



Making Social Care
Better for People

inspection report

Local Authority Adoption Services

Dudley MBC Adoption Service

Ednam House

St James` s Road

Dudley

West Midlands

DY1 3JJ

24th May 2004

Commission for Social Care Inspection

Launched in April 2004, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) is the single inspectorate for social care in England.

The Commission combines the work formerly done by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), the SSI/Audit Commission Joint Review Team and the National Care Standards Commission.

The role of CSCI is to:

- Promote improvement in social care
- Inspect all social care - for adults and children - in the public, private and voluntary sectors
- Publish annual reports to Parliament on the performance of social care and on the state of the social care market
- Inspect and assess 'Value for Money' of council social services
- Hold performance statistics on social care
- Publish the 'star ratings' for council social services
- Register and inspect services against national standards
- Host the Children's Rights Director role.

Inspection Methods & Findings

SECTION B of this report summarises key findings and evidence from this inspection. The following 4-point scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The 4-point scale ranges from:

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

'O' or blank in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

'9' in the 'Standard met?' box denotes standard not applicable.

'X' is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

ADOPTION SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of Local Authority

Dudley MBC Adoption Service

Headquarters Address

Ednam House, St James`s Road, Dudley, West Midlands,
DY1 3JJ

Adoption Service Manager

Nicholas John Parkes

Tel No:

01384 815825

Address

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DY1 3JJ

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Certificate number of this adoption service

Date of last inspection

Date, if any, of last SSI themed inspection of adoption service

Date of Inspection Visit		24th May 2004	ID Code
Time of Inspection Visit		08:30 am	
Name of Inspector	1	Helen Norry	127567
Name of Inspector	2	Vivien Slyfield	
Name of Inspector	3		
Name of Inspector	4		
Name of Lay Assessor (if applicable) Lay assessors are members of the public independent of the CSCI. They accompany inspectors on some inspections and bring a different perspective to the inspection process.			
Name of Specialist (e.g. Interpreter/Signer) (if applicable)			
Name of Establishment Representative at the time of inspection		Nick Parkes	

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INTRODUCTION TO REPORT AND INSPECTION

Local authority adoption services are subject to inspection by CSCI, to establish if the service is meeting the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services and the requirements of the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Act 1976 as amended, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 as amended and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003.

This document summarises the inspection findings of the CSCI in respect of **Dudley MBC Adoption Service**. The inspection findings relate to the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services published by the Secretary of State under sections 49 of the Care Standards Act 2000.

The Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 are secondary legislation, with which a service provider must comply. Service providers are expected to comply fully with the National Minimum Standards. The National Minimum standards will form the basis for judgements by the CSCI regarding notices to the local authority and reports to the Secretary of State under section 47 of the Care Standards Act 2000.

The report follows the format of the National Minimum Standards and the numbering shown in the report corresponds to that of the standards.

The report will show the following:

- Inspection methods used
- Key findings and evidence
- Overall ratings in relation to the standards
- Compliance with the Regulations
- Notifications to the Local Authority and Reports to the Secretary of State
- Required actions on the part of the provider
- Recommended good practice
- Summary of the findings
- Report of the Lay Assessor (where relevant)
- Providers response and proposed action plan to address findings

This report is a public document.

INSPECTION VISITS

Inspections will be undertaken in line with the regulatory framework with additional visits as required. This is in accordance with the provisions of the Care Standards Act 2000. The inspection methods used in the production of this report are set out in Part B. Pre-inspection information, and the manager's written self-evaluation of the service, have also been taken into account. The report represents the inspector's findings from the evidence found at the specified inspection dates.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SERVICES PROVIDED.

Dudley Adoption Service is a Local Authority Service and is based at Ednam House, St James's Road, Dudley.

The service is part of the larger Children and Families Department within the local authority. The Corporate Director of Social Services is Linda Warren.

The Assistant Director, Children and Families Division is Pauline Sharratt, she is also the Agency Decision Maker.

The Head of Service Children's Resources is Jane Prashar.

Nick Parkes is the Service Manager Permanent Placements he manages a team of 9 permanent qualified staff with a range of qualifications including the Certificate in Qualification in Social Work, the Diploma in Social Work and a Masters Degree in Social Work.

There are 6 Permanent Placement Adoption Social Workers, 2 Adoption Support Workers and an Adoption in the Black Country Marketing Officer.

There are three administrative support workers.

At the time of the inspection there is 1 vacant social worker post.

The adoption service arranges for the adoption of children and in doing so provide recruitment, assessment, and training and support services to prospective and approved adopters. They offer advice to child care social workers in matters pertaining to adoption and to work in partnership with child care social workers to identify suitable placements for children looked after by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

The service currently employs a Marketing and Information officer who works jointly with the fostering service and has responsibility for all recruitment campaigns and publicity material.

To ensure the adoption service provides the best possible outcomes for children, their families and those who wish to adopt, the four Black Country authorities of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton work together as a consortium.

Dudley adoption service is also a member of the "West Midlands Adoption Consortium"

The adoption service has two adoption support workers whose role it is to monitor the need and develop support services to adoptive families after the placement for adoption has taken place. One post has been funded through the Quality Protects initiative. The post adoption support workers also provide a counselling service for adult adoptees that wish to seek information about their birth families, in accordance with Section 51 of The Adoption Act.

PART A SUMMARY OF INSPECTION FINDINGS

INSPECTOR'S SUMMARY

(This is an overview of the inspector's findings, which includes good practice, quality issues, areas to be addressed or developed and any other concerns.)

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service has been inspected for the first time under the terms of The Care Standards Act 2000 Part 111 and against the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services introduced on the April 1st 2003.

A planning meeting was arranged prior to the inspection (29th April 2004) with the Service Manager Permanent Placements Nick Parkes and the inspectors to discuss the inspection process, the information required and a programme of visits that would enable the inspectors to assess the adoption service.

The manager of the service completed the Pre-Inspection questionnaire and the self-assessment form in detail and in a very clear and concise way. Questionnaires were sent to prospective adopters, approved adopters, birth families/relatives and professional advisors to ascertain their views on Dudley adoption service. Evidence was provided by the service manager in the form of policies and procedures, leaflets and other related documentation about the service.

The housekeeping arrangements and hospitality were very good throughout the inspection including, office and interviewing space, car parking facilities, punctuality of personnel attending interviews, maps and directions to visits and the willingness of people to join in discussions about the adoption service. This attention to detail enabled the inspection to progress smoothly.

A feedback was prepared at the end of the inspection and given to The Head of Service Resources Jane Prashar and the Service Manager Permanent Placements Nick Parkes. The main issues that have arisen from this inspection show that there have been considerable staffing difficulties within the adoption team over the last twelve months, which have had a serious impact on service delivery. There have been delays in the allocation of referrals, prospective adopters and approved adopters have complained at having to take the initiative to move the process on. Home visits to start the family assessments have been delayed and the matching of children to families has been seriously impaired. The Policies and Procedures relating to the work of the Adoption Service are in draft form and had not been approved at the time of the inspection. This has affected the scoring of some standards since they underpin all aspects of the adoption work and still require ratification by the Executive Council of the Local authority.

The department have been made fully aware that it is unacceptable to operate an adoption panel that is not quorate. The practice of operating a panel that fails to meet the requirements of the legislation and to then seek the views of absent panel members after the meeting to ensure the work of the service proceeds is a serious error of judgement and must be addressed.

It was acknowledged by the adoption service manager that it has been a period of immense change for the service and that new legislation will bring about further changes. There had been a number of action plans that have emerged from recent inspections and reviews and these have been merged to form one development plan for the local authority, which has included the adoption service. The service manager has been in post for eighteen months and recognises that the adoption service has had a difficult few months but believes there is an enthusiasm to consolidate the adoption service and to meet the challenges of the new legislation. The manager of the service is clear about how he wants to develop the service and to assist and support the existing staff team to meet these challenges whilst looking to increase the staffing compliment and widen the scope and experience of the team members.

Statement of Purpose.

This standard was assessed and found to be met.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service has a Statement of Purpose. The Children's Guide is a collaboration by members of the West Midlands Consortium and has been adopted by Dudley. The adoption service have a number of policies and procedures in place but recognise they are currently in a draft format and need to be ratified by the council.

