



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Devon County Council Adoption Service

**County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
Devon
EX2 4QR**

Lead Inspector
Sean White

Announced Inspection
25th April 2006 09.00a

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	Devon County Council Adoption Service
Address	County Hall Topsham Road Exeter Devon EX2 4QR
Telephone number	01392 383480
Fax number	
Email address	adoption@devon.gov.uk
Provider Web address	: http://www.devon.gov.uk/adoption.htm
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Devon County Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Jonathan Hepworth
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

NA

Date of last inspection 02/12/2003

Brief Description of the Service:

The adoption service is managed within the Children and Young People's Service Directorate of Devon County Council. It operates from three sites across the county but is centrally managed, essentially from Totnes although the headquarters of the agency are in Exeter.

The agency undertakes the following:

- Recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families wishing to adopt a child or children from this country.
- Preparation, assessment and approval of people wishing to adopt a child or children from overseas.
- Matching and placing children with adoptive families.
- Support and advice to adoptive families.
- Support and advice to families where the placement of a child has been made.
- Support to birth relatives.
- Birth records counselling.
- Post adoption support to anyone who has been affected by adoption.
- Manages indirect (letterbox) contact between adopted children and birth relatives.

The service is staffed by thirteen social workers (some part-time), which are supported by three practice managers and assisted by administrative workers. The agency approves a significant number of adoptive families and makes around 40-50 placements a year.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection upon which this report is based was carried out over three days by two inspectors. The agency prepared well for the visit and everyone involved extended every assistance and courtesy throughout the duration of the inspection.

During the course of the inspection the following were undertaken:

- Interviews with key managers and staff;
- Interview with elected member of the council;
- Reading policies and procedures;
- Inspection of case files for adopters and children;
- Inspection of (one) service premises and archive facilities;
- Visits to adoptive families;
- Inspection of Human Resources records;
- Observation of adoption panel.

Prior to the inspection questionnaires were sent to all adopters approved in the last twelve months, and applicants currently in assessment, birth families, social workers and agencies who had placed a child for adoption with the agency and professional advisors. The response was as follows:

- Adopters/prospective adopters – 27;
- Social workers – 4;
- Placing authorities – 3;
- Birth families – 0;
- Advisors – 3;

What the service does well:

The agency, overall, provided a very good service in most areas of its operation and the outcomes for children were positive and optimistic.

The agency has an impressive record of recruiting adopters, placing children in appropriate families and minimising delay; having very few children awaiting placement and a very low disruption rate in recent years is commendable. There were good preparation and assessment practices and arrangements for matching and introductions were well considered and coordinated.

The overall management of the service operates to a good standard. Managers at all levels – including elected members – were well versed in adoption matters and demonstrated a commitment to children having the best outcomes possible. It was clear that there was significant knowledge and understanding throughout the management structure. Workers, similarly, showed that they were suitably experienced and knowledgeable, and demonstrated a skilled approach to their work. There were many comments of praise for social workers, and the team as a whole, from adopters; for instance, “[My social

worker] certainly knew what she was doing...very impressed", "...a very considered approach, insightful but not intrusive", and "everybody at the office was helpful and supportive", being typical comments. Other authorities that had placed children with Devon adopters also made positive comments in questionnaires, such as, "Excellent" and "[social worker] was valuable and experienced".

Monitoring and evaluating the operation of the service was, in the main, of a good standard (but see below in 'What they could do better section) and quality control was evident; the decision-maker demonstrated a close eye for detail and process management.

What has improved since the last inspection?

There had been noticeable improvements since the last inspection demonstrating a managerial commitment to service development.

The agency had completed a Statement of Purpose that included all of the matters listed in Schedule 1 of the regulations. The executive side of the council had agreed the Statement of Purpose. The agency had recently developed a children's guide for younger children. This was a very attractive booklet that can be used as a working tool with children up to the age of eight years.

A written recruitment strategy has been developed. This covered a wide range of activities across the county. The effect of this strategy was evaluated and improvements noted.

A letter for people wishing to adopt a child from another country has been updated. The letter was clear and comprehensive. It provides details of the process and the charges for this service. The British Association for Adoption and Fostering leaflet for inter country adopters was sent to applicants with this letter and was available to all staff.

