

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

North Somerset Council

**Room 230
Town Hall
Weston super Mare
BS23 1ZY**

Lead Inspector
Lynn
Smith

Announced
15th June 2005 09:15

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	North Somerset Council Adoption Service
Address	Room 230, Town Hal, Weston super Mare, BS23 1ZY
Telephone number	01934 534 803
Fax number	01934 888 832
Email address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	North Somerset Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Jenny Slee
Type of registration	LAA
No. of places registered (if applicable)	
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

NA

Date of last inspection NA

Brief Description of the Service:

North Somerset Council provides a full adoption service to children and adults. Their strategic aims of the service are working towards all children and young people in North Somerset attaining the highest possible standards of health, development and educational achievement. These aims are promoted by : protecting children from harm, ensuring safe and secure care, respecting and promoting cultural ties and identity and supporting the upbringing of children by families. North Somerset adoption and fostering service operates three teams. The recruitment team, which aims to recruit a sufficient pool of prospective foster carers and adopters to meet the needs of North Somerset children needing fostering and adoptive families. The fostering support team who support foster carers and take on the role of 'family finding' adoptive placements. The adoption team who prepare and assess adopters, including intercountry. They give ongoing support and assessment of needs to adopters including support groups and social activities. They provide initial counselling for adults seeking birth records and a letterbox service for ongoing indirect contact between children and birth family members. They also provide consultation on adoption matters to child care workers and other agencies. Each team has a part time manager.

SUMMARY

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

This was the first inspection of North Somerset Council's adoption service. Two inspectors undertook the inspection over four days, including the observation of the panel. Detailed self assessment and pre- inspection documents were produced by the manager as well as supporting documentation prior to the inspection fieldwork.

Questionnaires were received from five adopters, three placing social workers, three placing authorities and two adoption advisors. Unfortunately no questionnaires were received from birth family members.

The inspectors visited four adopters and read relevant adopters' files and children's files.

Interviews were conducted with two councillors, the recruitment manager, the adoption manager, the assistant director, the administration staff, the adoption social workers, the childcare social workers, the fostering social workers (family finders), the psychologist, and the service manager. Both inspectors also attended an adoption support group as part of the inspection.

Nine months prior to the inspection, fostering and adoption teams split into three teams, fostering, adoption and recruitment. Senior management informed inspectors that they would be reviewing the structure of the service after the inspection.

What the service does well:

The service has introduced systems to ensure plans for children are not delayed.

The team manager chairs planning meetings and the service manager case tracks all children in North Somerset with adoption as their plan. At each panel meeting, three monthly updates are given on children waiting for placements as well as those with a placement but no order as yet. This ensures children's plans for adoption do not incur unnecessary delays.

The adoption panel assist social workers to improve the quality of documentation presented as well as promoting children and adopters' rights to have clear and accurate recordings on their files by recording and passing on any corrections to the social worker.

The adoption team are committed to improving the quality of the service provided to adoptive families. Consultation with adopters regarding what support services they feel they need has produced some very good initiatives. The service has responded to this feedback and adopters felt that the training they can access is excellent. There is a wide variety including external and internal training.

'CONSULT' is both a reactive and proactive service consisting of a Clinical Child Psychologist, Educational Psychologist and a dedicated social worker. The service is accessible to both adopters and children and self-referrals can be made.

Social workers and adopters spoke very highly of the medical and legal advisors who produce clear and understandable reports to the adoption panel. Adopters are encouraged in many cases to meet with the medical advisor prior to introductions with children.

All adopters spoke very highly of their support workers, one said that without the support and professional advice, "they possibly would not have been able to continue".

What has improved since the last inspection?

This is the first inspection of North Somerset Adoption Service by the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

What they could do better:

The adoption service needs to review their structure and staffing requirements. The service is inadequately resourced. Many good initiatives are put under stress due to lack of staff. For example, recruiting for specialist placements for older and siblings groups.

The family finding task needs to be reviewed, it is not managed by the adoption manager. Fostering social workers stated they are unable to prioritise this area of work, finding emergency foster placements are given a higher priority. The department must address this immediately to prevent delays in family finding for children with adoption as their plan.

The statement of purpose and children's guide needs to be developed in order to give clarity to the range of monitoring that the service does and for children to have suitable and accessible information about adoption.

Adopters and children's records need to be audited and regularly monitored. Children need to have adoption files in place at the point of the 'best interest' decision. The records are poor and require some work to bring them in line with current legislation. An adopted child reading their file in later life would not have access to all the information they should have and may read things that are inappropriate and unhelpful.

All personnel files including panel members and sessional staff need to have evidence of the relevant checks and documentation to ensure the safeguard and welfare of the children the service provides for.