Securing and promoting children's welfare.

This standard was assessed and found to be almost met

The staffing difficulties that have affected the service in the past twelve-months are well documented throughout this report. The service manager has found it increasingly difficult to allocate casework to members of the adoption team. Delays in allocating the work has meant that children have been waiting to be matched to permanent families and that the department have had difficulty in securing better outcomes for some children. It is acknowledged as a key objective for improvement by the department.

Prospective and Approved Adopters.

2 of the 4 standards assessed were met and 2 were partly met

The "Adoption in the Black Country" project was first set up in November 2002, a collaboration between Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Walsall. The aim of the project was to increase the number of people coming forward to adopt children who were in the care of the four authorities. An "Adoption In the Black Country Marketing and Communications Strategy 2004/05" gives evidence of the market needs and the trends in relation to recruiting adopters and matching children to families across all four authorities. The four authorities have pooled resources to recruit adopters for hard to place children. A marketing officer is employed and supervised by Dudley on behalf of the consortium.

The strategy recognise that families are needed for older children aged between 5 and 11.

Birth Parents and Birth Families.

3 of the 3 standards assessed were met.

The adoption service has a service level agreement with Adoption Support to provide independent support to birth parents and families. The service is working with a number of birth relatives where there is face-to-face contact with adopted children and through the letterbox contact system.

Adoption Panels and Agency Decisions.

2 of the 4 standards assessed were met, 1 was almost met and 1 was not met.

The agency fails to meet the statutory requirements of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983, with regard to the operation of the adoption panel, as it does not have a properly constituted adoption panel.

Fitness to Provide or Manage an Adoption Agency.

1 of the 2 standards assessed was met and 1 was almost met.

Nick Parkes is the Service Manager Permanent Placements he manages a team of 9 permanent qualified staff with a range of qualifications. He is currently in the process of studying for his Master Degree in Business Administration. He manages a team of qualified staff.

Provision and Management of the Adoption Agency.

1 standard was met and 2 standards assessed were almost met.

There is a clear organisational structure in place and clear lines of management responsibility and accountability. Reports on the adoption service are provided to the executive of the council.

Employment and Management of Staff.

4 of the 5 standards assessed were met 1 standard was not met.

The members of staff involved in the adoption service were suitably qualified and experienced in childcare as well as adoption issues. Staff vacancies and sickness has impacted on the service in the latter part of 2003 and the early part of 2004. Responsible steps have been taken to address the situation it has nevertheless had a major impact on service delivery.

The Human Resources department prioritizes CRB checks and only newly appointed staff are seen as a priority for these checks. This matter must be addressed to include all staff employed in the adoption service.

Human Resources were unable to provide the inspectors with the staff employment file of an agency worker or copies of evidential evidence that statutory checks having been made by the employment agency prior to employing the worker.

Records.

2 of the 4 standards assessed were met, 1 was partly met

The adoption service has appropriate records on prospective adopters, prospective applicants, approved adopters and children.

Separate files and records are kept on staff employed in the department.

The recruitment and vetting procedures for staff members were of concern to the inspectors

Fitness Of Premises

1 of the 1 standards assessed was almost met

The agency premises are a secure building with adequate facilities for meetings and interviews. The agency does not have a Disaster Recovery Plan.

Questionnaires.

13 questionnaires were returned from prospective adopters and approved adopters.

The comments in the questionnaires indicate families were concerned at the delay in attending preparation groups, being approved and being matched to children. Carers considered some social workers to be excellent, supportive and professional but that practice was not consistent throughout the department.

5 questionnaires have been received from placing social workers. The comments indicate placing social workers have had difficulty in dealing with some delays in the matching process. The work of individual social workers has been considered excellent and one social worker from the adoption team has been complimented on "meticulous planning".

Reports and Notifications to the Local Authority and Secretary of State

The following statutory Reports or Notifications are to be made under the Care Standards Act as a result of the findings of this inspection:

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(3) of the Care Standards Act 2000 that the Commission considers the Local Authority's adoption service satisfies the regulatory requirements:

NO

Notice to the Local Authority under section 47(5) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of failure(s) to satisfy regulatory requirements in their adoption service which are not substantial, and specifying the action the Commission considers the Authority should take to remedy the failure(s), informing the Secretary of State of that Notice:

YES

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(4)(a) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of a failure by a Local Authority adoption service to satisfy regulatory requirements which is not considered substantial:

NO

Report to the Secretary of State under section 47(1) of the Care Standards Act 2000 of substantial failure to satisfy regulatory requirements by a Local Authority adoption service:

NO

The grounds for the above Report or Notice are:

There have been considerable staffing difficulties within the adoption team over the last twelve months, which have had a serious impact on service delivery. There have been delays in the allocation of referrals with prospective adopters having to wait for home visits and family assessments to begin and to be completed and the matching of children to families has been seriously delayed.

The Policies and Procedures relating to the work of the Adoption Service are in draft form and had not been approved at the time of the inspection. This has affected the scoring of some standards since they underpin all aspects of the adoption work but had still to be ratified by the Executive Council of the Local Authority.

The department have been made fully aware that it is unacceptable to operate an adoption panel that is not quorate and to then seek the views of absent panel members after the meeting to ensure the work of the service proceeds.

The vetting procedures were of concern to the inspectors. Telephone enquires to follow up written references checks are not routinely undertaken by the Human Resources department.

The department have developed a system to ensure CRB checks on all adoption staff are renewed every three years however there is evidence that the Human Resources department prioritizes CRB checks and only newly appointed staff are seen as a priority for these checks.

Human Resources were unable to provide the inspectors with the staff employment file of an agency worker or copies of evidential evidence that statutory checks have been made by the employment agency prior to employing the worker.

**Implementation of Statutory Requirements from Last Inspection
(Not relevant at first CSCI inspection)**

Requirements from last Inspection visit fully actioned?

NA

If No please list below

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS				
Identified below are areas not addressed from the last inspection report which indicate a non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 and the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003.				
No.	Regulation	Standard	Required actions	
			Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service has been inspected for the first time under the terms of The Care Standards Act 2000 Part 111 and against the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services introduced on the April 1 st 2003.	

Action is being taken by the Commission for Social Care Inspection to monitor compliance with the above requirements.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS IDENTIFIED DURING THIS INSPECTION

Action Plan: The appropriate officer of the Local Authority is requested to provide the Commission with an action plan, which indicates how requirements are to be addressed. This action plan is shown in Part D of this report.

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which indicate non-compliance with the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Act 1976, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983, the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003 or the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services. The Authority is required to comply within the given time scales in order to comply with the Regulatory Requirements for adoption services.

No.	Regulation	Standard *	Requirement	
1	The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003. Reg10	LA2 LA4 LA5 LA14	The agency must ensure there are sufficient staff experienced and qualified to meet the needs of the service. Delays in allocating work has meant that children have been waiting to be matched to permanent families and that the department have had difficulty in securing better outcomes for some children.	31 st August 2004.
2	The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003. Reg 6(2) (c) Reg 11(3) (d) Reg 15(1) Schedules 3 and 4.	LA4 LA19 LA25 LA28	All Criminal Records Bureau checks must be undertaken on adopters and staff and panel members.	30 th June 2004

3	The Adoption Agencies and Children (Arrangements for Placement and reviews) Regulations 1997. Reg 5B (6) (h)	LA4	The service manager must implement a process that can demonstrate applicants have read and agreed with the content of the Home Study Form F and that they have returned their comments within the agreed timescale of 28 days.	31 st August 2004
4	The Adoption Agency Regulations 1983 Reg 5	LA11	The panel must always be quorate. The panel must have an appropriate gender mix.	31 st June 2004
5	The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 Reg 7	LA12 LA17	The panel must implement robust tracking procedures to ensure the panel receive regular updates on the progress of children, prospective adopters applications, the family finding and matching process.	31 August 2004
6	The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 Reg 6 (b) (1)	LA14	The manager must undertake a formal management qualification	31 st March 2006
7	The Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 Reg 7 (1) (b)	LA17	The Executive Council must receive six monthly reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service.	31 st August 2004

GOOD PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THIS INSPECTION

Identified below are areas addressed in the main body of the report which relate to the National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice issues which should be considered for implementation by the Authority or Registered Person(s).

