that existing tools are fully utilised.

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. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

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

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- The agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- The agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- Adopters are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- The functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- The constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- Adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- Adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- The manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- Staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- The agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 Voluntary Adoption Agency only)
- The agency safeguards and promotes the welfare of its service users (NMS 32)

The Commission considers Standards 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.

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

2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, and 32

Quality in this outcome area is good, with a well-informed adopter recruitment strategy, an efficient Panel and appropriately qualified staff committed to providing a service which meets the needs of children requiring adoption.

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

EVIDENCE:

The Agency has a written recruitment strategy which identifies and addresses the needs of Westminster City Council children; evaluates the success of previous recruitment efforts and uses the conclusions drawn to inform future plans; seeks to provide good outcomes for children and to value their heritage

by displaying commitment to placing siblings together and to addressing cultural and religious needs.

A young person visited in placement by an Inspector had clearly had her wishes and needs listened to in securing her adoptive family.

The placing social worker wrote 'the child was 14 and consulted at every stage of the process. In some ways she drove the adoption as it was her initial wish to be adopted by her carer'.

'The service provided a high level of assessing, report writing, information sharing and training' (placing social worker)

'We are really delighted with our social worker who we cannot praise enough for being approachable, sensitive, helpful and efficient' (adopters awaiting approval)

However, another questionnaire returned reported a less satisfactory experience – 'The agency should) take into account that applicants work (and) be more flexible with evening visits..... not add to delays by cancelling appointments ...we are on our 6th home study meeting and we are yet to be given a date for our halfway meeting with our social worker's line manager'.

Approved adopters with a child placed, recalled an (agency-imposed) pause in their assessment as 'on unjust grounds' and had been unhappy with how long the placement took to be completed.

They did also comment that they had 'an experienced social worker (with a) sensitive approach ... we felt supported not patronised'

The Agency is a member of the West London and Westminster Adoption Consortium aiming to maximise effective use of resources and enhance mutual learning.

The Metro (free newspaper for tube/train travellers in London), BAAF's Be My Parent newspaper and Adoption UK's journal are used for advertising children to reach a broad range of potential carers.

'(There is) a clear view of the children's needs being paramount, alongside a good attitude to being a corporate parent' (social worker LAC team)

The Agency will seek to assign the same Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to a child throughout his/her care experience.

IROs reported that adoption as an option is considered in a timely fashion and parallel planning is encouraged.

They felt well-informed about the work of the adoption service.

Applicants to adopt take part in a comprehensive Preparation Course, which user feedback described as 'thorough and informative'. Some days on a Saturday were also appreciated by those applicants with weekday

commitments. One adopter interviewed commented that having a foster carer to speak would have been useful.

'The training for prospective adopters was very good' (Placing social worker)

'Plenty of time to reflect and digest things. Scenario sessions very good' (approved adopter)

Adopters interviewed felt they had received enough information about their child and they were aware that they could meet the Medical Advisor and the child's foster carer.

The Agency may wish to explore the use of Life Appreciation Days which give a unique opportunity to plan for the child on the basis of all available information and knowledge coming together.

The agency should give further thought to how best to obtain from adopters the specific commitment to notifying the death of an adopted child

There was some evidence of delay (born February; Panel July; placed December) for a baby in one case examined.

Although the Agency had a contract with a Voluntary Adoption Agency to spot purchase concurrent planning placements this had not been very much used. The Agency may wish to consider the reasons for this and reassure itself that every opportunity is being taken to secure early placements for children, most particularly relinquished babies.

An example was seen of a family book prepared by adopters for a small child which showed imaginative use of graphics and textures to convey a positive message.

Approved adopters who have not been matched within a year of approval are reviewed as per Regulation.

Panel meets every 2 weeks and is usually busy. There was some mismatch between the view of managers that this frequency, coupled with the facility to request priority for a case, should minimise any chance of delay, and a social worker reporting a 2 month delay in obtaining a Panel date for a relinquished baby. The agency may wish to reassure itself that all staff are aware of the process for booking a Panel date and of the option of requesting priority.

The Panel minutes for the 3 month period studied, recorded a relatively high number of cases where the Panel was being approached to give advice and Inspectors did wonder if this was the best use of Panel's time, especially given the high volume of work.

