

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### Nottinghamshire County Council

**West Bridgford House  
Loughborough Road  
West Bridgford, Nottingham  
NG2 7UN**

*Lead Inspector*  
Rosemary  
Chapman

*Announced*  
12<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> September 2005

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# SERVICE INFORMATION

<b>Name of service</b>	Nottinghamshire County Council Adoption Service
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<b>Telephone number</b>	0115 846 5630
<b>Fax number</b>	0115 981 7153
<b>Email address</b>	
<b>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	N/A
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	Rachel Coombs
<b>Type of registration</b>	LAA
<b>No. of places registered (if applicable)</b>	N/A
<b>Category(ies) of registration, with number of places</b>	N/A

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

None

**Date of last inspection** 1<sup>st</sup> Inspection by the CSCI.

## Brief Description of the Service:

The Local Authority adoption service is located within Direct Services to Children and is an integrated part of the range of placement choices available to the looked after children in the County of Nottinghamshire. It is a well established and well developed service and offers a comprehensive range of adoption provision. This includes the placement of children for adoption, the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters and a variety of support services for adoptive families, both pre and post adoption order. There is also a variety of services offered to birth families and adopted adults, including counselling, intermediary work and assistance with contact. The County Adoption Team is based in Mansfield, the Support After Adoption Team is based in Nottingham and the adoption administration and archives are situated in other premises in Nottingham. Anyone who wishes to adopt from overseas is directed to a voluntary adoption agency, with whom there is a service level agreement in place to offer this service to prospective applicants from Nottinghamshire.

# SUMMARY

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

This is the first inspection of the adoption service provided by Nottinghamshire County Council. Prior to the inspection fieldwork taking place, a large number of supporting documentary evidence was sent to and read by the lead inspector. Questionnaires were received from 4 birth family members, 9 prospective and approved adopters, 5 placing social workers, 2 placing authorities, 2 medical advisers, 1 education adviser and 1 legal adviser.

Two inspectors spent 4 days in the agency and interviewed 4 sets of adopters, 2 birth grandparents, 2 birth parents, a group of placing social workers, 1 welfare rights worker and 1 finance manager, 2 recruitment and publicity workers, the adopters training co-ordinator, the corporate parenting consultant, the senior educational psychologist, administrative staff, adoption social workers, Support After Adoption social workers, 5 adoption managers and the principal team manager, the service manager, the 2 agency decision makers, and an elected member. Two of the three panels were observed, 2 panel chairpersons were interviewed and a selection of files, including personnel files, adopters' and children's files were read during the course of the inspection. The premises and archive storage were also inspected.

The inspectors would like to thank the managers and staff for their cooperation during the inspection and the hard work which they put in when organising both the pre-inspection material and the inspection programme. The openness and helpfulness of staff at all levels enabled the inspection to be carried out efficiently and effectively.

## What the service does well:

The agency is very good at recruiting adopters from a range of diverse backgrounds, including single adopters, same sex couples and black and Asian adopters. In fact, the recruitment campaigns are so successful, that the agency has to run 8 preparation groups a year and there are very few children waiting for adoptive families. The appointment of 2 members of staff with media backgrounds has been very beneficial in providing good quality information targeted at the right groups of potential applicants.

Information about children waiting for families is also of a good quality and one of the recruitment and publicity officers tries to engage children in writing about themselves so they feel part of the process.

The preparation of adopters is very good, including the group work and home study. "Preparation groups played a strong part of the adoption process and they helped us to gain improved knowledge and allowed us to gain confidence," said one adopter. Another said: "the structure of the preparation worked well and it prepared us well for the development of issues during our assessment". The forms F written for panel to recommend approval are of a universally high standard and are analytical and thorough. Comments from placing social workers included: "the forms F are very accurate" and "the form F was very detailed and was followed up by discussion with the adoption worker". Another said; "generally all adopters are reliable, well informed and well supported by their social worker. There is an excellent quality of assessments".