No.	Refer to Standard *	Recommendation Action
1	LA1	The adoption service have a number of policies and procedures in place but recognise they are currently in a draft format. These should be ratified and implemented.
2	LA4	Reference checks on the Form F should indicate if a home visit was made or contact was made via the telephone. There were a number of minor inaccuracies on some Form F. The dates when references checks were made were also missing from the document.
3	LA12 LA25	The panel should monitor the work of the adoption service and the timescale for the completion of applications.
4	LA16	There should be written procedures about the National Adoption Register.
5	LA18	There should be a written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers.
6	LA21	There should be an appropriate gender mix in the team.
7	LA29	The adoption service should have a disaster recovery plan.

- Note: You may refer to the relevant standard in the remainder of the report by omitting the 2-letter prefix e.g. LA10 refers to Standard 10.

PART B**INSPECTION METHODS & FINDINGS**

The following inspection methods have been used in the production of this report

Placing authority survey	YES
Placing social worker survey	YES
Prospective adopter survey	YES
Approved adopter survey	YES
Birth parent / birth family member survey	YES
Checks with other organisations and Individuals	
• Directors of Social services	YES
• Specialist advisor (s)	YES
Tracking Individual welfare arrangements	YES
• Interview with children	YES
• Interview with adopters and prospective adopters	YES
• Interview with birth parents	NO
• Interview with birth family members	NO
• Contact with supervising social workers	YES
• Examination of files	YES
Individual interview with manager	YES
Information from provider	YES
Individual interviews with key staff	YES
Group discussion with staff	YES
Interview with panel chair	YES
Observation of adoption panel	YES
Inspection of policy/practice documents	YES
Inspection of records (personnel, adopter, child, complaints, allegations)	YES
Date of Inspection	24/05/04
Time of Inspection	0830
Duration Of Inspection (hrs)	72.30
Number of Inspector days	4
Additional Inspection Questions:	
Certificate of Registration was displayed at time of inspection	NA
The certificate of registration accurately reflected the situation in the service at the time of inspection	NA
Total Number of staff employed (excluding managers)	9

The following pages summarise the key findings and evidence from this inspection, together with the CSCI assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards have been met. The following scale is used to indicate the extent to which standards have been met or not met by placing the assessed level alongside the phrase "Standard met?"

The scale ranges from:

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

"0" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion.

"9" in the "Standard met?" box denotes standard not applicable on this occasion.

"X" is used where a percentage value or numerical value is not applicable.

Statement of Purpose

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- There is clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and the adoption agency ensures that it meets those aims and objectives.

Standard 1 (1.1 - 1.2, 1.3 (partial) and 1.4 – 1.7)

There is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency which describes accurately what facilities and services they provide.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

Statement of Purpose.

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service has a Statement of Purpose. It sets out the functions and services provided by the Adoption Service. It is kept under review and revised when necessary. The local authorities executive committee reviewed and approved the document on the 17th May 2004. It will continue to be reviewed on an annual basis in accordance with the National Minimum Standards.

It is a comprehensive and well-written document, which will enable the reader to understand the aims and objectives of the adoption service.

Copies of the document are circulated to interested parties and they are available to members of the public upon request.

The adoption service has made a commitment to make the copies of the statement of purpose available in alternative formats and they can be translated in to other languages as required, by the departments Public Information Section and Access Project.

All social workers within the permanent placement team have been provided with a copy of the statement of purpose. Copies have also been made available to the children and families social work teams.

Children's Guide.

The adoption service has produced a Children's Guide in collaboration with the West Midlands Consortium. The brightly coloured booklet with an easy text will help children to understand the adoption process. The booklet states that its aim is to answer some of the questions children may have about adoption. The Children's Guide is the consortiums first attempt to produce a document to assist children in the adoption process. It will be reviewed within the consortium as they gain feedback from children as to its value and the help it offered them.

The Children's Guide can be produced in a format, which is appropriate to the needs of a child. The departments Public Information Section and Access Project are able to translate and format documents as required.

Policies and Procedures.

The adoption service have a number of policies and procedures in place but recognise they are currently in a draft format.

The department have engaged TRIX a company to update and replace all its existing policies and procedures and to incorporate the requirements of the new legislation.

**Has the Statement of Purpose been reviewed annually?
(Record N/A if the information is not available)**

YES

Has the Statement been formally approved by the executive side of the council?

YES

Is there a children's guide to adoption?

YES

Does the children's guide contain all of the information required by Standard 1.4?

YES

Securing and promoting children's welfare

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The needs and wishes, welfare and safety of the child are at the centre of the adoption process.

Standard 2 (2.1 - 2.3)

The adoption agency has written plans for the implementation and evaluation of effective strategies to recruit sufficient adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption locally.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council have a Children and Families Divisional Business and Commissioning Plan 2003/04. The Executive Summary sets out the council's vision, a summary of its key achievements for the preceding year and their priorities for 2003/04. One of the key objectives is to implement the national policy with regard to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (Adoption Support Services).

The adoption service has a Service Plan for 2004-2005. The document identifies the council's corporate objectives and a service overview. The service have recognised in their improvements targets, the need to fill vacant post within the permanent placement team with experienced social work staff, to work more closely with District teams around planning for permanence, preparation for placements and life story work.

The "Adoption In the Black Country" project was first set up in November 2002; there is an evaluation report of this project and one of the objectives of this collaboration between the four authorities is for the project to continue for another three years, to allow for the planning of future activities and effective budgeting.

An "Adoption In the Black Country Marketing and Communications Strategy 2004/05" gives evidence of the market needs and the trends in relation to recruiting adopters and matching children to families.

The preparation groups for prospective adopters are run throughout the year by the Black Country consortium, the joint training strategy means there are regular courses run throughout the year. Each authority host courses in rotation, prospective applicants applying to adopt are then able to attend a course relatively quickly after making an initial enquiry.

The service has a draft "Placement for Adoption" procedure. The procedure states that where an adoption plan is being considered in relation to a looked after child either as a preferred care plan or as a contingency plan a permanency planning meeting will take place. It further states that the case will be allocated to an adoption worker at the next allocation meeting. The staffing difficulties that have affected the service in the past twelve-months have demonstrated that it has proved increasingly more difficult for the manager of the service to fulfil this obligation and allocate such cases to members of the permanent placement team. Delays in allocating the work has meant that children have been waiting to be matched to permanent families and that the department have had difficulty in securing better outcomes for some children. There are indications on one file that these delays have been noted by a child's Guardian ad Litem and a Solicitor representing a child. It is acknowledged as a key objective for improvement by the permanent placement team in the Service Managers Service Plan for 2004/05.

As Dudley is a small geographical area the permanent placement team are often unable to place Dudley children within the Dudley area so they have developed links with the West

Midlands Consortium, Inter-agency placements, the Adoption Register, Be My Parent and other magazines used to place national advertisements to match children with families. There are regular flyers and a booklet called "Linking Children with Families" to promote the services own carers and children requiring placements. The service manager believes the council contribute effectively to the Black Country Consortium and the West Midlands Consortium both as a provider and a consumer.

85% of children are placed with families, which reflect their ethnicity, culture, language and religion. Where trans-racial placements are considered the service manager and the adoption panel look for clear compensatory measures being planned and steps taken to ensure that adopters are capable of meeting the additional needs of the child deriving from their race and culture. In matching children to families the adoption service were seen to be taking to account the wishes of the child and birth families, this was evidenced in the panel observed during the inspection process. A birth mother has made a specific request with regard to the proposed placement and every effort had been made to accommodate her wishes. Her wishes had been recorded on the child's Form E and they were fully explored verbally during the panel meeting and the matching process.