Applicants can and do attend for their approval and for matching and at the Panel observed, the adopters provided useful insight into aspects of the matters under deliberation.

'very nerve racking, the thought of all those people around a table was scary but it really was okay, they made us feel comfortable' (approved adopter)

There is no information leaflet for adopters about the Panel and the Agency may wish to consider the introduction of this as an aid to transparency. The Panel chair was clear on the process for giving feedback to managers on quality of paperwork presented.

There was no practice of giving progress reports on approvals or matches which had been recommended by Panel and the introduction of this device could enhance Panel's understanding of its role and provide a context for its work.

There is a very good mix of experience and expertise on the Panel, (eg the membership includes a Children's Guardian, an Educational Psychologist and adoptive parent and an adopted adult). There is a gender mix but only one black member.

The Panel does consider applications to adopt from overseas and when such cases are presented, the Agency Advisor and the specialist assessing social worker are able to provide additional guidance and understanding of the issues involved.

Two questionnaire returns from intercountry adopters highlighted delays they had experienced and commented unfavourably on the some aspects of the Preparation Course

'we were unhappy and disappointed for the time it took between the completion of our home study and our Panel date – 5 months'

'The classes were long, in an inconvenient location – an hour outside of central London and were held on 3 work days which meant we had to miss work'

The same respondents wrote 'it took 2-3 months to receive the application and then it was misplaced. Our Panel date was postponed'

The Agency may wish to reassure itself that resources for this aspect of the adoption service are sufficient

The Panel Chair is self-employed and paid a fee, and has been in post since January 2006, having been a Panel member prior to this. She has personal and professional experience of adoption, committee work and research, bringing therefore a spread of relevant skills and knowledge to the position.

She has recently (February 2007) produced her first Annual Panel Report, looking back at their work in 2006, outlining issues and highlighting future tasks for Panel.

The Chair considers the standard of practice in the Agency to be high on the whole, and finds staff very helpful and professional.

She is clear about her responsibility to raise any concerns about material presented to panel and has initiated discussion at panel and also written to the Agency Decision Maker.

She has not felt particularly closely involved in the development of Agency policy, although reports and proposals are brought to Panel once formulated eg

at the Panel observed, there were reports on the Recruitment Strategy and a Policy and Procedure on financial support to adopters.

While it is important to retain the very nature of her independence, there is scope, in the Inspector's view, for the Chair and senior managers to establish a pattern of meetings to afford a forum where matters of joint concern could be addressed in the interests of an effective and efficient service for children.

Inspectors were concerned that decisions for the Panels on 25 January 2007 and 8 February 2007 had been signed off outside the timescale expected, (and similar examples were found in case files examined) especially since a monitoring system was in place specifically to check on compliance in this area and yet the problem appeared not to have been identified.

'had to prompt for formal letter following approval' (approved adopter)

Additionally, Panel minutes were signed off by the Panel Chair and forwarded to the Agency Decision Maker to assist his (speedy) decision making. They were not then presented to the next Panel for members' comment/agreement. The Agency is asked to re-look at this system, since it did not seem to be affecting the time scales for decision-making, was excluding Panel members from the opportunity to check their contributions to the meeting and placing perhaps undue responsibility on the Chair.

The Inspectors considered it to be a good system that all the letters to adopters and birth parents went out from the New Families Team (NFT). In the case files examined, the copy letter only showed the month of dispatch however, not the date, and this should be rectified.

The Agency Decision Maker is the Director of the Children, Young People and Families Service and takes a keen interest in adoption provision. He line manages the Head of Commissioning for Looked After Children (to whom the Nominated Manager reports) and the Nominated Manager is part of his Management group.

He expressed confidence in the Panel Chair and will discuss her links with the agency as part of her Annual Review.

He receives the Panel papers as well as the Minutes and would readily address any concerns about practice and quality.

The Nominated Manager's personnel file contained confirmation of an up to date CRB check but the memo did not specify the level of check, which needs to be 'enhanced'. Inspectors noted that a previous check had been at standard level. There was also no reference on file because the postholder had been an internal appointment. Inspectors consider that obtaining a reference for an internal candidate would be good practice.

