



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### **Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service**

**County Hall  
Pegs Lane  
Hertford  
Hertfordshire  
SG13 8DF**

*Lead Inspector*  
Rosie Dancer

*Announced Inspection*  
27th February 2006      09:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

<b>Reader Information</b>	
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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

**Name of service** Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service

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Pegs Lane  
Hertford  
Hertfordshire  
SG13 8DF

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**Provider Web address**

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

**Name of registered manager (if applicable)** Brenda Simmonds

**Type of registration** Local Auth Adoption Service

**Category(ies) of registration, with number of places**

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

**Date of last inspection** This is the first inspection under The Local Authority (England) Regulations 2005.

## Brief Description of the Service:

The adoption agency is part of Hertfordshire Council Council's Children's Schools and Families Social Care Directorate. The agency is constituted as a service under current legislation that requires local authorities to provide or make provision for adoption services. The service comprises of:

- Two teams of social workers who predominantly prepare and assess prospective adopters and provide support to placement in the 12 months after an adoption order has been made
- A family finding team which predominantly finds families for children and supports the introduction and placement processes
- An adoption support team which provides a range of support services to families and individuals affected by adoption
- Fieldwork teams which work with the children needing an adoptive placement

The agency is a member of a regional Adoption Consortium that comprises of six other Local Authorities and a Voluntary Adoption Agency, which has associate membership.

Hertfordshire adoption service accepts applications from people wishing to adopt a child from England and those wishing to adopt a child from another country. The service recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, provides post adoption support, places children with adoptive families and provides birth records counselling.

# SUMMARY

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

The preparation for the inspection by the agency was of a good standard and included an efficient approach to providing pre-inspection material and a thorough self-assessment. The facilities made available to the inspection team were comfortable and everyone involved was welcoming, courteous and helpful; this enabled the inspection to be carried out efficiently and with the minimum of disruption.

The inspection was conducted over two full days and two half days by three inspectors.

During the course of the fieldwork interviews were conducted with key staff and managers and an elected member of the council. The lead inspector observed the adoption panel and interviewed the panel chair. Inspectors spoke to four birth parents and five adoptive families, including one family who were intercountry adopters. The views of the families are incorporated into the body of the report.

Questionnaires were sent to adopters approved in the last twelve months, prospective adopters currently being assessed, birth parents, placing social workers, placing authorities and professional advisers.

There were completed questionnaires returned from the following: (not all questions were answered by all respondents.)

17 Adopters two were intercountry adopters  
5 Birth family members  
13 Hertfordshire placing social workers  
5 Professional advisers

Some of the comments made in these questionnaires are quoted in the report.

All relevant policies and procedures were inspected, as were records in respect of service users, staff and panel members. A selection of papers submitted to the adoption panel in recent times was also inspected.

As will be seen throughout this report there is no consensus between adopters about the quality of the service provided. Some adopters have very clearly had a very positive experience of the service provided to them at each stage, while others describe a very different experience. The extremes of view noted in this inspection are very unusual to see. The scope of the inspection does not allow for an in depth analysis of the reasons for the disparity of views. Clearly these are issues that the management of the adoption service need to explore further and ensure that a good service is provided on a consistent basis.

## **What the service does well:**

The preparation courses were identified by the majority of adopters, both domestic and intercountry adopters, as being a positive experience during which they felt they were provided with good information and were prepared well for parenting children from the looked after system or from another country.

“ Preparation group was excellent” is a quote from one couple. A number of other couples made very similar comments about the groups.

The adoption support service is well developed and has a range of services to support people and families in a variety of ways.

The family finding team was regarded as a good resource by the assessing social workers and the children’s social work teams.

Some assessing adoption social workers were highly praised by the adopters they worked with.

Children were well prepared for adoption both through the written information available and through direct work carried out with them.

There were good working relationships between the teams of the adoption service and the workers in the childcare teams; strong links had been made and were maintained through the two link workers in the family finding team.

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

This is the first inspection under The Local Authority (England) Regulations 2005.

