



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### **Knowsley MBC Adoption Service**

**Astley House  
Astley Road  
Huyton  
Knowsley  
L36 8HY**

*Lead Inspector*  
Marian Denny

*Announced Inspection*  
1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> November 2005      09:30

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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# SERVICE INFORMATION

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<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	Mrs Terry Douglas
<b>Type of registration</b>	Local Auth Adoption Service
<b>No. of places registered (if applicable)</b>	0
<b>Category(ies) of registration, with number of places</b>	

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

**Date of last inspection** This was the first inspection by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI).

## Brief Description of the Service:

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council operates its own adoption service, which is located within the children and families division of the Council's Social Services Department. The service's office premises are situated at Astley House, in Huyton, which occupy a central position within the borough and are accessible by car or public transport. The team manager, who also has managerial responsibility for the fostering service, manages the adoption service. A comprehensive adoption service is provided to children and adults, which includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of adopters; pre and post-placement support of adopters, training for adopters post-placement, approval of non-agency adopters; the matching and placement of children with adoptive parents; support for children pre and post-placement; post adoption contact. The service also provides and maintains a letterbox scheme that supports information exchange in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults, via a service level agreement with After Adoption. In addition, the agency provides section 51 counselling and support to adopted adults. The service commissions overseas adoptions to a voluntary agency, in St. Helens.

# SUMMARY

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

The adoption service demonstrated a real commitment to this inspection and had prepared well for it. All the pre-inspection documentation provided was thorough and arrived within the agreed timescales. The arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful and enabled the inspectors to make effective use of their time. The facilities and resources provided were of a good standard and everyone involved in the inspection were most helpful and courteous.

Prior to the inspection, the pre-inspection material and the questionnaires, which had been returned to the inspection team were read and analysed. The information obtained from these documents has been incorporated into the inspection findings.

The inspection, itself, was carried out over three days and involved two inspectors. In addition, one inspector observed the adoption panel for half a day. Interviews were undertaken with the Assistant Director of Children and Families, other senior personnel, the team manager and two senior practitioners within the fostering and adoption team, childcare and adoption social workers and administrative staff. An elected member, with portfolio for health and social care was also interviewed, as well as the adoption panel's medical, legal advisor and chairperson. A sample of children and adopters' files were read and four adoptive families were visited. A variety of agency records were inspected, administrative resources examined and three office premises seen. Security issues relating to both record keeping and the agency's office premises were considered. In addition, the inspection team received twelve questionnaires from prospective and approved adopters, one from birth family members, eight from placing social workers/authorities and two from specialist advisors. The responses received from these questionnaires, together with the information obtained from interviews with adopters have been reflected in the main body of this report.

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

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council (KMBC) provided services to a compact, though densely populated area. One of the benefits of the Council's size was that it had enabled the authority to develop close collaborative working and partnerships with other agencies. The integrated arrangements with the Primary Care Trust had resulted in a number of shared posts within the children and families' division and ensured more flexible funding for services. A Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board had been established with representatives from the Council, the Primary Care Trust, the 5-Borough Partnerships NHS Trust and Children and Young People. This board had resulted in the development of a shared vision for children and young people's services and become the main mechanism for the planning,

development and integration of services for children. This had resulted in the development of a strategic Plan for Children and Young People, which would have a positive impact on the services provided to adopted children and their families. The Council had been granted Beacon status for the integration of children's services.

The Council had an excellent understanding and demonstrated a real commitment to the corporate parenting role. The executive member of the Council with the portfolio for health and social care was a good advocate and supported the development of good practice and outcomes for children.

The council was committed to providing "the best service" for looked after children and had made a real investment in the service to achieve this. The authority's senior management team shared these aspirations, were working hard to realise them and had a clear vision about the future development of children's services. This information was effectively communicated to staff and those spoken with had confidence in their leadership skills. The adoption agency's management team had the experience and skills to manage and organise the service in an effective and efficient manner.

The separation of adoption and fostering into two distinct teams had enabled the adoption service to focus more clearly on the core business and prioritise the work appropriately. The adoption team were enthusiastic about their work, had respect for each other, a "learning, sharing culture" had developed within the team and all staff were committed to achieving a high standard of practice. The adoption service was an integral part of the children services and there was good communication between them; this effective communication facilitated a child-focused approach to adoption issues.

There was a clear well structured preparation programme, which was routinely evaluated and changes implemented, where necessary. Adopters generally considered the programme "interesting," "thought provoking" and stated it provided a "good foundation" for them to adopt. Adopters were positive about the assessment indicating that it had been "thorough" and handled in a "sensitive and skilful manner."

The agency worked hard to obtain detailed and accurate information regarding adopters and children and gave careful consideration to matching to ensure that good practice and outcomes were achieved.

Knowsley's children and families' services used a definitive Life Work Model, which was an essential part of permanence planning for children. This model ensured that children understood the reasons for their removal from their birth family and their ancestry. There was evidence of life work being consistently completed to a high standard and an excellent example of life work was seen in a child's memory box. The agency also had an interactive children's guide, which was an excellent tool to enhance a child's understanding about the nature of adoption, the reasons for their adoption plan and it also enabled the child to express their wishes and feelings about adoption.