Adopters speak highly of the staff in the agency: "everyone has been so helpful – nothing is too much trouble". "I can't praise the teams enough – they have been absolutely fantastic". The agency is also said by adopters to be a listening and responsive one and they quoted examples of when things had been altered to suit them, such as training events and the preparation groups. An adopter said: "they ask your opinion and listen and make changes on the back of things".

Support to adopters is excellent, both pre and post order. The County Adoption Team work with adopters and children prior to the order being made and offer individual support and support groups. To quote one adopter: "we can't thank them enough for the help and support they have given us during our journey into parenthood" and another said: "all of the staff have been fantastic at Mansfield – always very supportive and helpful". One adopter said: "if the social worker says she is going to do something, she'll do it". Another adopter commented: "we have felt supported throughout and respect and value our social worker and the work she puts in with us".

The Support After Adoption Team work specifically with adopters and children post order and they offer a range of services specifically tailored to the needs of individuals. This can be group work, individual counselling, therapeutic work or referral to other agencies. Activity days and groups are run for adopted children and this has included a residential weekend. The children have also been involved in producing a video about being adopted. The team has a qualified psychotherapist who works jointly with other members of the team to offer a time limited support group for adopters.

There is a wide range of specialist advice available which adopters can access. This includes educational advice, links with the youth and community service, welfare rights advice, a training co-ordinator and medical advice.

The agency has a clear life long commitment to all involved in adoption and does very good work with birth families and adopted adults, at any time in their lives. The Support After Adoption Team offer practical assistance with contact arrangements for birth families, such as helping with letter writing and making arrangements for direct contact, support groups and individual

counselling. One birth relative said: "I was very satisfied with my treatment"; someone else commented that "everyone did the best they could, they were very friendly and very thorough and supportive". The letterbox scheme is robust and the social worker who administers this sees a wider role in its operation than just maintaining the contact – if something in a letter leads her to be concerned about the writer, she will contact them to offer help. In relation to adopted adults, the team will assist with tracing, intermediary work and counselling.

The work the agency undertakes in relation to the placing of children is of a good standard. There are clear systems in place so that children do not drift. The adoption tracking meetings play a big part in this, as the principal team manager holds these regularly with the team managers in each locality and is made aware of the children who may need a family, then monitors their progress in relation to linking and placements. Her role in relation to the approval of adopters, undertaking the final visit for every family, enables her to have a good idea of the families who will be available for the children.

The agency provides good information for adopters and has a well-established system of life appreciation days, which are held for every child prior to the introduction to their new family. This enables adopters to have a real knowledge about the child from a variety of sources who have had direct involvement with the child. One adopter commented, "We think all the information that has been given has been thorough and timely".

There are frequent panels and these are organised efficiently, with good quality minutes. Panel members are committed, thorough and child centred. The decision is made in good time and the agency decision makers demonstrate a clear commitment to this important role.

The service is integrated – all workers work to ensure good outcomes for children and all recognise and value their respective parts in that process, and those of the other workers. One social worker said: "there has been very positive evidence of the benefit of joint working". This is true at all levels in the agency.

The management is very good, with experienced and knowledgeable managers who support their staff and get the best out of them. Likewise, staff are qualified, experienced, committed and child focused. Staff are happy with their working environment and with Nottinghamshire as an employer. Staff said: "Nottinghamshire is continually making progress and 99% are changes for the better". "Nottinghamshire does feel a safe employer".

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



This is the first inspection of the service by the CSCI.

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

The main shortfall is in relation to some aspects of record keeping. Case files, although generally well maintained, would clearly benefit from a formal file audit system, to ensure the policies and procedures for records are adhered to. This would ensure that case notes are signed by both the worker and the manager and that the quality of recording was consistent. Children's adoption files (paper) did not meet all the requirements of the legislation, partly because the core assessment has not addressed this fully in relation to inheritance and compensation rights and because they have not been completed properly in some cases.