In the last 12 months:

How many children were identified as needing adoptive families?	24	
How many children were matched with adopters?	16	
How many children were placed with the service's own adopters?	5	
How many children were placed with other services' adopters?	11	
How many children were referred to the Adoption Register?	24	
In the last 12 months, how many children were matched with families which reflected their ethnic origin, cultural background, religion and language?	11	
What percentage of children matched with the adoption service's adopters does this represent?	85	%
How many sibling groups were matched in the last 12 months?	9	
How many allegations of abuse or neglect were made about adopters approved by this adoption service?	0	
On the date this form was completed, how many children were waiting for a match to be identified?	33	

Prospective and approved adopters

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- **The adoption agency recruits and supports sufficient adopters from diverse backgrounds, who can offer children a stable and permanent home to achieve a successful and lasting placement.**

Standard 3. (3.1 – 3.3 and 3.5 - 3.6)

Plans for recruitment will specify that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice, will be given clear written information about the preparation, assessment and approval procedure and that they will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

There is a wealth of information relating to the “Adoption in the Black Country” project; it was first set up in November 2002, a collaboration between Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Walsall. The aim of the project was to increase the number of people coming forward to adopt children who were in the care of the four authorities. As a collaborative project corporate aims and objectives of each of the local authorities are incorporated to present a consistent approach to the recruitment and training of prospective adopters.

An “Adoption In the Black Country Marketing and Communications Strategy 2004/05” gives evidence of the market needs and the trends in relation to recruiting adopters and matching children to families across all four authorities. The strategy recognise that adoption has radically changed over the years with changes in social attitudes to illegitimacy, contraception and terminations has meant that fewer babies are put forward for adoption and that families are needed for older children aged between 5 and 11. It also states that the changes in the population of looked after children indicates that adoption now involves finding families for increasingly vulnerable children often with complex and challenging needs.

The four authorities have pooled resources to recruit adopters for hard to place children. A marketing officer is employed and supervised by Dudley on behalf of the consortium. There is a budget of £40,000 (£10,000 per authority) set aside for Black Country recruitment over and above the marketing officers employment costs. The strength of this has been identified as the collaboration between four councils joining forces to recruit prospective adopters, sharing information, ideas and expertise, an amalgamation of funds, technology, and a wider network of advertising mediums. A key objective is to increase the number of enquiries by 100% and to increase the number of ethnic minority applications by 30% and to raise the awareness of eligibility as to who can adopt.

The appointment of a Marketing and Information Officer to work across the four authorities was seen by the inspectors as an innovative approach to developing an advertising strategy that will enable the service to recruit more carers a role that has traditional been undertaken by social work staff alongside their other duties.

The adoption service advertises for adopters in local papers, on the radio and use national adoption week as the focus for their recruitment campaigns. The service is developing a data base (as evidenced in the evaluation report on Adoption in the Black Countries) to show where they have had the most success in recruiting carers. The data is also broken down further to show the average age range of the applicants, factors leading to considering adoption, couples v single applicants, gender and ethnicity, so that they can focus future recruitment drives to meet the needs of the applicants and the children needing families.

Dudley operates within the “Children and Families Division Equalities Strategy”. In 1999 the Children and Families division undertook a consultation process with service users, carers and staff to identify where the department could improve upon the implementation of the equal opportunities policy. The process identified a number of good practice areas to be built upon and produced a three-year action plan for continuous improvement. It included reference to the SSI standard regarding fair access, and how staff responds to the specific social care needs that arise from children’s lifestyle and cultures. It remains ongoing work for the department.

“So You Want to Adopt? Adoption In Dudley” is a booklet, which is sent out at the point an initial interest is shown in adoption by an enquirer. It has a clear eligibility criterion that accepts enquires from anyone regardless of: age, medical considerations, accommodation, religion, disability, sexual orientation, pets, work and previous convictions. This booklet and the social work practice observed throughout this inspection reinforced the inspector’s view that applicants are welcomed without prejudice.

The booklet guides applicants through the adoption process and the need for social workers to undertake a full family assessment and home study.

All applicants are informed that the adoption service may prioritise some applications particularly where prospective adopters have shown an interest in specific children.

Prospective applicants attending the preparation groups are given the opportunity to meet and talk to approve adopters who have adopted children. Adopters and an independent panel member spoke about this having been an important and a significant aspect of the preparation training. Adopters interviewed said they found the preparation course interesting and good preparation for the adoption process. It takes place over a five-day period and suggests there are plenty of opportunities to explore adoption issues. There is a regular appraisal on a course-by-course basis and liaison across the Black Country Consortium to review preparation courses.

Standard 4. (4.1 – 4.9)

Prospective adopters are involved in a formal, thorough and comprehensive assessment, preparation and approval process.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****2**

The delays in allocating family placement work to members of the adoption team have been openly recognised by the directorate and the impact this had had on the work of the adoption service is reflected throughout this report. There have been serious delays in assessing families due to the staff shortages being experienced by the service.

The Permanent Placement team operates within the current draft departmental policy guidelines on the “Assessment and Approval of Agency Adoptive Parents”.

After an initial enquiry is made all prospective applicants are sent a copy of “So You Want to Adopt? Adoption In Dudley”. It sets out the adoption process and the expectations that are placed on applicants to take part in a full home study assessment and preparation course.

The draft procedures show it is the aim of the team for two members of the adoption team to visit the applicants within 4 weeks of an enquiry being made and that the decision about which families will take part in the preparation group will be based on the needs of the children waiting for families. The reality is that the current practice is to allocate referrals and invite applicants in to the office to discuss their application and then if appropriate a home visit takes place, and an invite on to a preparation course. This differs from the written format still to be implemented and it is hoped the new procedures will enable staff to respond quicker to referrals and prioritise those families best able to meet the needs of children waiting for placements.

Adopters interviewed as part of this inspection complained that once they had attended the preparation course it is at this point they felt the delay occurred. In discussion with prospective and approved adopters there has clearly been some delays in allocating applications to members of the permanent placement team. Applicants spoke of “having to take the initiative” “to prompt the agency in to looking at our application” “a feeling of being lost in the system” The service manager is very clear why this situation has arisen and showed some sympathy for carers who were eager to be assessed and approved and to be matched with children needing permanent families. It has partly been brought about by experienced staff leaving the department to take up other posts, retirement and extended periods of sick leave. He also recognised there has been considerable changes in the field of adoption that have presented an already depleted team with some very difficult challenges.

The home study and statutory references form the basis of the written report, which is presented to the adoption panel. The permanent placement team uses the BAAF Form F format as a means of gathering all the relevant information.

There is evidence on the adopter’s files of a thorough and comprehensive assessment-taking place. However there were a number of minor inaccuracies on some Form F and dates missing when references checks were made.

The home assessment show consideration is given to the applicant’s capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way. These are signed and dated by the applicants. Case files show that decisions made in supervision are recorded on the adopters file. There is an audit tool on the front of each adopters file; it records the date references are sent for and the date on which they are received back. It is not routinely completed. The Form F does not always indicate if reference checks included a home visit or contact with the referee via the telephone.

The procedure for storing CRB checks on adopter’s files is unclear. Some adopters file have a memorandum from Human Resources indicating the CRB has been returned to the department and is held centrally in line with recommendations made by the Criminal Records Bureau, other adopters files have the actual copy of the CRB on file. There was serious concern that one family had been approved without a satisfactory CRB check on one

family member.

All statutory references are taken up before the adoption service proceed to the home study assessment except in the assessment of a foster carer where the reference checks and the home study can be done simultaneous.

Full reference checks are undertaken including an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB) on any household member over the age of 18

The adopters interviewed as part of the inspection process said they were kept informed about their application throughout the process and had access to the Home Study Form F before it went to panel. They confirmed they were able to make any changes to its content if they felt the writer had not got a particular point or issue across in a way they would have liked. Panel procedures states that applicants have a right to see a copy of their Form F assessment at least 28 days before the panel to make comments about the report and that matters of factual accuracy will be corrected before panel. It further states that where there is difference of opinion these should be in writing and presented to panel. The service manager must implement a process that can demonstrate applicants have read and agreed with the content of the Home Study Form F and that they have returned their comments within the agreed timescale of 28 days.

All re-approvals go back to panel every two years in line with the requirement for adoption medicals every two years.

De-registration of approved adopters are also taken back to panel, there is clear evidence on the files of applicants who have been counselled out or withdrawn from the process that the service manager is aware of their decision and signs off the work as closed.

Inter-country adopters participate in the preparation training provided by the Black Country Consortium.