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

Some assessing adoption social workers were heavily criticised by the adopters they worked with. Comments were made by adopters about experiencing a lack of sensitivity, poor communication and in one case a worker was described as having been rude on occasions. These are matters for the management of the agency to urgently address. It should be noted that a significant number of adopters from the sample, seven out of sixteen questionnaires, stated that they had not been told how to make a complaint if they were unhappy and a number of adopters felt that their application would not be looked upon favourably if they made a complaint.

The information on adopters needs to be consistently comprehensive and include full analysis of the information; the assessments need to be subject to a more rigorous system of scrutiny.

Some of the children's permanence reports were of a poor quality and need to be subject to a more rigorous system of scrutiny.

The agency should ensure that adopters are clear about the level of contact their social worker will have with them post panel approval.

The agency should ensure that timescales for children are subject to close monitoring now the agency is at a stage where the backlog of cases has been cleared.

Staff reported training opportunities as being limited and felt that there was a lack of commitment from the employer in enabling and supporting workers to undertake the post qualifying awards in childcare social work.

Permanency planning training had been delivered to childcare social workers but a number reported that they had been unable to attend due to other commitments

Statutory checks need to be applied to all workers, what ever the basis of their employment and all such checks need to have been completed prior to staff carrying out work for the agency.

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 the following standard(s):

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

**Overall the adoption teams arrangements for assessing and approving adopters were adequate. However, there were some inconsistencies in practice in some areas that need to be addressed in order to ensure that safe, secure and stable placements for all children are made and maintained.**

### EVIDENCE:

It was stated that the agency experiences difficulties in recruiting adopters for harder to place children such as large sibling groups, older children and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is an issue for agencies nationally. Hertfordshire has developed a clear, written recruitment strategy that aims to target adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement. Hertfordshire employs a marketing and publicity officer who works with the fostering and adoption services in developing and implementing the strategy.

There is a recruitment group, which has the role of researching, planning and organising the tactical recruitment initiatives on a local basis. There is also a family finding group which as a part of its role, focuses on finding placements for harder to place children

Recruitment and family finding activity in Hertfordshire included:

- Children's evenings run on a quarterly basis, where children waiting for an adoptive placement are featured via photo and video with a brief outline of their needs.
- The use of a range of advertising both locally and nationally
- Information evenings
- Hertfordshire is a member of a regional consortium, which comprises of five other local authorities and a voluntary adoption agency. Through this consortium interagency placements can be made.
- There is a budget to fund interagency placements.

Within the marketing and recruitment strategy it had been identified that one area for further development in terms of recruitment activity was targeting black and ethnic minority communities and work was underway in targeting such local communities.

The adoption agency has systems in place to prioritise prospective adopters who are likely to meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents.

There was a newly established dedicated family finding team that works closely with children's social workers in finding a suitable family for the child and preparing the child to move to an adoptive placement. A number of placing social workers commented on the dedication and excellent work carried out by this team with one placing social worker commenting:

"Family finding was thorough and extensive and support from the team was excellent"

Another placing social worker commented that during introductions the family finding team had used:

"Useful tools – pictures and smells to make introduction smooth for a baby and toddler – good constructive teamwork"

However, it was stated, that in some cases, there had been a lack of clarity about the role of each worker in this process. As a relatively new team this is a developmental issue that needs to be addressed to ensure that workers are clear about the work that they are responsible for.

When considering placement options for sibling groups the agency uses a sibling relationship tool to consider the relationship between siblings and assess if they should be placed together or separately. While this could be a useful tool in considering this significant issue the completed 'assessments' viewed failed to clearly show the reasons for the conclusion reached. In addition the document did not show who had been involved in the assessment process or the date of the assessment.

It is recommended that staff are trained in its use and that managers monitor this work closely.

The practice in terms of matching in Hertfordshire was noted as being of a variable quality. Some good examples were noted of children's needs and applicants' strengths having been explored and fully assessed. This meant that a clear view about the reasons for the proposed match had been reached and that support needs had been identified in a timely way.