Birth family members should always be given the opportunity to comment on what is written about them before the information is presented to the adopters or adoption panel.

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

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

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Management

Scoring of Standards

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency does acknowledge the needs of children and are child focused. Insufficient staff within the adoption team has created unnecessary delays in the 'family finding' for children with adoption as their plan.

EVIDENCE:

Positive steps have been taken to recruit adopters for North Somerset children waiting for adoptive placements. A letter was sent out with the initial information pack stating that 'currently recruitment is targeted to meet the needs of North Somerset children. These children are older or in a sibling groups'.

North Somerset has a very small ethnic population however, an excellent resource folder, 'Recognising the Diversity of the people living in North Somerset' was in place. The social workers spoken to say they are aware of the folder and have used it in the past. An adopter confirmed that information and support had been given. "We have received 110% support from North Somerset adoption service. As well as information from our social worker, we have also had access to a staff member, for advice who is the same ethnic origin as our child. Signing interpreters have been provided at every review to ensure our child clearly understands and, is able to give his views. The

interpreter was also used to clearly explain life-story work and adoption. Our son was able to say he wanted to be adopted but not to have his name changed".

Adopters felt the delays in the assessment process were unacceptable.

"Process too long- not enough time, staff nor resources allocated to it". "The delay between the adoption training and the commencement of the assessment process was not helpful and frustrating". "The government may set down guidelines for the timescales of the adoption approval process, but in reality this is only a small part of the picture. It has taken us years to progress from our decision to apply to adopt, and our submission to the panel".

Social workers were aware that due to staffing difficulties, the recent preparation group of prospective adopters, that were looking for older children and sibling groups to be adopted, would not be allocated a social worker to commence the assessment process in the near future. Within the files read, one child's best interest decision was to 'twin track' unfortunately the assessment of the adopters was delayed due to the workload of the social worker. Legal issues arose when the child was placed with the adopters with an incomplete assessment.

The forms F viewed were on the whole thorough however opportunities were missed, e.g. very little information about the preparation group that applicants attend or how they participated.

Applicants clearly contribute to the forms F. Some examples of this seen were lengthy and did not always clearly differentiate from the social workers input.

The adopters' spoke highly of the preparation course, "it gave a good insight into the issues children face". One adopter did say, "Too little information about the actual process, I've had to find many things out afterwards".

Comments received from other authorities and placing social workers were very positive "Adopters are well informed and knowledgeable. Very clear in the questions they asked". "The adopters are well prepared and well supported by social workers".

During the observation of panel, two form E reports were poor; arrangements were made for senior childcare social workers to meet with the childcare social workers to give guidance. Panel acknowledged that the forms E in question were the first the social workers had written. The quality and content of information about children in forms E were of a mixed standard. Evidence was seen where social workers had been judgmental of birth family members and missed out dates.

One case was seen where insufficient information in a form E could have lead to an inappropriate placement being made, as a result of poor information, introductions had to be halted.

The adoption panel members were very good at identifying issues, probing and looking in depth at the documentation presented. Social workers said, "The panel ask relevant questions and make you think about what you've written". Social workers said that they feel the panel gives them useful feedback. " I received an email saying 'thank you' for the good form F submitted to panel". Adopters and social workers are asked to complete 'feedback' sheets after panel this enables positive development of the panel. The training and induction takes into account issues highlighted through the feedback sheets. Placing social workers and adoption social workers are asked to complete 'progress notification forms' every three months to keep the panel up to date on all children who are placed or have a plan of adoption. The decision maker receives all documentation from the panel as well as the panel minutes. The panel chair did not verify panel minutes at this point. The minutes were of a good standard and reflected the issues discussed and the reasons for recommendations made by panel. Panel minutes are not kept on children's' or adopters' files. A clear process needs to be in place to enable relevant people access to this information. Consideration needs to be made regarding the importance of this information, especially in the 'family finding' process as valuable information could be recorded in the minutes and nowhere else. Personnel files for panel members had been started; however needed to be in line with Schedule 3. References, including telephone references, photographs and identification were required.

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 service has clear and focused support systems that make full use of the specialist advisors available to promote positive adoptive placements.

EVIDENCE:

Adopters felt that the preparation training gave them a sound knowledge base of adoption and the issues adopted children could face and the life-long implications of adoption.

Several adopters spoke highly of the dedication and support they received after approval. " My support worker has given me and my family 110% support".

North Somerset adoption agency conducted a service users' consultation in August 2004. The outcomes of this consultation were presented to management. The key findings and priorities were: - the continued develop of support services, continued improvements in the adoption allowance and financial support and the expansion of the current adoption support group activities. The service continues to develop in these areas.