Standard 5 (5.1 – 5.4)

Approved adopters are given clear written information about the matching, introduction and placement process, as well as any support to facilitate this they may need. This will include the role of the Adoption Register for England and Wales.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

2

The permanent placement team operate within the guidelines of the draft procedures on the “Placement for Adoption” The procedures guide the staff through the adoption process and the approval of adoption as the plan for the child.

All applicants are given written information regarding the matching, introduction and placement process as well as any support that is needed to facilitate the placement along with information on the Adoption Register for England and Wales.

The department has no written procedures for the use of the adoption register but adopters do sign an agreement for their details to be anonymously submitted to the National Adoption Register.

Placements are provided from within the authorities own resources and via the West Midlands Consortium, Inter-agency placements, the Adoption Register, Be My Parent and other magazines used to place national advertisements to match children with families.

There are regular flyers and a booklet called “Linking Children with Families” to promote the services own carers and children requiring placements.

All adopters are given the profiles of children and Form E reports. Adopters have the opportunity to speak to the agency medical adviser if there are health issues.

The adoption service use the H1 and H2 Interagency placements forms adopters spoke of being involved in these meetings and that their feelings and views on the introductory plan and contact arrangements were considered. Adopters interviewed said they had been generally satisfied once the matching arrangements had started although felt there were unnecessary delays in the matching process.

Draft policy on “Monitoring and Supervision of Adoptive Placements” states the child’s social worker or adopters social worker will visit the child weekly in the first 4 weeks of placement, then every two weeks for the next three months then monthly until the adoption has been made. One file tracked as part of the inspection process showed the department had been unable to fulfil this obligation and initial support contact had been made via the telephone with a support visit some weeks after placement had taken place. One carer also indicated that support visits post placement had not been as often as they would have liked. One carer commented on a feeling of having managed the interagency placement planning meetings alone.

The service manager acknowledges this would be a very real perception by some adopters waiting for children to be matched and post placement support and that it was linked to the difficulties being experienced by the team just prior to the inspection and in the latter part of 2003.

The staffing issues highlighted throughout this report have seriously impacted on the delivery of service.

The adoption service said that adoptive parents are asked if they are prepared to notify the adoption agency if an adopted child dies during childhood or soon after. There written agreement is sought on an addendum to the Form F “Contact After the Making of an Adoption Order”.

Does the local authority have written procedures for the use of the Adoption Register?

NO

Standard 6 (6.1 – 6.7)

Adoptive parents are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them.

Key findings and evidence**Standard met?**

3

The draft policy on “Adoption Support Services, Post Adoption Support Plans” indicates that post adoption support plans are started at the “best interest” stage of the adoption planning process. Adoption support plans must be presented to panel when a matching recommendation is being considered and there was evidence to show this work is being undertaken. All matching documents presented to the panel observed during the inspection were accompanied by adoption support plans. Post placement support will be provided by the child social worker and the adoptive or permanent foster family’s social worker. Other professionals can provide additional support where this is consistent with the best interest needs of the child. One adoption support plan indicated that Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) would be involved in providing some support and guidance to the child and the adopters.

The service has two adoption support workers who maintain a supporting role with prospective adopters. Support is also provided to overseas adopters.

The draft policy on “Ending (disruptions) of Adoptive Placements” shows a disruption meeting must be held within 2 weeks of the placement breaking down. There is an option to have an independent chair or for the permanent placement service manager to manage the meeting. Reports on placement breakdowns are presented to panel.

Adopters spoke of the preparation course addressing discrimination, and how important it was to help children to maintain positive self-image. They confirmed they are encouraged by the agency to safeguard all information relating to the children in placement particularly personal memorabilia and information from birth families. It is clear there has been some discussion in the preparation groups about how to prepare family members and neighbours about children in placement and what information can be shared with them.

Financial support will be considered in every case subject to the criteria set out in the Adoption Support Services Regulations 2003.

A draft policy on the “Review of Adoptive Placements” states that reviews must be held within 4 weeks of placement.

There are draft departmental procedures on “Assisting Prospective Adopters with Legal Fees in Agency Adoption Proceedings.

Number of adopter applications started in the last 12 months

6

Number of adopters approved in the last 12 months

8

Number of children matched with the local authority’s adopters in the last 12 months

5

Number of adopters approved but not matched

13

Number of adopters referred to the Adoption Register

5

How many placements disrupted, between placement and adoption, in the last 12 months?

2

Birth Parents and Birth Families

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- **Birth parents are entitled to services that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption. They will be treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout the adoption process.**

Standard 7 (7.1 – 7.5)

The service to birth parents recognises the lifelong implications of adoption.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
<p>The adoption service has a service level agreement with Adoption Support (formerly the West Midlands Post Adoption Service.) to provide independent support to birth parents and families when adoption has been identified as in the child’s best interest. In recognition that adoption has lifelong implications the service are negotiating an extension to this contract. The service is being extended to include birth relatives as part of the department’s appreciation of this. The service is working with a number of birth relatives where there is face-to-face contact with adopted children. The service operates a letterbox contact service to enable a child to maintain indirect contact with their birth family where this is part of the adoption contact plan. Children can then grow up having regular information about their birth family.</p> <p>Each child where adoption is the agreed plan has a post adoption support plan; there were some very good examples of these on case files and in documents presented to the adoption panel as part of the matching process.</p> <p>The adoption service said that adoptive parents are asked if they are prepared to notify the adoption agency if an adopted child dies during childhood or soon after. Their written agreement is sought on an addendum to the Form F “Contact After the Making of an Adoption Order”. The same form also asks if adoptive parents wish to be notified of the death of a birth parent/ relative/sibling.</p>		

Standard 8 (8.1 – 8.2)

Birth parents and birth families are enabled to contribute to the maintenance of their child’s heritage.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
<p>Parents have access to all information that is written about them including Form E’s which are presented to panel. Form E’s show parents are consulted about their wishes and aspirations for the child’s adoptive placement and where they have made a specific request there is evidence social workers make every effort to meet their wishes. The inspectors were assured that birth parents and birth families are encouraged to provide information on the child’s birth and extended family. Case records indicate birth families are interviewed and consulted on the adoption process.</p>		

Standard 9 (9.1)

The adoption agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting birth parents and birth families (including siblings) both before and after adoption. This includes providing information about local and national support groups and services and helping birth parents to fulfil agreed plans for contact.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

3

The agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting birth families, they work in partnership with Adoption Support.

Discussions in the adoption panel and minutes from previous panels show the service are actively working with birth parents and families.

There is a draft procedure for "Access to Birth Records" applicants over the age of 18 and adopted before November 1975 receive counselling prior to receiving a copy of their birth certificate.

Adoption Panels and Agency decisions

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- Each adoption agency has an adoption panel which is organised efficiently and is effective in making quality and appropriate recommendations about children suitable for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the matching of children and approved adopters.
- The adoption agency's decisions are made to promote and safeguard the welfare of children.

Standard 10 (10.1 – 10.3)

Adoption panels have clear written policies and procedures about the handling of their functions and ensure that they are implemented.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
<p>There are draft adoption panel procedures, which include the panel's purpose and function, guidance on the membership including the procedure for dealing with disruptive members, the regularity of meetings, the tenure of office for panel members, and the declaration of any interest in a case being presented to panel. The panel have an appointed chair and vice chair.</p> <p>The quality of work including the delays in matching children to families is discussed in panel and it is the responsibility of the Professional Advisor to reflect any concerns about the content of Form E's, matching reports and delays in care planning back to area child care team managers.</p> <p>Prospective adopters are given the opportunity to attend panel and those spoken to during the inspection confirmed they had attended the panel, they expressed mixed views recognising the need for a formal meeting affording the process the status it required but also admitting to it being "quite scary". Adopters commented on panel being welcoming, friendly and polite.</p> <p>There are formal letters if the adoption panel do not propose to approve adopters. The letter lists the reasons why a decision has been taken not to approve the applicants and explains the options available to them including the Independent Review Mechanism.</p>		

Standard 11 (11.1 – 11.4)

The adoption agency shall ensure that each adoption panel is properly constituted, that panel members have suitable qualities and experience to be a panel member and have regular training to allow them to keep up to date with changes in legislation, guidance and practice. Where the adoption agency is involved in inter-country adoption, each member of the panel understands the implications of being adopted from overseas and seeks advice, when necessary, on the laws and eligibility criteria for the overseas country.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

1

The agency fails to meet the statutory requirements of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983 with regard to the operation of the adoption panel, as it does not have a properly constituted adoption panel.