However, there were some examples noted which did not clearly identify the child's needs or the applicants ability to meet those needs. Consistency in the quality of the matching process needs to be achieved.

Examples were noted of the child's views and feelings, as far as they could be ascertained, having been obtained and acted upon where appropriate.

There is a formal process of preparation and assessment in place. Overall adopters were very satisfied with the preparation process, especially the preparation groups. The following comments were made by adopters about their experience of the preparation courses:

" Well prepared and professional courses"

"Courses were informative, trainers were friendly and helpful"

"100% positive....preparation was professional"

Adopters also commented on how useful it was to have the opportunity to speak to adopters who had been through the process.

A few adopters stated that they had not been so happy with the practical arrangements for the preparation groups with one stating that they were lengthy and drawn out and five out of the seventeen respondents to the questionnaires stated that either the times or the venues were inconvenient. One adopter stated that they had not been aware that information gathered through observation by social workers during the preparation groups is fed into the assessment process. They were of the view that judgements in their case had been made on the basis of these observations, without the benefit of discussion with them about the issues.

However, adopters are asked to evaluate all training, preparation and assessment, including the experience of attendance at the adoption panel, and evidence was noted that changes had been made to the various stages of the adoption process in line with adopters' comments.

Following attendance at the preparation course adopters attend an assessment group. During these sessions adopters are guided through the process of writing for their assessment report. Some satisfactory assessment reports were viewed, which showed a good approach to the analysis of the written information provided by adopters, evidenced that issues arising had been fully discussed with adopters and provided a clear conclusion about the applicant's suitability to adopt. Placing social workers were overall positive about the assessment reports with comments such as:

"An F Form is often as good as the writer – however the form was an accurate tool"

And

" Well written and informative"

However, some assessment reports viewed lacked evidence that issues of some significance had been fully explored with adopters, showed a lack analysis of the information provided by the adopters and did not provide a clear assessment about the applicants parenting capacity.

One placing social worker stated:

" Adopters have found it hard to have a working knowledge of children's developmental needs but the Form F did try and address it."

Another stated:

" It is always difficult to cover every eventuality, however don't think all adopters are aware of possible behaviour problems."

Some adopters commented that the assessment courses were too theoretical and academic with one stating that they had found this part of the process stressful. Another adopter stated that while they had enjoyed this part of the process they did worry for others on the group who were little used to writing lengthy documents.

During the home study process statutory checks are carried out, health and safety assessments are done, and where the adopters own a dog, a dog questionnaire is completed, a number of references are taken up and referees visited.

The Health and safety questionnaire would benefit from the addition of an assessment of the safe storage of guns, or other weapons where these are kept in the household and while it was noted that some social workers had added, in handwriting, to the forms whether there was any risk to small children from hanging strings of window blinds it would also be good practice for this to be included on all assessments.

Some of the assessment reports did not detail the full employment history of the applicants and it would be good practice to include this information to ensure that panel and the decision maker are clear that where there are any gaps these have been fully explored.

One assessment viewed did not have a reference from one of the applicant's current employer, although a number of other references had been taken up.

The inspectors were satisfied that CRB checks are carried out routinely; this needs to be clearly evidenced on each file with full details of the check and outcomes.

It was noted that second opinion visits had been introduced and that some of the shortfalls identified when viewing assessments and files had been addressed as a result of these visits.

In respect to assessment reports written about children these were noted as being of variable quality. Some of the reports were of a reasonable quality, up to date and written with the possibility in mind that at some stage the child may wish to have access to them.

However, some examples viewed were of a poor quality, especially in respect to the following:

- The use of judgemental language about birth family
- A lack of updating information where significant events clearly warranted this
- A confused and incomplete explanation about the care planning for the child in particular where timescales had been greatly exceeded
- Poor quality of the assessment of sibling relationships
- Poor assessments in respect to contact issues

It was stated that there had been recent training for social workers in writing permanence reports and the impact of this training on the quality of reports will need to be carefully monitored to ensure that the quality of all reports are of an acceptable quality. It was also stated by some staff that they had not been able to attend this training due to other commitments so for these staff it is imperative that they have the opportunity to receive this training.