Recruitment and selection procedures were found to be generally clear and robust. References were followed up for external appointments and there is a system for ensuring CRB checks are renewed as required.

Some staff in the New Families Team are not yet qualified to write adopters' reports but they are supervised by appropriately-qualified managers. The percentage of staff with a PQ Child Care award is up to standard. There was clear personal and professional commitment to the task demonstrated by all staff in the Team.

Safeguarding procedures cover responding to allegations of historic abuse and to allegations against carers.

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)
- Services are tailored to meet the needs of people affected by adoption (NMS 33)

The Commission considers Standards 6 and 33 the key standards to be inspected.

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

6, 18 and 33

Quality in this outcome area is excellent with adopters feeling well-supported and evidence of flexible responses to help maintain placements

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

EVIDENCE:

The arrangements for adoption support were working well.

Requests for adoption support are routed through the duty service staffed by the New Families Team from 1-5 Monday to Friday.

Adopters' responses in interview and through surveys showed they were aware of the process for accessing support.

'(WCC) –fantastic couldn't have kept the placement together without support' (adoptive parent who had received financial and emotional support and help with contact arrangements)

The importance of valuing the child's heritage was espoused by staff and adopters. (See also 'Making a Positive Contribution')

One set of adopters, while generally very happy with the service from the Agency, ('a brilliant experience') had found themselves in receipt of confused advice and had felt at times shunted between the child care worker and the adoption worker. This may have been an unfortunate combination of both

workers being new/inexperienced, but it perhaps demonstrates the importance of clarity about roles and responsibilities at all stages in the process.

The Agency may wish, for added value, to consider the benefits of a subscription to the Post Adoption Centre, based in London, which would open up a range of additional support choices and opportunities (advice, training events, discussion groups) to adopters resident in the borough.

Specialist advice available is good. CAMHS staff are located in the Looked After Children team; legal advice comes from an outside firm – while one adopter thought the lack of in-house advice had caused some delay in his case, Inspectors also observed benefits in terms of the level of expertise available at Panel and broad knowledge of the Court system through work with cases from other Councils; the Medical Advisor experienced time constraints but was known to be very helpful when speaking direct to adopters.

'We have good access to psychotherapy and other support services for the children we work with' (social worker)

'the advice from the CAMHS team has been invaluable' (social worker LAC team)

All matches come to Panel with an Adoption Support Plan devised by the adoption worker, child's worker and adopters. This Plan is checked for continuing appropriateness at the child's review.

The Agency maintains a user-focus offering independent services through a Service Level Agreement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) and its own in-house provision which includes a clear policy and procedure on financial support.

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)
- Service users receive good quality services based on their needs (NMS 34)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 8, 9 and 34 the key standards to be inspected.

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

7, 8, 9 and 34

Quality in this outcome area is good with choice of support being offered to birth families through a service commissioned from a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) and evidence seen of in-house work to promote an understanding of the importance of valuing the child's heritage as part of his/her future well-being.

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

EVIDENCE:

An independent service offering support to birth families is provided through a Service Level Agreement with a VAA. This is monitored and the intention is to explore ways of improving take-up.

Social workers understood the value of Life Story Work with children, although some felt constrained in the time available to them.

Effort was put into including Birth parents' views in the Child's Permanence Report (CPR). This needed to be constantly re-enforced, hence the rolling programme offered by the New Families Team to Child Care staff on completing the CPR.

One adopter interviewed, who had successfully maintained the foster carer in the child's life, and spoke compellingly of valuing the child's heritage, had encountered difficulties in obtaining materials from the agency about and from the birth parents, as finalising one piece of work had 'fallen off the agenda', with the result that nothing had been passed on.

This highlights the importance of completing the Life Story Work before or by the time of placement.

An openness to letterbox contact and to encouraging the child's awareness of her birth family history was also evident from other adopters interviewed.

'The child has had ongoing direct contact with birth family which has been fully supported by the adoption service' (placing social worker)

The one birth parent who returned a questionnaire was disappointed in the service he had received, maintaining '(the agency) have never contacted me' and expressing concerns about his daughter's religious upbringing. The Independent Service will be asked to contact this person.

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)

The Commission considers Standards 1, 3, 16, 21, 25 and 27 the key standards to be inspected.