At the support group attended by the inspectors, several adoptive parents gave a feedback to all about a recent meeting they attended where discussions took place on how issues raised through the consultation were being addressed. A discussion took place around the excellent initiative for attachment training. It has been scheduled to take place with friends and family of adopters as well as adopters themselves so that each adopters support network could have an insight into attachment issues.

North Somerset adoption service has access to the 'CONSULT' service. The service consists of a clinical psychologist, an educational psychologist and a family social worker. The 'CONSULT' service is offered to any adoptive parent or child. Two-hour consultations are offered via self-referral or through the social worker. Face to face targeted work with children was undertaken.

Inspectors were told at the support group of the excellent courses and consultations several adopters had received from the 'CONSULT' clinical physiologist. The adopters felt the 'CONSULT' education psychologist service was welcomed however an example was evident where insufficient liaison with the school caused delays to a child's education and a tremendous amount of stress to the adopter.

The 'CONSULT' team were at the point of embarking on a new project. It is intended that the team will look at all children prior to adoption to assess what support is required. They intend to meet with all adopters prior to placement and help with introduction planning. Follow-up visits will take place three months, six months and eighteen months after placement. This will be in addition to 'self referrals' and phone access. The proposed early intervention does reinforce the services proactive approach in identifying adoption issues as early as possible.

Adopters are able to attend relevant training. An annual training manual is provided that identifies all courses with dates. 'Piece of cake' training is also available. Some have also attended 'Dan Hughes' seminars on attachment issues.

The adopters' receive regular newsletters, the last one contained information on support services including suitable summer groups for children to attend. Regular group activities do take place, e.g. picnics and Christmas parties however through the adoption consultation the adopters highlighted their need for more family orientated activities. The adoption team are looking into suitable activities that would be accessible to all adopters and children. Adoption support plans have been introduced, however they do need to be more specific and accessible to adopters. Adopters said that they had not received an individual copy of their plan.

Social workers from child care and adoption teams spoke very highly of the medical advisor. Very good medical reports were presented to panel with invitations for adoptive parents to speak with her prior to placement. All staff felt the legal advisors were approachable and knowledgeable in child and adoption legal issues including inter-country.

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 service has systems in place and a clear commitment to ensure birth families are actively involved in the planning for children's futures, however this is not consistently achieved.

EVIDENCE:

A service level agreement was in place with South West Adoption Network (SWAN). This service provides independent advice, guidance and counselling for adopted adults, adopted young people and children, birth parents, adoptive parents and other relatives. Quarterly monitoring statistics are provided to North Somerset adoption service to enable them to ensure the service SWAN offer meets the needs of the people requiring it. No specific details are given to North Somerset so confidentiality of people accessing SWAN is respected.

Leaflets were seen from 'SWAN' specifically for birth parents as well as specific BAAF leaflets. North Somerset also produces leaflets on 'letterbox' for birth parents.

The placing social workers seen by the inspectors clearly recognise the importance of working with birth family relatives. There were good examples of positive work done by placing social workers i.e.- the practice of giving the birth parent a 'life story book' as information is being gathered. The thought behind this is to empower and encourage them to add to their own books. Another example was where a birth mother disagreed with the information in the form E. She was encouraged to write her comments on an extra sheet that would be attached to the form E. Unfortunately no information was received directly from birth relatives.

Adoption assessments were viewed for birth mothers and fathers. They identified support however it was not clear if birth family members were aware of this as no signatures were evident.

Several forms E that had been presented to panel in the passed did not have signatures on from birth parents. The agency must address this as a matter of urgency and ensure birth families are actively involved in the adoption process wherever possible.

Adopters said that they have received memorabilia from birth families via foster carers and placing social workers.

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 service is well-managed and supportive to staff, however the lack of sufficient staff in the adoption team has created a service that is clearly stretched.

EVIDENCE:

Social workers' said the Statement Of Purpose reflects the adoption service. The executive member of the council for social care ratified the Statement of

Purpose in May 2005. This document is clear and easy to read, however, the Statement of Purpose could include all the monitoring systems that ensure plans for children are not delayed. For example -:

- The Children's Champions Group meets quarterly and receives information regarding adoption. This group is made up of councillors, managers and directors.
- The adoption panels' annual report is presented to the executive member of the council for social care.
- Quarterly performance management reports are submitted to councillors and senior management as well as monthly progress reports.
- All children with adoption as their plan are 'tracked' by a senior manager to ensure minimum delays.

North Somerset adoption service use the BAAF 'Children's Guide', this document however requires more localised information on the service available to children in North Somerset. The booklet was suitable for children and young people over the age of eight years old. The inspectors were informed that the guide will be reviewed and age appropriateness addressed.