The information provided to adopters about the matching process appeared to the inspectors to be of a good standard; it is therefore surprising to note from some adopters' responses that some felt very unclear about what happens following approval. This is further discussed under the management section of this report.

In terms of information provided to adopters about a specific child the feedback was positive. One placing social worker commented:

"The information provided was extremely clear. It gave the adopters time to absorb the processes and to clarify any specific query. The process moved at their pace.

One adoptive couple stated that:

The quality of information on our child was very good, the social worker has worked very hard at understanding the whole picture – she is so on the case."

The same couple commended the input from the child's foster carer stating:

"The foster carer was on the ball, she handled introductions well...Life story work from the foster carer was good."

Good examples of information provided to adopters about specific children and information provided from adopters to children about themselves.

Where there are medical issues involved it was noted that the medical advisers are pro-active in discussing these with adopters and social workers.

Where approved adopters have not been matched within a year the adoption team carries out a review. If after a further year a match has not been made a second review is carried out by the adoption team and the case referred back to panel. Where there has been a significant change in circumstances panel may be asked to consider the new information in relation to the original approval.

The adoption panel policies and procedures had been updated in line with the recently introduced legislation. There was some useful information available to panel members and social workers in terms of information that should be presented to panel.

There were two panels, chaired by different independent chairs. The lead inspector observed one of the panels. The panel membership was properly constituted although the only male member had not been able to attend on this occasion. The shortfall in terms of gender mix had been recognised and it was stated that it was planned that male members who sit on the other panel will swap over to the panel observed to achieve a better gender mix.

While it was stated that all panel members had been subject to a CRB check evidence on panel members files did not support this in every case; clear evidence that CRB's have been undertaken needs to be gained and placed on file. It should be noted that the actual disclosures for all staff, including panel members should be retained until the next inspection.

There was an induction process in place for new panel members, this needed formalising. New panel members are expected to observe a panel as part of their induction. There is a plan in place to introduce a system of annual appraisal for each panel member. Panel members had been provided with training relevant to their role, including training in the complexities of intercountry adoption.

Adopters are invited to attend the panel and it was noted from the panel observed that the adopters attendance was handled with sensitivity. Overall adopters' comments about their experience of attending panel were positive with the majority of adopters stating that attending panel had been a useful experience. One couple stated:

"Panel was very welcoming, supportive and asked pertinent questions."

Social workers views about the panel were also positive with the process described as being a rigorous process with valuable comments made about the work presented.

Chair prepares an annual report on the work of the adoption panel; there are also monthly panel management meetings.

There are two panels held on alternate weeks; this is an adequate arrangement in terms of the panel business. The dates for each panel are set in advance on an annual basis.

The administration of the panel was effective; papers were sent out to members in secure packaging in advance of the panel date. The panel minutes need to include clear reasons for recommending approval of the applicant's suitability to adopt.

The agency decision-making process was being carried out effectively with all relevant parties being informed of decisions in a timely way.

The nominated manager was suitably qualified and experienced to run the agency. She demonstrated that she has considerable knowledge and experience of adoption law and practices. Evidence was noted to show that a CRB check had been carried out in respect to the manager.



Hertfordshire recruitment policy ensured that adoption social work staff had been subject to all relevant references and checks that follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people.

One case was noted whereby a staff member employed through an agency had not been subject to all relevant references and checks prior to working within the agency.

The adoption agency must ensure that all panel members and staff employed through the agency have appropriate status checks and references undertaken in line with the standards and regulations.

There had been one complaint made about the adoption service in the twelve months prior to the inspection; it was noted that this had been appropriately handled at all stages by the service.

A significant number of adopters were not aware of how to make a complaint about the service, and some felt unable to complain due to feeling in a very vulnerable situation and not wanting to risk achieving their ultimate goal of adoption. It would be good practice to ensure that all adopters are fully aware of the complaints procedure and that reassurance is provided that any complaint made will not effect their application adversely.