The adoption panel was properly constituted, well organised and demonstrated a good understanding of adoption. Administrative support provided to the panel was of a high standard. Decision-making was thorough and timely.

The agency's specialist advisers were extremely knowledgeable; child focussed and provided a good service to the adoption agency.

The life-long implications of adoption were recognised. The inclusion of birth parents/ families in the adoption process was reflected in the agency's policies and procedures and in independent counselling service commissioned from After Adoption.

The council was considered to be a fair and competent employer. The training provided was considered to be of good quality and staff were fully supported in utilising the training opportunities provided them.

The quality of the administrative support provided to the adoption service was of a high standard. Adopters stated the administrative staff were "friendly and helpful" and were clearly a real asset to the agency.

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

This was the first inspection of the agency under the current legislation.

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

The adoption team was relatively small in size as a consequence unexpected events such as staff sickness impaired the agency's image, service delivery and was in danger of compromising service development. Consideration should therefore be given to reviewing the resources currently allocated to this service.

Adopters generally found preparation groups extremely valuable. However, some adopters raised some interesting ideas regarding changes to these groups. The agency should consider this information in determining whether the effectiveness of these preparation groups could be further enhanced.

Adopters' assessments were generally good; these could be enhanced through expansion of the health and safety assessment. The agency should also ensure the contemporaneous notes from the assessment and the twenty-eight day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment, where applicable, is held on file.

The agency should consider ensuring that all written literature provided adopters, children/young people, birth parents and their families contain



pictorial illustrations that accurately reflects the multi-cultural society in which we live.

Whilst the agency had carried out a great deal of work with childcare staff on improving the quality of children's assessments they continued to be of variable quality. The agency needs to address this and should also ensure that birth parents' views about the information presented in the children's assessments is consistently recorded. This also needs to be addressed in respect of birth parents and their families' views regarding adoption and contact.

In the sample of children's records seen, the children's wishes and feelings regarding adoption were recorded on file. However, these could be recorded in a more explicit manner in the file documentation. The life work model and the agency's interactive children's guide may prove useful tools to achieve this.

The agency had a well-organised and effective permanence panel, however the panel policies and procedures should be revised, if they are to meet the National Minimum Standards (NMS). Six monthly meetings took place between the panel chairperson, the advisor and service manager. In enhancing the panels' quality assurance role, it is recommended that the frequency of these meetings should be increased and should also include the agency decision maker. The panel leaflet provided adopters was informative, though would benefit from the inclusion of the photographs of panel members.

Adoption support was a developing aspect of the agency's work and the agency demonstrated a real commitment to the development of these services. However, if there is to be effective development of these services issues of capacity within the adoption team should be addressed.

The agency should develop a coherent strategy for working with birth parents and their families. The independent counselling and support service provided by After Adoption, along with the other advocacy services outside and within the Council should also be actively promoted.

A statement of purpose and children's guide had recently been produced, however revision of these was required if they were to meet the adoption NMS.

The agency's child protection procedures did not include specific references to children placed for adoption, which should be addressed.

The quality assurance systems in relation to the adoption records should be increased, as some files were not maintained in accordance with the adoption regulations.

The access to records policy should be revised to include the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records.

The procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff must be more robust. Personnel files and panel members' files were not kept in accordance with the adoption regulations and this must be immediately addressed.

The agency should develop a service specific disaster recovery plan.

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**

## **CONTENTS**

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 had systems in place to ensure effective and safe planning for children. Children were matched with adoptive parents who were well prepared and assessed to meet their needs.

## EVIDENCE:

The Council's Local Public Service Agreement (PSA) had ensured that the Children and Families' Division closely monitored the Council's looked after children population. A robust and efficient tracking system had been devised, which carefully monitored the care planning progress of all children in care, including those children being twin tracked and with a permanence plan. There were also arrangements in place for adoption staff to be involved at the outset of a child's care planning process, for example, in attendance at the accommodation panel and the looked after children's (lac) reviews. The efficiency of these care planning processes were also greatly assisted by the compact nature of the borough and the effective communication within the organisation. There was clear evidence that these systems were effective in ensuring the adoption agency was fully aware of the children locally requiring adoptive families. The service was also recruiting and prioritising prospective adopters, who were most likely to meet their needs. Excellent practice was seen of children being matched and placements made in a timely manner, as a consequence, the agency had few children waiting for adoption placements and

there had been no placement disruptions. It is recommended that the agency should reflect and reinforce this excellent standard of practice through the development of a clearly written recruitment plan.

Adopters indicated that the agency responded in a "friendly", "pleasant" and "helpful" manner to their initial adoption enquiries. A number indicated that the information pack had been sent out "promptly", "a few days" and the majority of adopters stated they had received "lots of information", which they had been "very pleased with" and that it had proved "excellent" in meeting their initial needs. Several adopters stated that following receipt of the information packs, the agency had "quickly" followed this up with interview. However, some adopters stated that they had waited some time for a response from the agency, due to staff shortages and this had caused them some disappointment and dissatisfaction with the service.