The core assessment document, which is used instead of the form E in relation to children's cases coming to panel, is not consistently completed to a good standard. It is a form, whose format is used for a number of purposes and it was clear from discussions with a number of different staff, that there was a lack of clarity about the different purposes and whether or not parts are rewritten to meet the needs of the different purposes. Birth parents are never asked to sign the core assessment to indicate they have seen and agree with the contents (or otherwise) as there is no place for such a signature. There was not always evidence that the information had been shared with them and in one case, it specifically detailed that it had not.

Minor amendments are needed to the statement of purpose and child protection procedure so that it meets the appropriate standards and regulations. The draft panel policies need some more information before they are implemented.

Panel minutes need to be produced more quickly so that the agency decision makers see them on every occasion prior to making the decision.

The panel members' files need to include 2 written references and staff files need to contain evidence that telephone enquiries have been made to verify written references.

Although adopter assessments are very thorough, recommendations have been made in relation to employer and family references and gun ownership, which the inspectors see as good practice to make the process even more robust.

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

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

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

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# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The practices of the agency ensure that children are placed with safe adoptive families who meet their needs.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency has appointed a manager and staff team who are suitable, well qualified, skilled, experienced and trained. Nearly half the social work staff have undertaken the Post Qualifying award. All staff interviewed impressed as enthusiastic, committed, child centred and confident in their role.

The agency has a written plan to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children needing adoptive families and this is regularly evaluated. Recognising the importance of recruiting the right families, the agency has a specific recruitment and publicity officer post, which is currently shared between 2 members of staff with a media background. As there are only a small number of children currently waiting for adoptive families, and only a small number of inter agency placements were made last year, this is clearly a successful strategy. The agency is also trying to improve the recruitment of families for black and Asian children, seeing this as a duty and responsibility for children outside of Nottinghamshire and a commitment to adoption nationwide. They have recruited 5 black families this year and the recruitment and publicity

officer has developed leaflets and strategies to target this resource. The agency recruits a diverse range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of children and this includes single adopters and adopters of the same sex. Placing social workers interviewed commented on this in a very favourable way.

Core assessments inspected had evidence that the views of children are sought, recorded and listened to. The agency has very clear guidance to social workers, enshrined in their policies and procedures, which emphasise the importance of placing children in families who reflect their background and enables them to live with siblings. There is practice guidance to assess whether or not this is in the child's best interests and ensures that children do not wait too long for a "perfect" match. The adoption panel also has useful checklists to enable them to recommend a particular course of action.

Adopters commented on the good response they get to the initial enquiry, usually on the telephone. The agency operates a 5-day a week duty system in the County Adoption Team to enable enquirers to speak to a social worker without too much delay. This is followed by a thorough initial visit by a social worker, which is well recorded. One adopter said: "from first response through preparation and home assessment, all aspects have been satisfactory".

The preparation of adopters is good and the small number of adopters who were less happy with the preparation groups, felt their concerns had been listened to appropriately and acted upon. The preparation has been evaluated recently and staff feel it has improved. It operates at different times and days throughout the year, but is always in Mansfield. However, if this is not convenient, various efforts are made to assist applicants to attend, such as staff providing transport, or a taxi service being utilised. Adopters are asked to evaluate each session, and there was evidence of this provided to the inspectors. The team currently run 8 courses a year, which is a huge time commitment for the staff group, as the agency has a large number of applicants and so those applicants do not have to wait too long.

Nottinghamshire has a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency (VAA) to provide a service for inter-country adopters and enquirers are provided with this information and attend that preparation group prior to their assessment by the VAA.