There is a clear child protection procedure in place in respect to children placed for adoption. There was a potential child protection issue noted from reading the files of a child. It was not clear from the file that this had been dealt with as a child protection issue and the manager commissioned a review of this case and will be reporting back to the CSCI on the findings.

# Enjoying and Achieving

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

**There was a strong commitment to supporting adoptive families by a dedicated team of workers. The support service promotes the stability of placements for children.**

## EVIDENCE:

Following placements the adopter's link worker from the adoption assessment team offers support advice and guidance and by agreement will continue to visit after an adoption order for up to 12 months. Support services are then transferred to the dedicated adoption support team.

Hertfordshire has a service level agreement with Post Adoption Link and the Post Adoption Centre; these are external agencies that offer a range of support for people affected by adoption.

There is a mentoring scheme in place whereby experienced adopters offer mentoring to newer adopters through a 'help' phone line.

Additional support to placements can be provided through regular support meetings or therapeutic intervention.

Assessment of support needs, including financial support, are assessed at the time of matching and reviewed at the time of placement.

Where there are direct contact arrangements for birth family members a key worker from the adoption support team is allocated to support the arrangements.

Where there are special educational needs there is the services of an 'advisory teacher' who is available to offer advice and support where required. There is a

leaflet, for adopters and schools, which is aimed at raising awareness about areas for potential difficulties. The leaflet details sources of support, which can be accessed where difficulties arise.

A range of other activities, groups and support services were run including:

- A newsletter, twice a year
- Access to play therapy
- Access to sessions with psychologist
- Support group evenings and further training with the focus on issues such as positive parenting, a life story workshop, discussion around contact issues, a telling children about adoption workshop, a session around attachment and relationship building
- An annual Picnic
- Events for parents and teenagers together
- A Group for adoptive parents of teenagers
- A Grandparents group
- Men's evenings, these are newly established, there was a guest speaker for the first session and time was taken to discuss what would be useful in future sessions
- Play schemes

Quotes from placing social workers about the support service included:

"A good and constructive package of support was in place"

" Support has been excellent"

Adopters' comments about adoption support included:

"Support is ok, we have seen the play therapist and some health issues have been sorted."

There is a meeting, carried out on a quarterly basis, with the focus group. This group comprises of adopters and the meetings are used to evaluate the service.

There had been one disruption of an adoptive placement during the twelve months preceding the inspection. There was a meeting held during the course of the inspection fieldwork to look at the issues involved in this case. Some social workers commented that it would be useful if the findings of such meetings were more widely disseminated in order to learn from any mistakes and there was a suggestion from the group that this could be done through joint group supervision.

In addition to the advisory teacher, the play therapist and the psychologist services, as mentioned above, the agency has access to two medical advisers and a legal adviser - all of whom provide advice to the panels.

Social workers said that access to medical and legal advice was good with one adoptive couple singling out one of the medical advisers as being:

“Very good, very clear”

There is a CAMHS in Hertfordshire. However, it was stated that referrals to this service, once an adoption order has been granted, are not treated as a priority and therefore for adopted children access to this service is limited. It is strongly recommended that this situation is negotiated with the CAMHS service by the agency to try and secure a priority service for adoptive families.

# Making a Positive Contribution

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

**7,8,9,**

**There was some good practice noted in the agency's approach to working with birth parents to enable them to contribute to their children's futures and to feel supported in the process. The practice in this area needs to be evidenced on a consistent basis.**

## EVIDENCE:

There is a leaflet for birth relatives to help them relay their views to panel about their child's proposed plan for adoption. The panel adviser monitors the participation of birth family members in the preparation of the child's permanence report. It was noted that there is a lack of consistency either about the level to which parents are involved in this work or about recording that parents have declined to be involved.

This had been recognised and work was being carried out within the agency to address any shortfalls in the skills and experience of individual workers in terms of working with birth family members.

There is a useful, informative pack of information provided to birth parents that details options for independent counselling and support available to them and provides information about the adoption process. This pack is available in various formats.