The assessment of prospective adopters has been extended to include the nine positive indicators for successful parents within part two of the Form F. Previous partners of applicants were contacted wherever possible. Evidence of this was seen on an adopters file during the inspection. The timing of planning meetings for placements had been revised and a checklist of information for prospective adopters had been devised to ensure they received all of the available information before a child was placed.

The information pack for prospective adopters had been updated. It was attractively presented and contained clear information about the process.

The agency was in the process of developing an in house support service for all parties to adoption. There was evidence on one file that a birth parent had access to a good level of support and had been closely involved in the arrangements for the adoption of her children.

The process for reviewing the policies and procedures for the adoption panel has been completed.

New practice manager posts had been created and filled. The manager of the adoption service and the practice manager posts had clear written job descriptions and the adoption manager had completed NVQ level 5.

The agency had developed an adoption-training programme for all staff.

What they could do better:

Although much of the agency's operational and systems management was of a high standard attention needs to be paid to the monitoring and quality controlling of case files. They were not particularly well put together, were inconsistent in quality and had no evidence of systematic auditing. There were few supervision decisions recorded and key information was missing in some cases; case recording was found to be perfunctory in many cases.

Staff personnel files were not as complete as they should be and the records in respect of adoption panel members were poor.

Life story work was not well featured in the cases that were tracked during the visit; it is important that this vital aspect of adoption work is given appropriate priority to enable children to have all relevant details of their history and antecedents.

The adoption panel, whilst appropriately constituted and generally well managed, should endeavour to ensure that they are fully aware of the implications of new legislation in their deliberations. The panel that was observed (and it is accepted that the legislation is very new) appeared confused when discussing approval and matching and how these must be separate considerations.

More investment in IT should be strongly considered; workers having to share computer access is not the most efficient way of conducting a service.

The issues of disaffection caused by different and unequal pay structures need to be attended to; fairness and competence in employment matters are crucial to ensure the workforce is motivated and loyal.

The technical difficulties in respect of maintaining safe archives should be attended to as soon as possible.

Child protection (safeguarding) procedures do not reflect the aims of the service as outlined in the statement of purpose in that they do not, as they should, make specific reference to safeguarding children in adoptive placements.

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

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

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

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

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

The agency has improved its performance in a way that provides a more coherent infrastructure for the adoption service. This has created a framework within which children have much better opportunities for a safe adoption.

EVIDENCE:

There have been significant improvements made by this agency since the last inspection in Dec 2003. A Rapid Improvement Plan was instigated some time ago and this, supported by the Adoption Development Plan & the Recruitment Strategy, has paid impressive dividends. There had been more than forty domestic adopters approved in the last twelve months, very few children were awaiting a match and delays were kept to the absolute minimum; there had been only one disruption – the first in almost five years. It was very evident that the agency took seriously the need to avoid delay and had stringent monitoring procedures in place.

The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters was, overall, very thorough and the approach to matching children with families was similarly well managed and carefully considered. Preparation groups are held periodically at locations throughout the county and arrangements are in place within the consortium for discrete inter-country groups. The adopters'

assessment reports, although improving, were (in some instances) reliant on substantial written input from the applicants with only limited analysis from the social worker. There is no 'house style' for report presentation; the agency may wish to consider the benefits of a more consistent model of report style. Nevertheless, the agency's approach to assessment was thorough overall and all necessary checks were made, including contacting previous partners. Children's placement reports were also generally well presented although there was evidence from the adoption panel of omissions being made in the documentation of crucial information – particularly in the case of a sibling group where all information was not available on every report. Nevertheless, the outcomes for children were very positive with some realistic placements being made, including very complex and demanding ones.

Feedback from adopters was, in the main, very positive in respect of their experiences of the service they received: "The process was fine and we were always kept in touch with what was going on" and "We were very pleased with our experience of the adoption process" being two written comments received and, "Preparation training superb", being said by one family that was visited. Placing social workers and other agencies were also very complementary about Devon's approach with comments such as, "Their commitment and knowledge was excellent", and "Forms F gave a good picture of the adopters".

The information received from placing social workers (both within and external to the authority) gave a very positive impression of the agency's cooperative and partnership approach to working in the best interests of children.