The home study is very thorough and the inspectors were very impressed with the quality of the Form F assessments seen, which were analytical and comprehensive. Appropriate checks are carried out in relation to former partners and it was clear that staff were aware of the information required and used imaginative ways of obtaining this where it was not straightforward. An employer reference is taken up where the applicants are in a caring role, but we would recommend that this is done in all cases as a matter of good practice. Likewise, consideration could be given to taking up a family

reference in all cases, although this is clearly done where the family member will be playing a large role in the child's life. Health and safety issues are addressed in a questionnaire and this includes the issues of dog and other pet ownership. The inspectors would also recommend that the issue of gun ownership be formalised in this questionnaire. Car documents are routinely checked to ensure the vehicle is road worthy and insured and the drivers have passed their test. Placing social workers confirm the high standards of preparation of adopters and made specific reference to "particularly issues of birth family contact arrangements" being well addressed. Adopters spoke of the sensitivity of social workers when dealing with difficult and painful issues. One commented: "it was an excellent experience and we were supported throughout". Another said: "the staff are fantastic, supportive and helpful and we would recommended Forever Families to anyone".

The principal team manager undertakes a very thorough final visit, which is a robust and important part of the process and links into the very sound matching which occurs.

Links with families occur through regular adoption tracking meetings, which the principal team manager attends in each locality. These are an excellent way of ensuring children needing families are identified at an early stage to inform the recruitment process, and for minimising drift for children. The principal team manager has a personal awareness of the children needing families and the adopters waiting as she has undertaken the final visit and plays an important part in identifying a suitable match. As the fostering managers are part of these meetings, it also enables an assessment of whether foster carers may be willing and suitable to adopt the children placed with them.

Adopters receive a lot of written information and have the opportunity to speak to other professionals, such as the medical advisor, before they have a child placed with them. One adopter felt the information they received was a bit dated, but generally the feeling was that it was up to date and relevant. A major strength of this matching process is the well-established practice of life appreciation days, which take place for all children. Adopters also commented that children are well prepared for adoption and to move on. Adopters are also enabled to say no if they feel a placement is not right, and feel able to do this, even if they have said no in the past. Adopters prepare family books, which are written for each specific child. These were available for the inspectors to see.

A further strength of the whole process is the good relationships which are evident between the placing social workers and the adoption team. They all see themselves as part of an integrated service, all engaged for the same ends: "we're all about making it work – there is no us and them".

There are 3 panels which each meet 9 or 10 times a year. They are well organised, efficient, child centred, robust and thorough. They are properly constituted but there has been one occasion when the chair from one of the panels was used for another panel, to ensure a case was progressed without delay. Although legal approval was sought and given for this course of action and the business was therefore conducted in good faith and with the best of intentions, it is a situation which must not be repeated. Very good draft procedures are being developed to meet the needs of the new legislation and the advisor should ensure that these also cover the appointment of the chair and vice chair, dealing with disruptive behaviour, emergency panels and receiving progress reports.

Adopters are invited to attend panel and adopters said: " we felt totally prepared for the panel". The panel was said to be: "civilised, comfortable and not threatening". Staff said: "they make a real effort to welcome adopters". Panel members receive an excellent information folder, have an induction with the professional adviser, which includes a panel observation and there are at least 2 training days a year, one of which involves agency staff.

The minutes are of a very good quality, although there is a need to clarify who the panel members actually are on the minutes inspected. However, there is sometimes a delay in these being produced and they are not available for the next panel to check and confirm. The agency is addressing this through the appointment of a separate person to take the minutes, as the current post holder also organises the panels (which is done very well).

The decision is made very quickly. Two assistant directors share the role and take it very seriously. They read the papers in advance and more often than not have sight of the draft minutes before making their decision. The agency is aware that the draft minutes should be available for the decision maker on every occasion. The letters of notification are sent out to the appropriate people in a timely way but it is recommended that these be signed by the decision maker rather than the professional adviser, as is the current practice.