The letterbox exchange is staffed, on a part time basis, by a qualified social worker with the support of a full time admin worker. There is an annual review of contact arrangements. Where support or advice is required by any of the parties involved in contact arrangements social work support is available. There is a leaflet available which describes this service.

It was noted that the adoption support team were working with twenty-two birth family members and adoptees at the time of the inspection. The areas of work being carried out included support in indirect and direct contact arrangements, counselling and support in the adoption process, support and guidance in attending a meeting with adopters, help to prepare life story information for their child and birth records counselling for adoptees.

It was pleasing to hear from a number of birth family members through the course of this inspection. Five questionnaires were completed and returned, three birth mothers met with the inspectors and one birth mother telephoned the lead inspector. A birth parent and a birth grandparent had jointly completed one of the questionnaires. One questionnaire indicated that overall there was a satisfaction about the service provided and no additional comments were made.

Clearly many of the comments made by birth parents were very painful for them to write and very personal to them and the comments have been collated into general themes.

There was an overwhelming view that birth parents did not feel that they had been listened to and been given a fair chance at the time of the care proceedings. Four sources independently stated that either counselling had been offered to them but was too far away to travel or that counselling had not been offered at all. (It should be remembered that for the majority of these people their experience of the adoption service in the early stages might have been some years ago.)

There were some anxieties expressed about contact and what would happen should the adopters decide that they did not want to continue with contact and some general anxieties about the future.

However despite the obvious pain and anxieties expressed there were a number of positive comments about the workers from the post adoption team who were supporting these birth family members. Individual workers were described as supportive and helpful and people who met with the inspectors were clearly comfortable to come into the adoption offices.

# Management

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

**The arrangements for the management of the service were, in the main, of a reasonable standard. There are some issues around quality assurance and the conduct of some staff that require management intervention to ensure that the service conducts its business and carries out its responsibilities to the advantage of all service users.**

## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency has a clear written statement of purpose that clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the agency. The statement is reviewed on an annual basis and the elected members had approved the current statement in January 2006.

The statement needed the addition of more detail about the manager the organisational structure of the agency and the procedure for assessing needs for adoption support services. The manager actioned this during the course of the inspection.

The agency has developed a good range of information, about adoption, for children. The information provided is of a good quality, informative and there is a colourful guide for children who are under 10 years old. There is a children's version of the statement of purpose, a guide for siblings who are in the looked after system and have a brother or sister who has a plan for adoption and a version has been developed in Makaton for children who are unable to understand the written word. There is also specific information for children adopted from other countries. A leaflet for children in respect of adoption support service is in draft form; it was planned that this leaflet would be finalised imminently.

An interpreting service is available to explain written information and translation services can be accessed on a needs basis.

The written information viewed included details of the adoption process and information about financial assistance, including tax credits and other benefits.

There was a separate information pack made available to all people wishing to adopt from another country; this provided good information about the processes involved.

It was stated that following approval all adopters are asked about the level of contact they would like with their social worker. For example they are asked if they wish to be informed each time they are considered as a potential match for a child.

In light of the above information it was surprising to hear from a number of adopters that they felt poorly informed about what would happen at different stages of the process. The main confusion about the process arose post approval.

One adopter commented:



“ There was a lack of communication, we were not told if we were being considered for a child.”

“Another stated that they had only been contacted once in five months following approval”

And a third commented:

“It would be useful to have a list of what is happening next.... we were approved and it seems like another big hurdle to get over is the wait for a child. The social worker is not good at contacting us.” (This adopter’s file was viewed and the recording showed a three and a half month gap from approval to any contact with the social worker and not record of the couple having been asked about their wishes post approval.)

The adoption procedures state that following approval adopters should be visited at a minimum of six weekly, clearly this is not happening in every case and needs to be addressed.

The nominated adoption manager has the necessary knowledge, qualifications and experience of childcare and adoption law and practices. The managers of the adoption assessment teams, the adoption support and family finding teams were also qualified, knowledgeable and experienced in the adoption field. Staff reported that these levels of the management tier were committed individuals and that all were accessible to them and supportive of them. There were overall clear roles for managers and staff and well-established lines of communication between the adoption service and the childcare teams.