There are two vacant posts and the minutes of previous panel meetings show the authority struggles to ensure the panel is at times quorate. It is the council's practice to carry on with the adoption business despite a panel not being quorate and to then seek the views of absent members following the meeting. This is unacceptable practice and makes the work of the adoption panel illegal. This practice must cease immediately.

The panel observed on the 2nd June 2004 as part of the inspection process was not quorate. It did not meet all the requirements of the legislation; it failed to include a male panel member (excluding the panel adviser who is not part of the quoracy.)

The panel membership is predominantly female with only two male representatives (excluding the panel adviser who is not part of the quoracy) and there are 2 senior social work managers and a senior practitioner from the department within its membership. The agency should consider a more balanced makeup of the panel and include additional male members of staff and current casework practitioners.

The agency's draft policy on "Adoption and Permanence Panel" also sets out departmental requirements on panel members attending for 75% of the meetings otherwise their membership is reconsidered. It is the opinion of the inspectors the department are failing to meet their own departmental standards with regard to the operation of the panel. The panel chair assured the inspectors she had spoken to panel members who consistently fail to attend panel meetings. It advised that the chair of panel continues to review the poor attendance of some panel members.

The panel members receive regular training and updates regarding significant developments in the field of adoption including changes to the legislation and the introduction of the Adoption Standards 2001, The National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services, Adoption and Children Act and Inter-country Adoptions. The adoption team and panel members have a joint training day each year. Some training has been provided by BAAF and has provided panel with an overview of the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act and a review of panel involvement in Inter-country adoption. It has been acknowledged by senior managers the ongoing training of panel members and the adoption team is crucial and that it has at times been difficult for them to adjust to the new ethos of the department in particular the shift from sequential planning to concurrent planning for children in the looked after system.

New panel members are provided with an opportunity to observe panel before becoming an active member of the adoption panel. This was confirmed by current panel members who commented on the value of observing a panel before taking part.

Each panel member has a recruitment file; there is evidence on some panel member's files that a Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB) has not been undertaken. Panel member's

files have a confidentiality statement signed by the panel member as part of their application form to be a panel member. Some panel members file indicate a personal reference had been taken up prior to their appointment but this did not seem to be a standard procedure. A record of panel training is maintained.

In discussion with the service manager it is clear the Human Resources have implemented a priority system for applying for CRB across all departments within the council, and this has not always included panel members particularly those on a second panel term where their police clearance check has expired.

The make up of panel members files should be in accordance with the National Minimum Standards.

Members of staff commented on a significant improvement in the way panel approached their responsibility. Questions were asked in a non threatening way and one very positive comment was made "that workers were proud to take colleagues from other authorities to panel"

The panel observed during the inspection process demonstrated panel members have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities; conversations were supportive and enabled all panel members to contribute effectively. Those attending panel were treated fairly and with respect for the work they had done. Any delays in care planning process were discussed at the panel with the social workers presenting cases and with the legal representative.

Is the panel a joint panel with other local authorities?	NO	
Does the adoption panel membership meet all of the statutory requirements?	NO	

Standard 12 (12.1 – 12.3)
Adoption panels are efficiently organised and conducted and are convened regularly to avoid delays in the consideration of prospective adopters and matching children and adopters.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	2
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The service has two panel administrators whose duties include ensuring panel papers are sent out in time for panel members to prepare for the meeting. Panel papers are sent by recorded delivery in sealed wallets and through the internal post for agency panel members.

The adoption service has a panel, which meets regularly on dates planned in advance. It is effective in making decisions and recommendations (subject to the panel being quorate) about the placement of children and the approval of prospective adopters. Additional panel dates can be arranged where urgent matters need to be heard for care planning and court deadlines and social workers confirmed the department does arrange extra panel meetings. There is evidence of delays in the care planning process, the allocation of adoption social workers and the family finding and matching process. Social workers also complained that it could often be up to five months before they were allocated a panel date. The service manager explained that panels are very busy but that social workers will book a date in advance and then fail to have the documentation ready withdrawing work at the last moment, which disrupts the panel process.

Panel minutes show discussions and recommendations made are well recorded.

The panel should implement robust tracking procedures to ensure the panel receive regular updates on the progress of children, prospective adopters applications, the family finding and matching process. The panel should also monitor the work of the adoption service and ensure that assessments are completed within reasonable timescale.

Panel meetings take place at a Family Centre, it is pleasant building brightly coloured, clean and with plenty of chairs and interview rooms for visitors and prospective adopters. The room is quite small but the intimacy this provides enables everyone to be fully involved in the process.

Standard 13 (13.1 – 13.3)
The adoption agency's decision is made without delay after taking into account the recommendation of the adoption panel and promotes and safeguards the welfare of the child.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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The Assistant Director, Children and Families Division Pauline Sharratt, is the Agency Decision Maker. She receives all panel papers prior to the meeting. As a former panel chair she is experienced in the panel process and adoption issues.

Panel minutes are typed following the meeting and presented to the agency-decision maker within 24hours of the panel meeting.

A decision is conveyed orally to the applicants within 24hours and then in writing within seven days.

Fitness to provide or manage an adoption agency

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- The adoption agency is provided and managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience to do so efficiently and effectively and by those who are suitable to work with children.

Standard 14 (14.1 – 14.3 and 14.5 – 14.6)

The people involved in carrying on and managing the adoption agency:

- possess the necessary knowledge and experience of child care and adoption law and practice and
- have management skills and financial expertise to manage the work efficiently and effectively and
- ensure that it is run on a sound financial basis and in a professional manner.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

Dudley Adoption Service is a Local Authority Service and is based at Ednam House, St James's Road, Dudley.

The service is part of the larger Children and Families Department within the local authority.

The Corporate Director of Social Services is Linda Warren.

The Assistant Director, Children and Families Division is Pauline Sharratt, she is also the Agency Decision Maker.

The Head of Service Children's Resources is Jane Prashar.

Nick Parkes is the Service Manager Permanent Placements he manages a team of 9 permanent qualified staff with arrange of qualifications including the Certificate in Qualification in Social Work, the Diploma in Social Work and a Masters Degree in Social Work. He is currently in the process of studying for his Master Degree in Business Administration. The accelerated route takes three years to complete; he has completed 18 months of the course.

There are 6 Permanent Placement Adoption Social Workers, 2 Adoption Support Workers and an Adoption in the Black Country Marketing Officer.

There are three administrative support workers.

At the time of the inspection there is 1vacant social worker post. All members of the adoption team are qualified and have childcare experience. All staff have clearly written job descriptions.

It is the opinion of the inspectors that the members of staff involved in the adoption service were suitably qualified and experienced in childcare as well as adoption. Staff vacancies and sickness has impacted on the service in the latter part of 2003 and the early part of 2004.

Responsible steps have been taken to address the situation including the use of agency staff; sessional workers and the extension of workers hours too fill the gaps. It has nevertheless had a major impact on the service delivery.

Does the manager have Management NVQ4 or equivalent?

NO

Does the manager have at least 2 years experience of working in a childcare setting in last 5 years?

YES

Standard 15 (15.1 – 15.4)

Any person carrying on or managing the adoption agency are suitable people to run a voluntary organisation or business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The local authority has a written recruitment and selection procedure for the appointment of staff. The manager has demonstrated throughout this inspection that he is equipped to manage the adoption service in an effective way. It is acknowledged that this has been with a depleted staff team and that this has impacted on service delivery.

The manager has recently submitted a new disclosure form to CRB.

The pre-inspection questionnaire, and the self-assessment form were completed in full prior to the inspection and gave the inspection team an over view of the adoption service. The information provided in these documents has also been included in to the main body of this report.

The service manager provided supportive documentary evidence to demonstrate where the service meets the National Minimum Standards.

Financial management is the overall responsibility of the finance manager of the Dudley Council Social Services Department.

Provision and management of the adoption agency

The intended outcomes for the following set of standards are:

- The adoption agency is organised and managed efficiently, delivering a good quality service and avoiding confusion and conflicts of role.