The agency undertook a formal preparation, assessment and approval process in respect of adopters and there was a clear commitment to ensuring foster carers, who adopt a child they have previously fostered, received the same services as other prospective adopters. This was clearly demonstrated in the preparation training, which was provided jointly to foster carers and adopters. The materials and exercises used in the preparation programme was an amalgamation of the fostering network's course, "The skills to foster" and the British Association of Adoption and Fostering's (BAAF) course, "Preparing to Adopt". Adopters' attendance and involvement in the preparation groups, as well as the course leaders' comments regarding the applicants was recorded in the form F presented to panel.

Adopters presented a rather mixed picture regarding the speed of attendance at the preparation training. Some adopters indicated that after submitting their application they had attended the preparation training within six weeks; whilst others indicated they had waited a number of months. It would appear that some of the delays were related to the service's prioritisation systems, as well as to a time when the service was suffering staff shortages. The agency clearly needs to address these issues and ensure the reasons for delay is effectively communicated to applicants, thereby enabling them, if they so wish, to approach and make an application to another adoption agency.

Adopters indicated that the information given them regarding the preparation training was clear and preparation groups were held at "convenient times", which effectively met the varying needs of prospective adopters. Adopters stated that the preparation programme was well structured, organised and effectively presented. Several adopters described the materials used as "thought provoking", "excellent", "prepared us well", with one adopter describing the preparation training as "brilliant". One adopter though stated that the information provided regarding the children's needs and past experiences had been presented "too positively" and suggested this should be addressed. A couple of adopters felt there was too great an emphasis placed

on fostering, which had resulted in their needs as adopters not being fully addressed. In contrast, another adopter stated that they had found the joint training beneficial, as it had increased their understanding of the child's previous experiences in care and had significantly altered their view on a child's direct contact with birth parents and families. Several adopters commented how much they had enjoyed hearing about the experiences of others, who had adopted. One adoptive family, who were adopting a second child, stated that the preparation group would have been more effective, if it had been specifically designed to meet their needs, as second time adopters. The agency may wish to consider this in arranging future preparation groups.

A number of placing social workers/authorities stated that "good preparatory work" had been undertaken with adopters. Several commented on the depth of adopters' understanding about the importance of maintaining a child's heritage and the positive view that adopters had of a child's direct contact with the birth parents and their families.

Adopters were generally of the view that the assessment process had been "open", "transparent" and had generally been undertaken at a "pace appropriate to their needs". One adopter though indicated the assessment process had taken eight months to complete and in their opinion had been a "long, drawn out process". A number of adopters said that the assessment had been "thorough", "gruelling, but a positive and beneficial process", another adoptive couple stated that they had held "a rather unrealistic picture of adoption", however, the assessment process had enabled them "to reassess what they thought about adoption" and as a result believed that they now had "a more realistic picture". Several adopters indicated that the staff were extremely "professional" and "skilled" in their work and as a consequence personal issues had been dealt with "sensitively and appropriately". The majority of adopters indicated that they had been kept fully informed of their progress through out the adoption process, though several adopters stated that they would have liked to have been kept more fully informed after the approval stage and prior to matching. A number of adopters commented on the accuracy of the agency' recording, particularly in relation to the form F, which they indicated portrayed them very accurately. The adopters spoken with had received a copy of their written assessment and were aware that they had to send any observations regarding the assessment, in writing to the agency within twenty-eight days of receiving the notice. However, in several of the files examined, there was no evidence of the 28-day waiver notice relating to the adopters' form F.

Placing social workers presented a similar picture, as adopters about the quality of assessments. Several workers stated the assessments were "well written, clear and detailed". One placing social worker stated that the form F's addressed issues of equality and diversity extremely effectively. A number commented on the "thoroughness of the assessments" and the form F's, which they regarded provided a "good", "accurate" picture of the family.

The adoption service undertakes competency-based assessments of adopters. A sample of adopters' files were examined and these assessments were generally of good quality with adopters' competencies clearly evidenced and sound professional analysis demonstrated. One assessment seen though would have benefited from greater professional analysis and this was discussed with the manager of the service at the time of the inspection. The agency also gave consideration to ensuring applicants had the capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way, pet and health/safety assessments were consistently used and found on file. The agency may wish to consider developing these assessments though, in order to enhance this aspect of the work. In all the adopters' files examined, there was no evidence of the contemporaneous notes of the assessment and this should be addressed. Similarly, the files contained little evidence of managerial oversight and scrutiny and this needs to be urgently addressed.

The agency had written information about the matching, introduction, placement process and support available to adopters. This information was in a user-friendly format and was provided at various points through out the adoption process. Adopters indicated that they had found this information detailed and helpful in enabling them to gain a good understanding of all the stages in the adoption process and the support services available to them. Consideration should be given though to enhancing these information leaflets through pictorial images, which more accurately reflect to-day's multi-cultural Society.