The information packs sent to prospective adopters are attractive and informative and available in Braille, large type and other languages. The pack contains a letter explaining the needs of North Somerset children. Many leaflets are included for example, complaints, support, intercountry adoption, the independent review mechanism, letterbox and contact, access to records and adoption allowances.

The manager of the adoption service is suitably social work qualified and at the time of the inspection, had just completed a management qualification. The management of the fostering and adoption services have been 'stretched' over the past six months. Study leave and sickness had impacted on some of the management tasks. For example, the auditing of files has not taken place regularly and no case supervision was evident on files.

Approximately nine months ago the fostering and adoption services was re-structured into teams plus a recruitment team for both fostering and adoption. Three managers were appointed, one for each team.

The adoption team undertake, training of prospective adopters, assessing and supporting all adopters, section 51 counselling, letterbox contact and stepparent/non- agency adoptions. Currently waiting lists for assessments, stepparent adoption and section 51 counselling are in place. There are delays in the letterbox contact due to the work pressures of the staff allocated to this task.

The staff were very experienced and committed. They spoke very positively about developing their roles in light of the new legislation however, inspectors had great concerns about workloads for example, adoption support is a growing area but staff have very little time capacity to achieve the positive outcomes they want to achieve in this field. One social worker said, " crisis work is coming and this takes precedence. We are negotiating with the 'intake'

assessment team how the adoption team will work along side in child protection cases. Cross-boundary responsibility and lack of communication between other local authorities regarding support issues does demand a substantial amount of the adoption teams time".

The social workers said that independent social workers are regularly used but the waiting lists are still present.

'Family finding' is undertaken by the fostering team however not managed by the adoption manager. The inspectors were concerned to learn from fostering social workers that 'family finding' is on occasions secondary task behind fostering issues. "We are not able to measure the time needed to do family finding work and we would have to put emergency fostering issues first". A review of this structure needs to take place as a matter of urgency to prevent any delays in 'family finding' for children.

North Somerset has recently updated their Adoption Manual, social work staff said, "it's an excellent resource for all aspects of adoption work".

Training was accessible via the training officer and consortium. Social workers said that they have attended BAAF training and 'Dan Hughes' training on attachment. They said, "Training has never been refused". One social worker has achieved PQ1 however others were reluctant to go on this training as they felt the impact was too great on the small team.

Adopter and children's files lacked consistency. Some files were in disarray, with no auditing or monitoring evident. CRB's were in place on some adopters' files, others had a memo, stating a CRB check had been done. These memos did not have the status, the result or reference number and no indication who had verified the information.

None of the files viewed had evidence that case supervision had taken place. Adoption files were not created for children with adoption as their plan in compliance with the Regulations. This needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. There was also evidence of 'misfiling', for example, personal information on wrong files.

There is a recording policy for childcare that addresses access to records and relevant legislation however a policy should be in place to address recording regarding adoption files.

The personnel files seen showed that the manager and staff had appropriate qualifications and that the majority of Schedule 3 requirements were in place. The system for recording CRB checks was not robust. The result, reference number and status were not evident. No evidence was seen indicating telephone references are undertaken.

An archive facility is available for secure retention of records. Arrangements for the removal of adoption archives from the Town Hall to this facility were under way. The new facility should have a specific health, safety and fire assessment review in light of these documents now being stored there. The adoption service should also develop a disaster, recovery plan that addresses the provision of preserving and safeguarding, including backing-up of adoption records.

The adoption premises at the Town Hall were very cramped and appear to be out grown by the relatively small team.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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, 15, 19 & 28	11	The adoption service must ensure that it obtains information required in schedules 3 and 4 for all staff working for the purpose of the adoption service (including all panel members and sessional staff).	30 th November 2005
2.	1	3	The adoption service must produce a written children's guide, which includes all the matters listed in schedule 2	30 th November 2005
3.	21	10	The adoption service must ensure there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purpose of the adoption service.	16 th January 2005
4.	25	Adoption Agency Regs 1983 7	North Somerset Council must ensure that an adoption file is created for each child for whom adoption is the plan.	Immediate

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.	7	The adoption service should ensure that the views of birth parents about adoption of child are sought and clearly recorded.
2.	20	The adoption service should review the way staff are organised and managed to enable delivery of an efficient and effective service for children, adopter and birth family members.
3.	27	The adoption service should ensure that there is a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and that remedial action is taken when necessary.
4.	29	The adoption service should ensure they have a suitable Disaster Recovery Plan covering both provision of premises and safeguarding/back-up of records.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

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