Standard 16 (16.1 – 16.7)

The adoption agency is managed effectively and efficiently.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

There is a clear organisational structure in place and clear lines of management and accountability.

The Service Manager Permanent Placements Nick Parkes undertakes the day-to-day management of the adoption team. In his absence the Service Manager (Fostering) has delegated authority to manage the work of the team.

A Complaint, Comments and Compliments policy and procedure document is available to all service users the procedure includes a paragraph on complaints made by prospective adopters it recognises their unique position where they may not be satisfied with the decision of the panel.

The service has a policy document on “Allegations of Abuse Against Carers” it recognises their unique position as carers but acknowledges the role of the department in safeguarding and protecting children in placement.

Dudley has an equal opportunities policy and as qualified social workers the adoption service staff are expected to work in a non-discriminatory manner.

The department has a “Positions of Trust” policy managers and staff are reminded of their responsibility to declare any possible conflicts of interest. A separate statement exists for panel members on matters of declaring their interest in a case brought before panel.

All approved adopters and children are automatically referred to the National Adoption Register following the making of a decision. At the time of the inspection there are no written procedures about the Adoption Register.

Number of complaints received by the adoption service in the last 12 months

2

Number of the above complaints which were substantiated

2

Standard 17 (17.1 – 17.3)

There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency and ensuring quality performance.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The statement of purpose further underlines the principles the adoption service operates within and the evidence gained on this inspection suggest the adoption service operates in accordance with its statement of purpose. It has been acknowledged throughout this report the adoption service have a series of draft policies and procedures which must be implemented as a matter of priority.

The service should implement robust tracking procedures to ensure the panel receive regular updates on the progress of children, prospective adopters applications, the family finding and matching process. The systems implemented should enable the department to monitor the work of the adoption service and the timescale for the completion of applications in line with the National Adoption Standards 2001.

Reports on the adoption service are provided to the executive of the council. The Service Manager Permanent Placements presented an update on the service to the executive committee in the early part of 2004. The Children Champions Group is a joint committee by Social Services and Education it has a cross party membership and children's service issues including the activities of the adoption service are reported back to them. The Good Health Select Committee can request any report they wish to scrutinise.

It is a requirement that the executive side of the council should receive written reports on the management and outcomes of the adoption service every six months.

How frequently does the executive side of the council receive written reports on the work of the adoption service?

Monthly?	
Quarterly?	
Less than Quarterly?	YES

Standard 18 (18.1 – 18.5)

The adoption agency has access to specialist advisers and services appropriate to its needs.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?**

2

The adoption service has access to medical, legal and professional advisers. Specialist advisers are professionally qualified and drawn from the statutory agencies. The Local Health Authority employs the medical advisor. Dudley Council employs the legal adviser both attend the adoption panel.

There is a joint Health/Social services team operating within CAMHS. A post has been created for a worker who will specialise in working with attachment disorders. It is expected this role will be closely linked to the work of the adoption service.

The adoption service is a member of two-adoption consortiums, The Black Country Adoption Consortium and the West Midlands Adoption Consortium; the agency has access to specialist advice on any related issues.

The agency also works jointly with Adoption UK, Adoption Support and Families Futures so the adoption service is familiar with commissioning services from external agencies.

The service is also a member of the British Association For Adoption and Fostering (BAAF).

There are no written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers.

Employment and management of staff

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- The people who work in the adoption agency are suitable to work with children and young people and they are managed, trained and supported in such a way as to ensure the best possible outcomes for children waiting to be adopted or who have been adopted. The number of staff and their range of qualifications and experience are sufficient to achieve the purposes and functions of the adoption agency.

Standard 19 (19.1 – 19.14)

Anyone working in or for the adoption agency are suitable to work with children and young people and to safeguard and promote their welfare.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

1

Dudley Council has a written recruitment and selection procedure for the appointment of staff. Appointment to the adoption team is dependent upon a formal interview and satisfactory statutory references. Telephone enquires to follow up written references checks are not routinely undertaken by the Human Resources department.

The department have developed a system to ensure CRB checks on all adoption staff are renewed every three years however there is evidence that the Human Resources department prioritizes CRB checks and only newly appointed staff are seen as a priority for these checks.

Human Resources were unable to provide the inspectors with the staff employment file of an agency worker or copies of evidential evidence that statutory checks having been made by the employment agency prior to employing the worker.

There are no unqualified staff or students working in the team. Student placements are supervised by one of the two (three including the service manager) practice teachers within the team.

The local authority's recruitment procedures ensure all staff who are employed in the adoption team are fully qualified social workers with either DIPSW or an equivalent Social Worker qualification and have a background in child care work. One member of the team has commenced a PQ programme and one is to commence the next available programme. Dudley has an ongoing PQ programme in association with the University of Birmingham. Social workers in the permanent placement team confirmed they received regular supervision and an annual professional development interview ensuring on going professional support in their activities.

Ongoing training is provided through the departments training programme. Six members of staff are undertaking a 6-month block (2 days per month) of advanced training with Family Futures for adoption workers.

BAAF have provided training on Inter-country adoption and The Adoption and Children Act Training 2002.

The directorate provide Child Protection training, Equality and Diversity courses and training on the Framework of Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.

There is a draft procedure for "Access to Birth Records" applicants over the age of 18 and adopted before November 1975 receive counselling prior to receiving a copy of their birth certificate. Experienced and trained members of the team only provide birth record counselling.

Do all of the adoption service's social workers have DipSW or equivalent?

YES

What % of the adoption service's social workers have a PQ award?

0

%

Standard 20 (20.1 – 20.12)

Staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an efficient and effective service.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

3

The adoption service is managed in an appropriate way; there are team meetings, monthly supervisions and a regular allocation of work. The Service Manager who supervises all the social worker staff allocates work; the manager prioritises case allocation with very young children being prioritised for home finding. Caseloads are reviewed with the member of staff monthly supervision.

The levels of management delegation and responsibility are clearly defined. The members of the adoption team have a good understanding of the levels of management delegation, responsibility and decision making within the service. In discussion with the adoption team and placing social workers there is evidence of teams working together to ensure there are good outcomes for children in need of families. The delays in allocating family placement work to members of the adoption team have been openly recognised by the directorate and the impact this had had on the work of the adoption service has been reflected throughout this report. Agency staff and sessional workers are used as part of a contingency plan, which is activated to resolve short term staffing difficulties.

All employees have appropriate job descriptions.

Training and professional development is identified through supervision.

The adoption service has an adequate level of clerical and administrative support. An additional administrative post has recently been created. There is a high level of administrative support to the adoption team and their services were greatly appreciated by the team members. The administrative team played an important part in the inspection process ensuring all documents and supportive evidence was available including ensuring housekeeping arrangements were in place to enable the inspection process to run smoothly. The department have created two new adoption support worker posts, their responsibility is to coordinate adoption support and advice for adopters and to work in partnership with other agencies.

The council have an equal opportunities policy, a complaints policy, a grievance policy and a whistle blowing policy.

Standard 21 (21.1 – 21.4)

There is an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to meet the needs of the adoption agency and they are appropriately supported and assisted in providing a service.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****3**

There is a departmental recruitment and selection policy document “Recruiting the Right People” The adoption team have had a series of staffing difficulties in the past twelve months these have been well documented in this report. It has had serious impact on the delivery of service, which has prevented them from dealing effectively with casework planning and matching children to families.

There is a distinct split between the fostering team and the adoption and permanence team and both teams have a separate service manager. The adoption team is an all female team and it is the opinion of the inspectors the service may benefit from a more appropriate gender mix to ensure a balance of skills, views and perspectives.

The team have considerable experienced in childcare work and are all qualified social workers. The discussion with the adoption team was informative and their conversations demonstrated an understanding and commitment to their roles and responsibilities within the department.

There are flexible working arrangements and the opportunity to write home studies (Form F) at home. The team spoke of receiving appropriate training through the councils own training department and more specialist training courses run through BAAF. Child protection training is mandatory and the council offers a rolling programme to ensure all staff has a number of opportunities to attend.

The Post Adoption Support Worker undertakes Birth Record Counselling under section 51 The Adoption Act 1976.