The agency's practice was child focussed, with careful consideration being given to matching a child with adopters, as evidenced in the agency's thorough matching meetings and the quality of their matching reports. There was evidence that adoption staff had made strenuous efforts to improve the quality of form E's in providing childcare staff with various guidance documents, training and mentorship. However, whilst there had been improvements in the quality of these forms, it was recognised further training was required to achieve a high standard of practice and arrangements had been made for such training to take place. Life work was also undertaken, which ensured a great deal of information was obtained about the child. The development of the Life work model across the service was a valuable tool in the matching process. It was recognised though that the qualitative information provided to adopters could be further enhanced through the introduction of life appreciation days, which they were hoping to introduce in the future.

Adopters stated that the agency had provided them with a great deal of information about the child. They were also extremely positive about being able to discuss a child's medical condition with the agency's medical adviser and thereby fully consider the implications of this for themselves and their family in caring for the child.

In examining a sample of files, it was confirmed that the quality of the form E's were variable. There was evidence though that the Life work model used by Knowsley's children's services ensured considerable work was undertaken in preparing a child for adoption. Adopters' introductory books were also used as an effective tool in preparing a child prior to placement. The agency had produced a written guidance for adopters regarding the completion of these books, which ensured the books were effective and appropriate. In addition, the adoption worker was able to provide further support to adopters should this be required. In some of the children's files, their wishes and feelings regarding adoption could have been made more explicit in the file documentation. The agency may wish to consider whether the interactive child's guide to adoption and the life work model could be effectively used to evidence the child's views regarding their adoption.

Examination of adopters and children's files identified some shortfalls, however, overall, the inspection team were of the view that the information provided adopters in the matching process was of good quality and ensured good practice and outcomes were achieved.

There was evidence that the agency had developed an effective system to record the adoptive parents' decision regarding notifying the agency, if an adopted child dies during childhood or soon afterwards. In addition, the agency's letterbox agreement and scheme clearly addressed adopters' and birth families' decisions regarding the nature and frequency of the contact between them.

The agency had written policies and procedures in relation to the Permanence Panel, which were available to all staff and panel members. Whilst this documentation contained some of the information required, not all the matters referred to in 10.1 and 10.2 of the National Minimum Standards were addressed. To achieve full compliance with these standards, these documents should be revised.

Arrangements had been made for six monthly meetings to take place with the panel chairperson, the panel advisor and the service manager for the adoption and fostering section. These meetings clearly provided an opportunity to formally feedback to the agency the quality of cases being presented to the panel. However, if any urgent issues arose in the intervening months, the panel chairperson advised she would have ready access to the service manager and agency decision-maker. However, meetings between the panel chairperson and senior managers should be more frequent and include the agency decision maker.

Prospective adopters were invited to attend panel and an informative leaflet had been produced to inform them of this process. This leaflet could be further enhanced with the inclusion of panel members' photographs. Several Adopters' commented positively on their experiences of attending panel stating



that panel members were “friendly”, “put them at their ease”, questions asked were “appropriate” and the meeting was considered to be “well chaired”.

The agency’s permanence panel was properly constituted. Observation of the panel demonstrated that the members had a good knowledge and understanding of the complexity of adoption work and paid a great deal of attention to the details of the cases presented. Their thoroughness of scrutiny ensured relevant concerns were noted and effectively addressed.

In the sample of panel members’ seen, two of the files did not contain a CRB check and two files did not contain a signed and dated confidentiality agreement. There was evidence to confirm all panel members received regular and appropriate training for their roles.

Panels were convened on a regular basis to avoid unnecessary delay in the approval of adopters or the matching of a child. The recent changes in the date, papers were being forwarded to panel ensured that panel members now had the necessary time to read the documentation. The selection of panel minutes seen were of a good standard though could be enhanced with greater attention given to the reasons for the panel ’s recommendations.

The agency decision-maker took her responsibilities very seriously and her practice was extremely child focussed. All panel papers and minutes were received and thoroughly examined, prior to the agency’s decision being made. The agency decision should be clearly stated. In view of this, consideration should be given to amending the wording of the form signed by the agency decision maker. There was evidence of the agency’s decision made without delay and quickly and effectively communicated to the prospective adopters, the child and birth parents. However, the agency decision maker may wish to consider signing this letter personally, as in so doing it clearly emphasises the importance of such a decision.

There were clearly written recruitment and selection procedures. However, the personnel files examined did not contain all the information required by regulation, for example, one file did not contain two written references. There was also no documentary evidence of relevant qualifications, although all staff were registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). No files contained proof of identity in the form of a recent photograph of the staff member. The inspection team was advised that from July 2005, a system had been introduced to ensure telephone enquiries were made to verify the legitimacy of references. A system had also been introduced for Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks on staff to be reviewed every three years.

# 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 agency provided a variety of support and specialist advice for adoptive families with a view to maintaining placement stability for children. Capacity issues within the adoption team and the lack of a clear strategy though compromised the quality of this support.