# Enjoying and Achieving

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency provides a wide range of excellent quality support services for children and their adoptive parents to enable good placements to continue and children to fulfil their potential.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency has very well established and innovative ways of supporting adoptive parents, both before and after an adoption order is made. Placing social workers commented on how well prepared adopters were before children are placed and adopters spoken with echoed that theme. The support offered post placement builds on that foundation of good preparation. This preparation clearly includes discussions about the importance of birth family information. Adopters spoken with expressed very open attitudes towards this, one had pictures of the birth family in the children's bedroom, and others spoke about the life story book and how they would use this with the child. One adopter was not happy about some of the quality of the life story book and was making efforts, along with their support worker, to improve this and make it more appropriate to use with the child. Adopters also spoke of various items of memorabilia they had received from the birth family which they were keeping safe for the child.

The preparation groups and home studies use a variety of resources to help adopters develop strategies for combating racism and other forms of discrimination. This was observed at a panel, in relation to a same sex couple. There are videos available, and a number of other books, games, toys and so forth, which can be used with, or borrowed by, adopters. Issues of diversity are well addressed and the material for the preparation groups gives an indication of this.

Social workers from the County Adoption Team provide ongoing support to approved adopters and this was seen by adopters as very helpful. In addition to this, there is a regular support group which looks at a variety of issues of



the adopters' choosing. Placing social workers said: "adopters are very well supported".

The adoption agency has access to a number of specialist advisers, some of whom were interviewed and others responded to questionnaires. Staff spoke highly of the advice they receive from the legal and medical advisers and found them helpful and approachable. Adopters also said they had the opportunity to speak to a medical adviser and found this useful and appropriate.

Other advisers and specialist services which can be accessed, both by adopters and staff, include named people in a variety of services who can ensure that adoptive families receive appropriate support quickly. The Council takes its corporate parenting role very seriously and has a senior educational psychologist and education adviser who work with, or facilitate work with, all looked after children, the remit of which specifically states that this includes children who are adopted if their adoptive parents request this. This is of enormous benefit as educational issues can play a large part in placements going wrong.

The Youth and Community Service have a named person who ensures that service provides appropriate support and they have received training from the Support After Adoption Team, with whom they work closely, to make them more aware of adoption issues.

The agency has a welfare rights officer who offers her expertise to every adopter to ensure they have the right entitlement to benefits and other financial services. Although she is not physically based in the adoption team, she is very much a part of the integrated service. One adopter said: "she knows her onions and certainly makes things happen". All but one of the adopters she has assisted have benefited financially from her contact with them to obtain the financial assistance which is rightfully theirs and this is one part of the support package the agency provides. The agency also provides financial assistance in its own right and evidence was seen of one off grants to facilitate a sibling placement, as well as on-going financial support.

The agency has an adoption training co-ordinator who has a post approval learning and development strategy and the value and importance of such training is clearly recognised by the provision of this post. She is responsive to the needs of adopters, who confirm they decide what they want to do and hear about.

The Grandparents Day is further evidence of the agency's innovative approach to support, by enabling the grandparents of adopters, people in the usual network of support, being enabled to provide this support more effectively by learning about adoption and making them more aware of the issues and how they can help.

The Support After Adoption Team continues to provide a variety of support to adoptive families throughout their life time. The range of services available is excellent and the team includes a trained psychotherapist. Work offered includes group work for children, groups for adoptive parents, individual therapy, work with children and/or their parents and activity days and a residential experience, in conjunction with the Youth Service. Adopted young people have also been involved in making a video about their feelings and experiences.

If other support is needed, social workers said: "management commitment to buying in appropriate support is absolutely excellent", providing an appropriate case is made.

There have been no disruptions in the last 12 months but staff and other people interviewed confirmed that a disruption meeting is held, the panel receive the minutes of this as a learning tool and support is available to adopters and the child for as long as this is necessary.