The adoption panels (there are two) were appropriately constituted and were governed by a clear policy, written to encompass new legislation, which outlined their duties, responsibilities and functions. One panel was observed and it undertook its work with due rigour and attention to detail. Some of its deliberations, however, demonstrated that it was not fully 'in tune' with the requirements and expectations of the Adoption & Children Act. Also, the decision-maker did not accept a recommendation made in the recent past, due, in some part, to the panel not 'separating' the approval and matching processes. Nevertheless, this demonstrated a keen approach to decision-making - showing clearly that attention is paid to quality and performance issues. The administrative arrangements for supporting the panel processes were very efficient and minute taking, although not undertaken by the staff from the service, was of a good standard and minutes were produced without delay.

Managers and staff were all suitably qualified and experienced, and demonstrated a wide knowledge and understanding of adoption matters, including new legislation.

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):

6, 18

The support provided, and the professional advice available, to encourage successful placements is of a good standard overall. This promotes optimistic adoptions from a stable foundation.

EVIDENCE:

Families with a child in placement are provided with support from the social worker that undertook their assessment – until at least the adoption order is made; this provides continuity and familiarity. This arrangement was seen as positive by adoptive families who responded in questionnaires by saying, for instance, “The support we have been given by everyone has been brilliant” and “We felt very supported by [our social worker] and the team”. There was very little deviation from these sentiments although one family did seem somewhat unsure about whom to ask for support and advice on specific issues. There was clear evidence that support was available and provided throughout the whole process of placement, including the matching and introductory phases. The agency has made some successful placements of sibling groups and other ‘difficult to place’ children and has supported these throughout. As indicated in the previous section, there has only been one disruption to a placement in several years.

There is an embryonic adoption support team in place with its own practice managers. Although not yet fully functional it was evident, through discussions, interviews and policies/procedures that the development of this team is in line with new legislation and the need to ensure a broad adoption support service to a wide range of people affected by adoption. The development appeared positive and had the capacity for continued improvement.

The service is well served by professional advisors. Medical advisers sit on both the adoption panels (and are regular attendees) and there is a non-member third advisor available to cover absences. There were several reports received about the high quality of the medical advice, both to the panel specifically and the service generally. There is also an educational psychologist who provides advice and sits on the panel; the contributions made to the panel observed during the inspection were noted as valuable and relevant. The legal adviser, who is supported by other solicitors with experience of children's matters in the authority's legal section, provides support and advice to both the panel and the team. There was some concern, however, during the inspection when social workers and the panel chair reported that they were unclear about who provided legal advice and also said that attendance at panel was infrequent. The agency should ensure there is clarity about legal advice.

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.

The agency's approach to the inclusion of, and support to, birth families demonstrated a positive developing service but was let down somewhat by the inconsistent approach to life-story work.

EVIDENCE:

The new adoption support team provides support for birth families; one worker has a specific responsibility for this and receives external support for this task. This is a recent initiative – in the past the service contracted with an independent agency to fulfil this role but has made the decision to undertake this responsibility 'in-house' as part of its developing adoption support team. There were no questionnaire respondents from birth relatives so it was not possible to gain direct information but it appeared that the evolution of the service was positive and was aimed at working as closely as possible with them to enable effective plans for the adoption of their children to be progressed.

Although the views of birth parents were sought throughout the adoption process and recorded on permanence reports it was not always clear that they had been given the opportunity to comment about what had been written about them.

There was some evidence to demonstrate that efforts were made to develop life-story work for children and to ensure that each had an appropriate history and later-life letter available. However, this was not found in all areas and in some there was no information at all. It is important that such work begins at the earliest opportunity and that all children have a completed life-story book when in placement and prior to the adoption order being made.

Contact arrangements, including the 'letterbox' system, were clearly recorded and were satisfactorily managed.

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):

1, 3, 14, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29.

This is an agency that is well managed in most areas which has resulted in an improved service that provides good quality and efficient outcomes for children requiring adoption.

EVIDENCE:

The agency's statement of purpose was of a good standard and included all required information; it gave a broad overview of the service and reflected the policies and procedures that govern the agency's responsibilities. The

children's guide was a very attractive booklet that can be used as a working tool with children up to the age of eight years.

A written recruitment strategy for adopters has been developed. This covered a wide range of activities across the county and, as already indicated in this report, the recruitment of adopters has been very successful.

It was very evident throughout the inspection that the service is well managed at all levels; appropriately qualified and very experienced managers demonstrated a clarity of understanding and experience of adoption matters and this was clear in the development and success of the service overall. This included an elected member of the council who gave clear indications of interest and involvement, the head of service who demonstrated depth of knowledge and a keen eye for detail, and service and practice managers who had a steadfast and committed approach to service development.