### EVIDENCE:

The agency had no written strategy for working with and supporting adopters, however a clear commitment to working with adopters was evident in their practice, as demonstrated in the written agreement completed between the agency and the adopters.

From the outset adoptive applicants were encouraged to recognise and consider the complex needs of the child they were being matched with and the likely support required to ensure the child was provided with a permanent home. An adoption support plan was carefully formulated, agreed by all parties and presented to the adoption panel. Adoptive parents' needs were continually assessed prior to the adoption order and the adoption support plan modified, wherever necessary.

In spite of the resources available to them, the agency provided a good range of pre and post adoption support services to adopters and their families. In the pre adoption stage, support was provided to them from the child and adoption social workers and if applicable, the foster carers. A variety of financial support packages were provided adopters, with evidence of these packages being used in a flexible manner to meet the individual needs of adoptive families and children. There was a fast track system for adopted children and their families to access the Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS). In addition, where there were difficulties in placement, the agency was able to spot purchase therapy packages from independent sources to support an adoptive family. There was also good accessibility to the multi-disciplinary behavioural support team for adopted children who were

experiencing educational difficulties. The adoption agency had also established a newsletter and support groups for adopters. Assistance with contact arrangements was provided to adopted children and their birth relatives. In addition, the agency had a service level agreement with After Adoption, which provided a variety of support services to adopters and their children. The agency also provided an assessment for support to anyone residing in the borough, who had been involved in the adoption process. The agency had a service level agreement with the Nugent Care Society's adoption agency to provide an inter country adoption service to adopters wishing to adopt a child from Overseas, which included the provision of all aspects of support.

Adopters were generally of the view that the agency provided good written information regarding the support services provided. One adopter indicated though that they had not received any information regarding adoption allowances. The majority of adopters were also complimentary about the support services that they had received with several stating that they had received "fantastic," "excellent," "great" support. Similar views were also expressed by the placing social workers who stated the agency had provided their adopters with "constant," "good" support, with a number stating the agency provided "high quality support services." One placing social worker though expressed concern that the adopters' social worker had not been available during the child's introductions to the adopters. One adoptive family also stated that following the placement of their children, whilst the children's social worker had continued to visit and see the children, they had received no support from the adoption agency due to staff sickness. This had clearly placed considerable pressures upon them, particularly given the children's complex needs. Consideration should be given as to how this situation could be addressed more effectively, should it emerge in the future.

The agency's preparation training, assessment and matching process provided adopters with information about a child's history and its relevance in enabling a child to develop a positive self-image. It also enabled adopters to understand the need and to develop strategies in assisting a child to address all forms of discrimination. The importance of keeping safe information provided by birth parents and families was clearly addressed through out the preparation and assessment process.

There were adoption disruption procedures, however, the agency had not had any adoption disruptions during the past year. The agency was clear though that should such a disruption occur priority would be given to supporting the child and adoptive family to ensure the best possible outcome was achieved for them. Learning gained from the disruption would also be carefully considered by the agency and incorporated into their future practice.

The agency had access to a variety of specialist advisors and services to meet its needs. These included a panel medical and legal adviser, educational advisors, a race equality co-ordinator and access to BAAF. There were also

plans to appoint and locate a nurse within the agency, who, in conjunction with the panel medical advisor would address the children's medical needs. Staff confirmed that both the legal and medical advisers were available for consultation, if required and they were described as being "extremely knowledgeable" and providing "a very good service". They were also considered to be highly committed to their work and extremely "child focussed". However, staff indicated that the medical advisor had a heavy workload and this together with staff sickness, had impacted on his capacity to service the panel. Arrangements had therefore been made to purchase additional time from the medical advisor and this appeared to be addressing the difficulty.

There were no written protocols governing the role of specialist advisers, however the agency was working with other adoption agencies in the region to develop such protocols.

## **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 adoption agency demonstrated a commitment to developing and improving support to birth parents and their families, however a coherent strategy for working with birth parents and families was required, if the outcomes of these standards are to be consistently achieved and maintained.

### **EVIDENCE:**

The agency clearly recognised the life-long implications of adoption and this was effectively evidenced in their adoption policy. Parents were provided with written information regarding the care planning processes for their child. Placing social workers worked in an open and honest manner with them and actively encouraged birth parents and their families to become involved in these care planning processes for their child. The adoption agency had also produced an informative leaflet, "Planning for your children's futures," which outlined the planning processes for permanence, including twin track planning and adoption. In addition to the work undertaken by the placing social workers and adoption agency, there was a service level agreement with after adoption to provide independent counselling and support to birth parents, where there was an adoption or twin track plan for their child.