The reporting systems to the executive were in line with regulation and this enables the executive to monitor the performance of the agency.

The quality assurance of some of the work of the adoption agency needs to be more robust, as identified in the report and detailed in the requirement and recommendations sections. Staff reported regular supervision and good peer support through formal team meetings and on a less formal day-to-day basis.

The individual workers in the four adoption teams demonstrated that they were appropriately qualified. The inspector met with eleven placing social workers. These workers stated that they found the adoption teams very helpful, two link workers were singled out as being particularly helpful, as providing good advice and practical help and as being an excellent link between the teams.

Placing social workers questionnaires included the following comments:

“The allocated worker (Hertfordshire family finding team) was experienced, knowledgeable and extremely helpful.”

" The adoption social workers were always friendly, warming and professional...it was a pleasure to work with these colleagues...Together we achieved a positive outcome.

"Very informative approachable team."

Some adopters felt very positive about the professionalism and sensitivity of the adoption teams and the following comments were made:

"Social workers were super so supportive but they never seem to have enough time."

"She (the social worker) is so on the case.... Very supportive, genuinely caring and made herself very available."

Adoption team is helpful, panel was excellent and welcoming, impressed with our social workers insight and dedication."

"We enjoyed the process, the result our wonderful child was well worth it."

However there were a number of very negative comments made by adopters on questionnaires, as follows:

"Often felt we had not been heard....we felt unable to complain"

"Months with no contact – waiting with hope"

" The systems seem to forget we are people, months go by through inefficient paperwork or low staffing, frustrating and upsetting."

" Children's social worker on the whole were friendly and easy to talk to, adoption social worker unsupportive and at times rude, in general very negative."

Three adopters also stated that in their view some social workers showed a lack of sensitivity around issues of infertility.

This unusual split of views needs to be investigated, by managers, to establish why some adopters feel that they have had such a bad experience.

The social workers interviewed overall felt that Hertfordshire was a fair and competent employer but identified some ongoing issues that are causing an increasing level of dissatisfaction. The most significant issues are:

- Pay grading issues which have led to a disparity between teams and workers
- The impact restructuring has had on the roles and ability to carry out work effectively in children's teams.

- Anxieties about planned changes in the offices the adoption team work from. It was stated that birth parents, in particular, are happy to visit the adoption support team, as the children's social workers do not work from the building. It was feared that should the move involve social workers from both adoption and childcare teams working in the same building this could lead to birth parents being reluctant to visit the premises to access support services.

It was stated that the first two issues had been subject to a grievance procedure and resolution was imminent. For the third issue senior management must carefully consider the likely impact on service users any proposed move of the adoption team will have and ensure that a move does not adversely impact on the good service provided in the area of support to birth family members.

While there is a clear corporate training programme in place social workers overwhelmingly felt that the training offered did not meet the needs of workers specialising in adoption. It was stated by the workers that there are funds, which enable some to attend external training but that they were unclear about how people were prioritised for this training. It was stated that while training needs are identified through the supervision and appraisal processes there was a limited opportunity for workers to undertake the post qualifying awards in childcare social work.

Training is required for some childcare social workers on permanency planning to ensure they are fully aware of all the factors that need to be taken into account when moving a child into an adoptive home and to ensure that information about the child and that birth family is appropriately recorded and contributes to the child's understanding of the situation in the future.

The case records were kept securely and it was evidenced that confidentiality issues are complied with. The files for adopters were well ordered but there were some gaps noted as follows:

- Decisions made by supervisors were not routinely being placed on the file
- Not all files had evidence of a file audit having taken place
- The recording of the CRB checks did not provide all necessary information
- Children's adoption files were 'works in progress' as the files viewed were for children who were not yet adopted. It was stated that before the files are archived they are subject to a full audit of content. It was noted on two files viewed that the chronology was not up to date and close

attention will need to be taken to the quality of the content of files prior to archiving.

There is a clear access to records policy in place.