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 with a clear commitment to good practice demonstrated by all staff and with robust policies, procedures and systems in place to support the agency's activities.

This otherwise efficient and well-managed service is compromised by deficiencies in the safeguarding of historical records and in the contents of Personnel and Panel Members' files.

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

EVIDENCE:

The Statement of Purpose is clearly written and contains all the required details.

It was last formally reviewed in January 2007 and presented to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services for approval.

The Agency may wish to consider if the role and identity of the Adoption Support Services Advisor is sufficiently emphasised in the Statement of Purpose.

The Agency uses the BAAF Children's Guide and Inspectors recommend that the Agency look at developing more age-specific documents.

The Agency's recruitment plan gives a clear picture of the criteria applied to adoptive applicants and the prioritising system in place to best meet the needs of children waiting.

The Agency had recently held a very successful Information Evening attracting high interest and positive feedback about its usefulness from those who attended.

Adopters interviewed had found the Agency 'helpful and professional'

The Nominated Manager is appropriately qualified (due to complete a Diploma in Management Studies in May 2007) and is well-regarded at all levels within the organisation.

She takes seriously her 'public service' role, aiming to offer the level and quality of service which she would like to receive.

She has been the Team Manager since June 2004, but has held other posts within the Council's Family Placements Service over the last 10 years.

The service appears efficiently and effectively managed, having achieved stability after a period of significant change. Lines of communication were considered good by staff. There is a relatively flat hierarchy and senior managers were reported to provide prompt responses to queries/requests.

The Nominated Manager reports to the Head of Commissioning for Looked After Children, a long-standing member of staff with considerable experience, whose broad remit facilitates the inclusion of adoption as part of 'positive planning' for children. This post-holder is currently Vice-Chair of the Panel, having been a member since 2001, which provides another route to evidence the quality of work being accomplished by the service.

The Team Manager (Nominated Manager) meets with the Assistant Team Managers every week to consider new referrals, issues raised on Duty, Panel, staffing matters, team development initiatives.

The Agency monitors and evaluates its services, analysing outcomes and activity rates etc and listening to feedback from service users. Quarterly reports are made to Panel summarising activity; 6 monthly reports are provided to the Cabinet member and adoption information is included in the regular report to the Children and Young People Overview Scrutiny Committee of the Council.

An Action Plan for the New Families Team in 2007/8 had been developed as a result of a checking exercise comparing existing service provision with a Commission for Social Care Inspection report on what makes an adoption service good for children.

There is good quality supervision (3-weekly) and support, using a supervision record pro-forma, with separate sheets which can be copied for the relevant case file; appraisals are carried out annually; the Assistant Team Manager post was created to free up the Team Manager for strategic and development work.

The service appears to have sufficient staff – a Full-time Team Manager, 2 Assistant Team Managers (1 FT, 1 3 days/week), 6 social workers plus 2 sessional staff covering Intercountry Adoption assessments and Access to Records work, and 3 administrative support staff.

Flexible working practices help retain staff.

Staff have clear job descriptions.

Staff were aware that they could access Council-wide Policies on, for example, Whistle-blowing, Valuing Diversity, through the Intranet. Speakers from other sections eg Complaints had been organised for team meetings.

The Agency is considered to be a fair and competent employer – the Student currently on placement wanted to work permanently for agency; a new recruit had been attracted by the quality of the agency; an existing staff member had been retained through a work conditions package.

Training, internal and external, is readily available and promoted by managers. Training profiles were seen for individual staff confirming the range of courses attended.

The Council assists staff with the Portfolio requirements of their GSCC registration.

There are 'Divisional Days' for staff every 6 months with a specific topic eg 'Learning from Serious Case Reviews' and 'Parallel Planning'.

Records are generally well structured, but not all recording was signed in the case files examined.

An assessment monitoring form is commended as a useful tool but examples were seen of the form not fully completed which must limit its value.

A file audit is expected annually.

The Agency is commended for having created the child's adoption case record but the example seen would have benefited from a photograph of the child and more medical information.

There were no consent forms on the file for a relinquished baby.

Another case record examined might usefully have included more information about the family-finding efforts.