Knowsley's children services recognised that information about the child was a keystone to understanding and meeting the child's needs. Consequently, a life model was developed and promoted for all looked after children. This work commenced from the outset a child entered the looked after system, that is the first review, and ensured a child's memories were kept safe through their inclusion in a memory book and photo album, which were then kept in a memory box. Children, separated from their birth parents and families on a permanent basis, were provided with a family history book. The adoption agency fully encouraged and facilitated birth parents and their families to provide information so that they might contribute to the child's sense of

heritage through the completion of family history books. There was evidence of life work being consistently completed to a high standard and an excellent example of life work was seen in a child's memory box. Clearly, the completion of this work is of vital importance for the child and greatly assists in placement stability; as a consequence, the inspectors would congratulate the agency in their use of the life work model and commend them for attaining such an excellent standard of practice. Similarly, the agency's plan to introduce later life letters and life appreciation days would also prove beneficial to the child's understanding of their past. The inspectors would fully endorse these planned service developments though clearly their realisation will be dependent on the resources made available to the agency.

Birth parents and families were given further opportunities to pass on and update information provided through direct contact or indirect contact via the agency's letterbox scheme. At the time of the inspection, both the adoption agency and other staff within the family centres were supporting direct contact. Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages in this work being completed by both services, however the organisation needs to consider which service is best equipped to undertake this task effectively and ensure resources are allocated accordingly. Examination of the letterbox scheme confirmed it was a robust, well organised and an effectively managed system, providing birth parents and their families a real opportunity to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

The agency did not have a clear written strategy for working with birth parents and their families, however the children's services were developing a permanency policy and it was anticipated that this would provide them with the opportunity to develop such a strategy. The agency's service level agreement enabled birth parents to access the local support groups organised by after adoption. Information about independent national support groups was also provided.

During the course of the inspection, one birth father was interviewed and one questionnaire was received from a birth family. A sample of adopters and children's files were also seen. Information obtained from these sources provided a rather differing picture of the agency's effectiveness in working with birth parents and families, for whilst the information obtained from the interview with the birth parent was extremely complimentary; this was not reflected in the birth family's questionnaire. In the interview with the birth father, the inspector was told that staff in the family centre, the children's social worker and staff in the adoption agency had "valued," "respected," "involved" and "supported" him in the realisation of his children's care plans; the information provided in the birth family's questionnaire, stated that they had not been listened to, nor had they received any help in relation to the adoption of their child.

This differing picture was also reflected in the sample of records examined, for whilst in one of the files, there was evidence of good engagement and consultation with the birth family and in another file, there was evidence of the birth parents' views about adoption and contact being clearly recorded, this was not evident in every file examined. Similarly, whilst inspectors were advised that birth parents were aware and had the opportunity to comment on the information that had been written about them, this was not always evidenced in the selection of panel papers seen, for example, the form "E" s were not always signed by the parents. Clearly, the small sample of files and panel papers seen, together with the fact that only one birth family questionnaire was received and one birth parent interviewed makes it difficult to draw definite conclusions regarding the adoption agency's involvement and effectiveness of their work with birth parents and families. However, after taking all matters into consideration, the inspection team was of the view that the agency treated and worked with birth parents and their families in a fair, open, respectful and effective manner.

# 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

The adoption agency was well managed and a good service was provided to children and adopters, however a more robust quality assurance system would enhance the service.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency had recently produced a statement of purpose, which had been presented to elected members in October 2005. Whilst this statement contained most of the information required, the services provided by the



agency and the summary of the complaints procedure required to be expanded upon. The statement should also reflect the fact that if a complaint remains unresolved, the Commission is a source where such a complaint can be directed. In addition, it is recommended that the office address and telephone number of CSCI be revised to reflect the adoption team's base.

The agency had only recently produced a draft form of the children's guide. This guide did not contain all the information required in Schedule 2, for example, it did not contain a summary of the complaints procedure, details of how a child may access the services of an independent advocate or the name, address and telephone number of the children's rights director. The guide also needs to be produced in other formats, so that it is suitable for children of different ages. In revising the statement of purpose and the children's guide the agency may wish to consider whether the pictorial illustrations could more effectively depict children and families from ethnic minority groups and thereby effectively convey the multi-cultural society in which we live.

The service's adoption policy and procedures accurately reflected their statement of purpose. There were plans to revise these though in accordance with the Adoption and Children's Act's implementation in December 2005. It was noted that the Council's Child Protection Procedures did not specifically refer to children placed for adoption and this must be addressed. The agency must also ensure all staff have access to information, which would enable them to contact the Commission for Social Care Inspection regarding any concern about a child's welfare and safety.

The agency provided an information pack to all those who made enquiries about adoption. This attractively presented pack contained clear, well-written information about the adoption process. There was evidence of people interested in becoming adoptive parents being welcomed without prejudice and treated in a fair, open and respectful manner. These principles permeated the whole of the adoption process, were clearly reflected in the agency's practice and favourably commented upon by a number of adopters. Information was provided about the agency's eligibility criteria and the needs of local children, who required families.

A number of adopters spoke positively about the written information received stating that it was "clear" and of "good quality". The inspectors were able to evidence that the agency ensured that all foster carers, who applied to adopt, received the same information as other adopters.

The agency had effective systems in place to prioritise those adopters who were most likely meet the needs of children waiting for adoptive parents.