The arrangements for admin support to the teams are variable, in terms of levels of support, not quality of personnel. It was stated that while there were dedicated workers for the two assessment teams and the adoption support team that in one of the offices there was a vacancy rate of one full time worker and one part time. The family finding team had no dedicated admin support. Clearly at a time of restructuring issues such as levels of admin staff will be key to the future effectiveness of the adoption service and the management team must ensure that such support is adequate for each team.

A sample of personnel files were viewed. It was found that the files for social workers met regulations and standards. The files for panel members had some gaps, such as evidence of CRB checks on two files. One file was viewed for a member of staff employed via an agency. This file had a number of omissions and the manager must ensure that all staff have been through a thorough vetting process prior to their employment commencing.

There are two offices used by the adoption teams, one based in Welwyn Garden City and one based in Bengeo. The inspectors were based in the Welwyn office. There were appropriate security systems in the Welwyn office and adoption records were stored securely. It is recommended that a risk assessment be carried out in respect to protection of files in terms of any risk of damage, for example the risk of fire or water damage.

There were adequate systems in place for the back-up of the IT systems.

There was a detailed disaster recovery plan in place, which detailed such issues as where the service would operate from in the event of a major incident.

# 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

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

<b>MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>7</b>	2
<b>8</b>	4
<b>9</b>	3

<b>STAYING SAFE</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>2</b>	1
<b>4</b>	2
<b>5</b>	2
<b>10</b>	3
<b>11</b>	3
<b>12</b>	2
<b>13</b>	3
<b>15</b>	3
<b>19</b>	3
<b>24</b>	N/A

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

<b>ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>6</b>	3
<b>18</b>	3

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? NA

|#ZTREQT|# Use Section 1 button to insert Standards in the Standard column

**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	AD5AD4AD2	17 and 25	The manager must ensure that all of the assessments in respect of children and adopters are of an adequate quality with reference to the issues detailed in the main body of this report.	31/05/06
2	AD28	11	Personnel files for any person working for the purposes of the adoption agency must evidence that all required checks have been carried out and must contain all information as required by regulation.	31/05/06
3	AD2	9	The manager must report the findings of a review of a case for which potential child protection issues had occurred to the CSCI.	30/04/06
4	AD23	12	The training needs for social workers must be ascertained and met as a matter of priority. Specific but not exclusive areas are training in writing permanence reports and the post qualifying childcare award.	31/05/06

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1	AD4	The manager should ensure that an assessment is carried out in respect to the safe handling and storage of any guns or weapons held by adopters and assessment of any risk from hanging strings of blinds in the home. The employment history of applicants should include the months of employment and clear evidence should be retained in respect to CRB checks.
2	AD5	The manager should ensure that systems are developed to ensure that in each case respective workers are clear about their roles and responsibilities in the family finding and matching processes.
3	AD5	Quality assurance of the assessment carried out during the matching processes need to be more robust.
4	AD5	It is recommended that staff are trained in using the sibling relationship assessment tool and managers monitor this work closely
5	AD11	The induction process for panel members should be formalised.
6	AD12	All panel minutes should clearly record clear reasons for recommending approval.
7	AD6	The manager should consider ways in which the findings from disruption meetings can be more widely made available to social workers.
8	AD7	Social workers should evidence the opportunities that have been provided to birth parents in the planning process for their child.
90	AD7	Consideration should be given to birth parents views about access to the adoption service in the event of a move of premises.
10	AD7	In light of the views provided by birth parents the agency should ensure that no birth parent who wishes to have independent counselling has been disadvantaged in attending sessions due to travel arrangements.
11	AD18	It is strongly recommended that the agency discuss the status of adopted children with the CAMHS service in terms of priority for services.
12	AD20	The manager should ensure that adopters and social

		workers are clear about the visiting frequency required following the approval panel.
13	AD25	The contents of case records for adopters and children should be subject to audit, in terms of the quality as well as the content, and missing information should be placed on files and updating where necessary should be carried out.
14	AD27	The admin support arrangements should be reviewed and it should be ensured that they are adequate to meet the needs of the service.



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