Personnel files were generally good but the Agency is asked to note the following points:

- 1) References might be obtained for internal candidates.
- 2) The memo on file re the CRB check does need to specify the level of check undertaken;
- 3) Re the newest recruit to the New Families Team – the application form was not on file and also see point 2;
- 4) Re the Sessional worker who provides the access to files service – no photograph or proof of ID on file and references are very old (a previous employee).

The Agency should consider having a separate file for each Panel member and perhaps a checklist as per Personnel files to help ensure that all necessary information has been obtained and updated as necessary.

The following documents were missing (not all of them on all files) – a signed confidentiality statement; evidence of qualification; level of CRB check; home address; references; photograph; date of birth.

Premises are accessible and identifiable and there is appropriate security and storage of records.

IT equipment has been recently updated and there are electronic filing systems. All electronic records are backed up every day automatically by the Council's IT service.

Staff and premises are covered by adequate insurance and there is a Disaster Recovery Plan.

The Agency must address the issue of safe storage of historical records as a matter of urgency.

A Risk Assessment is recommended for the Archives.

Adoption files are held with other archived Council files in the basement of City Hall. The files are scattered amongst other files and not held as a discrete unit. This militates against loss/damage in the sense that an incident in any one area would not affect all of the adoption files but does mean that any additional security measures thought appropriate to adoption records could not be applied in just one area.

Security for accessing and retrieving files seems sound but the actual storage leaves room for concern.

The files are in (double-skinned) cardboard boxes on metal shelving racks, the design of which keeps down the amount of air flow and draft – a mitigation against fire spreading. The basement is susceptible to flooding and to leakage from premises above (not council controlled). There is no actual humidity control but archiving standards are believed to be met. There is provision for pest control and the office area is cleaned 3 times a week. There are fire and smoke alarms but fire itself or the chemicals used to douse a fire could damage (or destroy) the documents.

The Council is the guardian of approximately 15,000 irreplaceable files, from a now defunct Voluntary Adoption Agency, which are likely to contain information not easily, if at all, found elsewhere.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion

"N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
8	3
9	3
34	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
2	3
4	3
5	3
10	3
11	3
12	2
13	2
15	2
19	3
24	N/A
32	3

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

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
6	4
18	4
33	4

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

No

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	AD25	Reg 39, The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005	The Adoption Agency has written policy and procedural instructions to ensure manual/computerised indexes and case records for children and prospective/approved adopters are securely stored to minimise the risk of damage from fire or water	30/06/07
2	AD28	Reg 15 & Schedule 4, The Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003	Up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff and member of the Adoption Panel	30/06/07

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	AD1	The Agency could examine other examples of Children's Guides now available, to determine if there are enhancements to be made
2	AD4	The Application Form should be completed prior to the applicant being offered Preparation Group training
3	AD4	The Agency should consider providing an explanatory leaflet for applicants attending Panel
4	AD4	The Health & Safety questionnaire for adoptive applicants should contain a question about the storage/use of guns or other weapons
5	AD4	The Agency may wish to explore the benefits of seeking a view from all former partners with whom an applicant has lived, not just those where there were children of the relationship
6	AD5	The Agency might consider introducing Life Appreciation Days as part of the matching process to enhance the adopters' understanding and knowledge of the child's experiences and their impact.
7	AD5	The Agency needs to ensure that adopters are asked to provide a Notification of the child's death
8	AD10	Progress reports on individual cases to Panel should be provided
9	AD10	The Agency should consider presenting Panel minutes to the whole Panel for final agreement
10	AD11	All Panel members must sign a confidentiality agreement and this should be placed on the member's file
11	AD11	The Panel Members' Handbook needs to be updated to be compliant with the provisions of the Adoption and Children Act 2002
12	AD12	The Agency should investigate reports of delay in obtaining a Panel date and satisfy itself that no child is being disadvantaged
13	AD13	The Agency should check its decision-making timescale monitoring and satisfy itself that Standards are being adhered to
14	AD13	The File copy of the notification letter should have a full date

15	AD15	The memo on personnel files recording the outcome of the CRB check should confirm that an enhanced-level check has been undertaken
16	AD19	The Agency might consider obtaining a reference for internal appointments
17	AD25	Regular file audits would identify any shortfalls in recording practice, which could be fed back to staff

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