Both the team manager and the senior practitioner in the adoption team had extensive knowledge of child-care and considerable knowledge, experience and skills in adoption. Staff interviewed spoke extremely highly of them and clearly held them in high esteem. The manager was said to be "very visible"

and her management style was described as being “open”, “approachable”, “helpful” and “very supportive”. Both the manager and senior practitioner were said to be enthusiastic about the agency’s work and took a genuine interest in any issues discussed with them. The senior practitioner was considered to be exceptionally knowledgeable about adoption, as illustrated by the comment made by the social workers “what she doesn’t know about adoption, isn’t worth knowing” and they stated, “this gives us confidence.” All staff spoke highly of the leadership skills of the agency manager and had total confidence in her ability to develop the service.

There was evidence to confirm that the agency operated in accordance with its statement of purpose and was managed efficiently and effectively. There were written job descriptions available for the manager of the agency and well-defined managerial arrangements in place to identify, who was in charge when the manager was absent. There were clear roles for managers and staff, with well-established lines of communication and accountability. A supervisory and appraisal system was in place, which was used to monitor staff’s performance and ensure a quality of service. There was evidence that staff were being supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency’s policies. An administrative staff review was taking place though and could result in changes to current supervisory arrangements.

The agency ensured managers and staff were aware of their responsibility to declare any possible conflict of interests, which was clearly outlined in the council’s code of conduct and available on the intranet.

There were clearly written procedures for monitoring the work of the agency and a number of effective systems were in place to monitor and control the activities of the adoption service. These procedures included an adoption tracking system, which monitored the outcomes for children and adopters and was regularly considered at the divisional managers meetings. The agency’s supervision and appraisal systems monitored the adoption workers’ performance. Senior and middle managers had established a file auditing system to monitor the agency’s case records and ensure they met the required standard. Reviewing officers in the quality assurance unit, who chaired lac reviews, carried out a monitoring and quality assurance role in respect of the adoption service. Divisional Team Managers undertook a quality assurance role in the final visit made to adopters. Similarly, the Permanence Panel carried out a quality assurance role in relation to the cases presented to the panel. The panel chairperson also met with the panel adviser and service manager regarding the work of the adoption agency. The agency decision-maker also carried out a quality assurance role in respect of the agency. The adoption agency provided regular reports to the divisional managers and the policy and performance unit on the progress made in achieving their targets. Regular reports were also made to the leadership and elected member with portfolio for health and social care. An annual adoption report was presented to the Cabinet Member with Portfolio for health and Social Care, however, in the future, the agency must ensure a six monthly report is also made available

to the Cabinet Member. Interviews with members of the senior management team, as well as the elected member confirmed that councillors took their corporate parenting role seriously and carefully scrutinised all information presented.

Staff working within the adoption team were a very experienced group of staff, with the necessary qualifications, experience and skills to undertake the agency's work effectively. Adopters made a number of very positive comments regarding individual adoption workers' practice, for example, they were described as "extremely knowledgeable", "professional," "sensitive and skilled in their approach to the assessment," and "supportive." Several adopters indicated their workers were "always prepared to go the extra mile," "another said, "I can't fault" my worker, "I love her to bits".

Staff spoken with talked of their enthusiasm for their work, their eagerness to improve their practice and had a determination to achieve a standard of excellence in their practice. Staff clearly had respect for each other and the team culture was very much about "learning and sharing". Whilst staff indicated that there was not a formal workload management system in operation, they stated there was an informal one and believed workloads were being allocated appropriately. Whilst there was no evidence to indicate that workloads were not being allocated in an equitable and effective manner, consideration should be given to introducing a formal workload management system, as this would prove a useful tool in evidencing the agency's workload and in any negotiations for increased resources.

The childcare social workers who were interviewed showed a real commitment to providing a good, qualitative service to the children and their families. They stated that they worked well with the adoption staff and indicated that there was good communication between them. Several childcare workers spoke positively about the advice, help and support given them by adoption staff, in making an adoptive placement. Placing social workers also expressed similar views in the questionnaires returned to the adoption team.

The administrative support provided to the adoption team was of an excellent standard and was of great assistance in enabling staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. This was also reflected in the positive comments made by adopters, who described the administrative staff as "efficient", "polite", "friendly" and "helpful." However, whilst the office equipment supported the administrative staff to carry out their work, the agency may wish to consider obtaining an additional photocopier, as this would further enhance the efficiency of the service.

The agency had staff, who were well qualified, experienced and skilled to meet the needs of the agency. However, the adoption team was small and there were some concerns that staffing levels within the agency were not, at all times, adequate to meet the agency's needs. This had been clearly demonstrated when unexpected staff sickness had impaired the service

provided by the agency. Moreover, the current staffing levels within the agency made it difficult to effect further developments in the service and severely limited staffs' ability to attain a standard of excellence. In view of this and given the likely increase in the demands on the agency, resources currently allocated to this service should be reviewed.