# **Making a Positive Contribution**

## **The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

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

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

The agency demonstrates a commitment, and provides a range of support to birth families to enable them to make a positive contribution to their child's life.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency shows a clear commitment to birth families both pre and post adoption order. The agency's placing social workers work with birth families but there is also independent support available through a service level agreement with a voluntary agency. In the majority of core assessments inspected, the birth family's views were recorded but in some, the core assessment had not been shared with them and there is no place for them to sign to indicate they are happy with the contents, or otherwise. This needs addressing.

There is clear evidence that birth families are asked to contribute to the maintenance of the child's heritage. Birth family members spoken with confirmed they had been asked for copies of photographs and information when the child was placed for adoption. They also commented on the good relationship between the child and the social worker and confirmed they were part of contact arrangements. Interviews held with placing social workers indicated their commitment to the preparation of the life storybook in good time, and the panel also ask about this when making recommendations on matching. Adopters spoken with confirmed that they had life story books for their children.

There is a robust letterbox scheme in place, which is administered by a social worker with administrative support. The social worker will follow up any issues in the letters she reads, if she is concerned for the welfare of the birth family member, showing a caring and supportive attitude and commitment to the

birth family. There was also good evidence from birth families about supporting contact long after an adoption was made, and this was practically, financially and emotionally. One birth family spoke highly of the worker from Support After Adoption who undertook this role with them – “she does whatever she can”.

The Support After Adoption Team works in many different ways with birth families and they are encouraged to use their services at any time. They provide counselling, group work, will act as intermediaries, facilitate contact by helping with letter writing and any other assistance necessary and are very positive in their approach.

# Management

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The adoption agency is well managed at all levels, which enables staff to be supported to do their jobs effectively and provide good outcomes for children.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The adoption agency has a statement of purpose, which, other than needing to have the address and telephone of the Commission in it, complies with the regulation. However, the inspectors feel this undersells the agency, as it does

not reflect the excellent, and sometimes exceptional, practices which have been found during this inspection. The agency also has a children's guide, which is well written and tells a story. The address and telephone number were missing from the one seen but the manager assured the inspector that this was an error and there was a label which was placed in the Guide before being given to a child. There was clear evidence that the Guide is given to children and a letter is sent to the child's social worker once the agency has made a decision in relation to adoption as the plan, which includes a copy of the Guide to give to the child concerned. The agency can make any documents available in other formats and languages at short notice.

The policies and procedures are of a good standard and reflect the statement of purpose. The only omission is in relation to child protection, where the policy and procedure do not specifically make reference to children placed for adoption (Regulation 9) and this needs to be addressed.

The information which is given to adopters is useful and inclusive and reflects the practices of the agency. This includes information about the process, the eligibility criteria, children who need families and support services. Not only do applicants meet other adopters in the preparation groups, they are encouraged to meet someone locally who has adopted children and with whom good relationships and links can be forged. This was referred to as being very helpful by adopters on a number of occasions.

The agency is well managed at all levels by committed, well qualified and well trained staff. Staff feel that Nottinghamshire County Council is a good employer to work for, they feel listened to, changes are made for the better and there are good conditions of employment which encourage the retention of staff.

There are clear monitoring procedures in place and the executive side of the Council had received 2 written reports about the work of the agency last year, as there had been a best value review and close monitoring of the service in relation to this. There were also a number of other reports about specific issues such as staff appointments and finance. The type of report needed for the executive every 6 months was clarified i.e. on the management and outcomes of the services of the adoption agency to satisfy themselves that the adoption agency is effective and achieves good outcomes for children (standard 17.3). The portfolio holder for social services meets every week with the Director and discusses the whole range of social services issues (including adoption) at those meetings.

The nominated manager for the service is very experienced in management and adoption and has a clear child care focus and vision as well as excellent management skills and knowledge. One member of staff said: "she creates an atmosphere where creative ideas develop".

There are also a number of other managers in the adoption agency who have either line management responsibility for staff or the development of other aspects of the service. These managers have appropriate experience and qualifications, including management qualifications in some instances. Their roles and responsibilities are clear and staff interviewed were also clear about this.