Similarly the workers in the adoption team were all suitably qualified and showed a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. There was a range of experiences in the team that was complementary to the scope of their work and it was clear they had a wide knowledge of adoption matters. Their skills and abilities were commented on very favourably by adopters – "Social worker excellent, superb interview techniques" and " Skilled at getting to know us and our abilities", being comments provided by families visited. Questionnaire respondents were similarly effusive saying, for instance, "We think [our social worker] is a star" and "Our adoption experience was very positive".

The agency had sufficient workers to undertake its range of responsibilities and the arrangements for workload allocation and monitoring were well managed. Supervision was provided at appropriately regular intervals; there was, however, little evidence on case files of decisions made during supervision. Workers, nevertheless felt very supported in their work and said that there was a culture of encouragement and enablement across the service. Although the authority demonstrated itself as a fair and competent employer and understood the nature of supporting and encouraging staff – which included satisfactory recruitment, retention, grievance and whistle-blowing policies and practices – there was an issue of discontentment regarding a lack of social workers' pay parity across the department.

Staff training had been a high priority in recent times, with an emphasis being given (but not exclusively) to the enactment of new legislation. Workers felt that they had ample training opportunities and that the department encouraged their development. The management should endeavour to ensure that on-going training is provided on the new legislation and included in the programme.

The management of systems was, in the main, of a good standard but there were some matters that should be addressed to ensure consistency and clarity

in all areas. Case files were not routinely monitored, were not particularly 'user-friendly' and had key information (panel minutes, for instance) missing in some cases; case recording was, in many cases, perfunctory and did not provide sufficient detail or clarity to enable tracking or checking to be carried out effectively. This was the case with both adopters' and adoption support files – the latter requiring a more consistent and coherent format. There is a new policy in place, however, but this needs to be enacted as soon as possible.

Although many respondents to questionnaires indicated that they did not know how to complain it was evident that the service acts appropriately to complainants – there had been some in the last year, all appropriately managed – and takes matters seriously. It may be appropriate, nevertheless, to review how the right to complain is presented to applicants.

The records in respect of staff and panel members were not kept to the required standard; there were some omissions of required information in staff files and panel member's records were generally poor with significant detail missing. It was noted, however, that the agency was in the process of improving panel members' files and had an electronic database that alerts when updates are necessary. It was acknowledged that the agency is actively working towards compliance on this issue.

One issue that the agency needs to address to ensure a full and comprehensive approach to keeping children safe, as outlined in the agency's statement of purpose, is in respect of the lack of any direct reference in its child protection procedures to safeguarding children in adoptive placements.

Only one of the three premises locations were inspected. This was a small building with appropriate security and, although somewhat cramped, provided a reasonable working environment. There is, nevertheless, limited access to IT with workers having to share computers; a more efficient service might be realised with greater investment in IT facilities for all workers.

Case records are appropriately stored and there are archive facilities in County Hall. This is a paper archive only, and although there are appropriate fire detection systems in place, there is, as yet, no back-up system in place. There are plans, however, to ensure that a recently installed IT system has the facility to archive records electronically.

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	3
8	2
9	3

STAYING SAFE	
Standard No	Score
2	4
4	3
5	3
10	3
11	3
12	3
13	4
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	3
18	3

MANAGEMENT	
Standard No	Score
1	3
3	4
14	3
16	2
17	3
20	3
21	3
22	2
23	3
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	1
29	2
30	N/A
31	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? YES

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	AD16	9 (2003)	The agency must prepare and implement a policy to safeguard children placed for adoption.	01/08/06
2.	AD28	2003 11 (3)(d) 15(1)	The agency must maintain records for all staff and panel members that include all of the information required in Schedules 3 & 4. Previous timescale 31/01/06 not met.	01/08/06

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	AD8	The agency should give due priority to the compilation of life-story work.
2	AD22	The agency should ensure that social workers across the

		children's services have pay and conditions that are fair and equitable to avoid disaffection and maintain retention initiatives.
3	AD25	Supervision decisions should be maintained on case files.
4	AD27	The agency should instigate a closer monitoring and auditing system for case files.
5.	AD29	The agency should include plans for the back up of adoption records in the disaster recovery plan. (This is an outstanding recommendation.)
6	AD29	More investment in IT should be provided to avoid the workers having to share access to computers.

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