The staff team confirm they are appropriately supported through the line management structure but welcome the development of a new post of additional managerial support in the role of an Assistant Team Manager.

Total number of social work staff of the adoption service	9	Number of staff who have left the adoption service in the past 12 months	2
Number of social work posts vacant In the adoption service.	2		

Standard 22 (22.1 and 22.3)

The adoption agency is a fair and competent employer, with sound employment practices and good support for its staff.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****4**

There are a number of draft Adoption procedures in place to support the work of the agency. The adoption service operates within the terms of the department's equal opportunities policy.

The authority has a whistle blowing policy, which encourages all employees to raise serious concerns with the council.

The staff interviewed as part of this inspection confirmed that they felt the council was a fair employer. The adoption team operate to the council's employment practices.

The council has a Public Liability and Professional Indemnity insurance for all staff.

In discussion with many staff it was clear they felt Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council was a "supportive" and "caring" council to work for. They spoke with enthusiasm about the council's decision to employ Assistant Team Managers to strengthen the district teams and the managerial structure. They felt it also offers the possibility for social workers to consider a managerial career. They felt the role of the Family Support Workers and the Young Person Advisers were an asset to the teams and had seen these developments in the past two years as a real positive approach by senior managers.

Standard 23 (23.1 – 23.6)

There is a good quality training programme to enhance individual skills and to keep staff up-to-date with professional and legal developments.

Key Findings and Evidence**Standard met?****3**

All new employees in the adoption team undertake an induction programme, this includes working alongside experienced social workers undertaking family assessments and observing the adoption panel.

The individual training needs of the social workers in the adoption team are identified during supervision.

Team meetings and the joint panel training days are an opportunity for the adoption team and the panel to keep abreast of any changes in legislation, case law and departmental policies and procedures.

The team spoke of receiving appropriate training through the councils own training department and more specialist training courses run through BAAF or other organisations that specialise in adoption issues. Child protection training is mandatory and the council offers a rolling programme to ensure all staff has a number of opportunities to attend. The team are confident that they are kept up to date with adoption issues.

Records

The intended outcome for the following set of standards is:

- All appropriate records are maintained securely, kept and are accessible when required.

Standard 25 (25.1 – 25.5)

The adoption agency ensures comprehensive and accurate case records are maintained for each child, prospective and approved adopter with whom the agency has worked.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

There is a draft policy on "Adoption Case Records". It states an adoption case record should be opened as soon as there is an adoption plan for the child, where there is a sibling group there must be separate adoption case records. The service meets this requirement. The "Access to Records" show files are retained for minimum of 75 years an examination of the filing and storage system show the department are fulfilling this requirement. The "Recording Policy Procedure and Guidance" offers social workers the principles of good practice, open access to information, and the importance of record keeping. There is an "Access to Personal Information" leaflet on how to access personal files, the leaflet can be made available in any language, large print or audiotape if required. The adoption service has appropriate records on prospective adopters, prospective applicants, approved adopters and children.

All files contained the relevant information. Casework decisions made in supervision are recorded on files and signed by the service manager. The organisation of information was not consistent with some files having case notes and information filed in reverse order and others filed in the traditional book order, making it difficult to retrieve information. The service should implement a robust tracking procedure to ensure they are able to monitor the timescale for the completion of applications, best interest decisions, panel recommendations and approvals in line with the National Adoption Standards 2001. It is general practice for the service to undertake full reference checks on all applicants including an enhanced Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB) on any household member over the age of 18, medical reports and personal references from family, ex-partners, children from previous relationships, friends and current employers. The information is stored in the confidential sections of case files. There was serious concern that one family had been approved without a satisfactory CRB check.

Standard 26 (26.1 – 26.2)
The adoption agency provides all relevant information from its case files, in a timely way, to other adoption agencies and local authorities with whom it is working to effect the placement of a child.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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There is evidence to show that the adoption service has developed satisfactory inter-agency links and use the standard BAAF Form F and Form E's. Inter-agency planning is recorded on the H1 and H2 Inter-Agency Placement Agreement Forms.
 The council have a written policy on "Access to Records"
 Panel members have been asked to sign a confidentiality statement and copies of these are stored on the panel member's recruitment file.

Standard 27 (27.1 – 27.6)
There is a written policy on case recording which establishes the purpose, format, confidentiality and contents of files, including secure storage and access to case files in line with regulations.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	3
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The department have a written policy on "Case Recording" which sets out the procedure for appropriate recording on case files, the safe storage of files and departmental staffs responsibility to maintain confidentiality.
 Separate files and records are kept on staff employed in the department, complaints and allegations.
 The content on the Looked after Children's Files (LAC) documents were seen to be of a good standard.
 Files are secured in locked cabinet in the main office. Archived files are stored in a strong room and the administrative team oversees all requests for archived files.
 The computer system is in the process of being protected " Fire Walled" to ensure absolute confidentiality for adopters and adopted children.

Standard 28 (28.1 – 28.2)
Up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of staff and member of the adoption panel.

Key Findings and Evidence	Standard met?	1
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Human Resources maintain the personnel records of all employees. The vetting procedures were of concern to the inspectors. Telephone enquires to follow up written references checks are not routinely undertaken by the Human Resources department.
 The department have developed a system to ensure CRB checks on all adoption staff are renewed every three years however there is evidence that the Human Resources department prioritizes CRB checks and only newly appointed staff are seen as a priority for these checks.
 Human Resources were unable to provide the inspectors with the staff employment file of an agency worker or copies of evidential evidence that statutory checks have been made by the employment agency prior to employing the worker.
 At the time of the inspection there were no staff disciplinary, allegations or complaints being investigated.
 Separate personnel files are maintained on panel members.

Fitness of Premises

The intended outcome for the following standard is:

- The premises used by the adoption agency are suitable for the purpose.

Standard 29 (29.1 – 29.5)

Premises used by the adoption agency are appropriate for the purpose.

Key Findings and Evidence

Standard met?

2

The agency premises are a secure building with adequate facilities for meetings and interviews. The adoption team have a team room and appropriate facilities. The service manager has his own office; supervision and staff support can be given in private. Achieved files are stored in a strong room an administrator controls access to all files and was able to demonstrate that appropriate storage and security systems are in place.

The agency does not have a Disaster Recovery Plan.

PART C

LAY ASSESSOR'S SUMMARY

(where applicable)

Lay Assessor _____ **Signature** _____
Date _____

D.1 Local authority manager's comments/confirmation relating to the content and accuracy of the report for the above inspection.

We would welcome comments on the content of this report relating to the Inspection conducted on 24th May 2004 and any factual inaccuracies:

Please limit your comments to one side of A4 if possible

Action taken by the CSCI in response to the provider's comments:

Amendments to the report were necessary

 YES

Comments were received from the provider

 YES

Provider comments/factual amendments were incorporated into the final inspection report

Provider comments are available on file at the Area Office but have not been incorporated into the final inspection report. The inspector believes the report to be factually accurate

Note:

In instances where there is a major difference of view between the Inspector and the local authority adoption manager, both views will be made available on request to the Area Office.

D.2 Please provide the Commission with a written Action Plan by 16th August 2004, which indicates how statutory requirements and recommendations are to be addressed and stating a clear timescale for completion. This will be kept on file and made available on request.

Status of the Provider's Action Plan at time of publication of the final inspection report:

Action plan was required

Action plan was received at the point of publication

Action plan covers all the statutory requirements in a timely fashion

Action plan did not cover all the statutory requirements and required further discussion

Provider has declined to provide an action plan

Other: <enter details here>

Public reports

It should be noted that all CSCI inspection reports are public documents.

D.3 PROVIDER'S AGREEMENT

Local authority manager's statement of agreement/comments: Please complete the relevant section that applies.

D.3.1 I _____ of Dudley MBC Adoption Service confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) and that I agree with the statutory requirements made and will seek to comply with these.

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Designation _____

Date _____

Or

D.3.2 I _____ of _____ am unable to confirm that the contents of this report are a fair and accurate representation of the facts relating to the inspection conducted on the above date(s) for the following reasons:

Print Name _____

Signature _____

Designation _____

Date _____

Note: In instance where there is a profound difference of view between the Inspector and the Registered Provider both views will be reported. Please attach any extra pages, as applicable.