Staff commented that supervision took place regularly and that it was of a good quality and "worthwhile". They also have good training opportunities, although it can be difficult for specialist staff to access appropriate courses, due to the expense involved. They have an annual appraisal where training needs are identified and these are monitored. There are caseload monitoring systems in place and these are open and transparent. Both teams commented on the very good peer support which is available and said they were "a brilliant team" and "you don't at anytime need to feel isolated". The County Adoption Team also felt that the Asian workers in the team have been of great benefit in raising awareness of issues in relation to the recruitment of black and Asian families – "they have strengthened the black perspective".

There is sufficient office equipment and administrative support – in fact, the latter was said to be "absolutely brilliant – they take a real pride in their jobs". The premises are also satisfactory. Thus the infrastructure supports and enables the staff to undertake the tasks for which they are appointed.

The agency has had a new computer system for record keeping which was implemented on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2005. Thus paper records and computer records were inspected, both in relation to children and adopters' case files.

The agency has good and clear procedures in place for case recording and access to records and there is clear evidence of decisions made in supervision being recorded on the case file.

Adopters' case files were generally of a good standard, but not all records were signed by the social worker and were rarely signed by the manager, although the team managers said they did read them. Thus a case file audit system is recommended to ensure that case recording is of the expected standard.

The children's case records (paper version) do not meet the requirements for a children's adoption file, although the computer version would appear to do so. They contain too much information, the core assessment which is used instead of a form E, does not make reference to rights to property and claims for damages which may be lost if a child is adopted and one core assessment inspected was about 2 children. There is also inconsistency in the completion of core assessments and those inspected were of a variable quality. The form has a number of purposes and there was a lack of clarity amongst staff as to whether it could be reworded to make it more appropriate for the purposes of panel or the child's information for the file. Senior managers said there was

good guidance available, so staff clearly need further work on this, to ensure an appropriate document is produced for all the circumstances for which it is used.

The files on panel members have been developed to a good standard and contain all the necessary information apart from 2 references. These must be taken up and placed on file. The staff personnel files contained all the required information but gave no evidence of telephone enquiries to confirm written references, although the manager was sure this was the practice.



# SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	Score
7	2
8	3
9	4

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

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

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
Standard No	Score
6	4
18	4

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

N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

## STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	11	1983 AA regs 5(4)	The agency must not substitute a chair or vice chair from one panel to sit on another panel.	Immediate
2.	1	LAA 2003 reg 2	The agency must include the address and telephone number of the Commission in its statement of purpose.	31.12.05
3.	1	LAA 2003 Reg 9	The agency must ensure the child protection policy makes specific reference to children placed for adoption.	31.12.05
4.	25	1983 AA regs 7	Children's adoption files must meet the requirements of the legislation.	31.12.05
5.	28	LAA 2003 regs 11 and 15 schedule 3 and 4.	The agency must obtain 2 written references on panel members and provide evidence that telephone enquiries are made to verify written references.	31.12.05

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to	Good Practice Recommendations
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	Standard	
1.	4	The agency should take up employer references and a family reference for all applicants.
2.	4	The health and safety questionnaire should be amended to ensure questions about gun ownership are routinely addressed.
3.	10	The agency should ensure the procedures which are currently being drafted include the appointment of the chair and vice chair, dealing with ineffective or disruptive behaviour, emergency procedures and receiving progress reports on cases.
4.	13	The agency decision makers should see the draft minutes before making a decision on every occasion.
5.	13	The letters of notification should be signed by the agency decision maker as a matter of courtesy.
6.	7	The agency should ensure that birth parents always see and have the opportunity to comment on what is written about them and are offered the option of signing to say this has been done.
7.	27	The agency should develop and implement a case file audit system to ensure that all records are signed and are of an appropriate quality.
8.	27	The agency should ensure that staff have further training in the writing of core assessments to ensure they are fit for purpose.

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