The managers and staff interviewed generally considered the council to be a fair and competent employer. Staff interviewed stated that they were able to access internal and external training and post qualification study, as part of their professional development. They considered the training provided was of good quality and effectively met their needs.

There were written policies and procedures in place for case recording, as well as the maintenance and formatting of adoption case records. Examination of a sample of records indicated that these policies and procedures were being followed, with the records seen were well organised and in good order. There were some shortfalls in the adopters' files though, as several had no evidence of managerial oversight, file audits being carried out, nor were case decisions recorded in the files. Similarly, with regard to the children's files some shortfalls were found, for example, in two files, there were some documents missing, for example, the child's birth certificate and in another, the copy of the care order. The statutory visits made to children were also not clearly recorded and this should be addressed.

The agency had a good system in place to ensure confidentiality, which was in accordance with current legislation. Staff, panel members and specialist advisors were fully aware of this system and strictly adhered to it.

There was evidence that the agency provided information from its case files to partner agencies within the consortium and to other adoption agencies, in as short a time as possible, to effect the placement of a child.

The Council has a written policy, procedure and guidelines in relation to access to records; however, these documents do not deal with the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records. The agency must now address this and in so doing take into account the new legislation.

Separate records were kept of complaints, allegations and staff. There was evidence to confirm all the agency's adoption records were stored securely in locked, water and fire proof cabinets. The agency had not developed a disaster recovery plan specific to the adoption agency and some attention should be given to this. The agency's adoption records though were all effectively safeguarded through an appropriate back up system.

Personnel and panel members' files, as discussed earlier in the report, did not comply with the adoption regulations and this must be addressed.

The adoption agency had identifiable office premises, which had disabled access and were fit for purpose.

# 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>	
<b>Standard No</b>	<b>Score</b>
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

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

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

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

<b>ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING</b>	
<b>Standard No</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>6</b>	2
<b>18</b>	3

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

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

N/A

**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	AD4AD19 AD20AD21	LAA Reg'03 10a&10b	The manager of the service must ensure that there are a sufficient number of competent, experienced social work and administrative staff working for the purposes of the adoption agency.	01/02/06
2	AD4	AA Reg'83 8(2h)	A 28-day waiver notice in respect of the adopters' written assessment should be held on file, where this is applicable.	31/03/06
3	AD1	LAA Reg'03 2&Sch1	The manager of the service must ensure that the Statement of Purpose contains all the information required in Schedule 1 of the Adoption Services Regulations, 2003.	01/03/06
4	AD1	LAA Reg'03 3&Sch2	The manager of the service must include in the children's guide, all the information contained in Schedule 2 of the Adoption Services Regulations 2003.	01/03/06

5	AD1	LAA Reg'03 9(1a&b)	The agency must ensure that its child protection policies and procedures specifically refer to the measures intended to safeguard children placed for adoption by the authority from abuse and neglect. They should also include arrangements to be made for persons working for the adoption agency, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the authority to have access to information that will enable them to contact the Commission regarding any concern about a child's welfare and safety.	31/03/06
6	AD4AD25	LAA Reg'03 7(a&b)	The agency must implement and maintain robust quality assurance systems for all aspects of adoption service.	31/01/06
7	AD4AD25	AA Reg'83 &LAC(97)13	The manager of the agency must ensure a case record is set up for a child, where the adoption agency is considering adoption for a child. This case record must contain the information specified in the Adoption Agency Regulations 1983, 7(2)(a), schedule 1, part I and the guidance provided in the local government circular.	31/01/06
8	AD26	AA Reg'83 15(1,2&3)	The manager of the agency must revise its access to records' policy the specific legal responsibilities the agency has in relation to adoption records.	01/03/06
9	AD15 AD28AD29	LAA Reg'03 6,11&15	The manager of the service must ensure that information is held on all persons who work for the	31/01/06



			adoption service in accordance with Schedule 3 and 4. This applies to all staff, panel members and specialist advisors, who provide services to the agency.	
10	AD18AD28	LAA Reg'03 10(b)	The agency must ensure that those working for the service are suitably qualified and competent. In view of this documentary evidence must be obtained in relation to panel members and specialist advisors' registration with the appropriate professional bodies and this should be held on their file.	31/01/06

## 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 agency should review the content of the preparation groups to ensure the materials use do not place undue emphasis on the needs of foster carers.
2	AD4	The establishment of preparation groups for second time adopters and relative adopters should be considered.
3	AD4	The contemporaneous notes of adopters' assessments should be held on file.
4	AD4	Consideration should be given to the health and safety checklist being expanded.
5	AD5 AD6	The agency's written literature should reflect the multi-cultural society in which we live.
6	AD5	Consideration should be given to the training on form E's being a standing item on the training programme.
7	AD5AD25	The agency should ensure the birth parents views about the information presented in the form E's is consistently recorded. This also needs to be addressed in respect of birth parents and their families' views regarding adoption and contact.

8	AD5	Consideration should be given to the introduction of life appreciation days into the service.
9	AD2	Children's wishes and feelings regarding their adoption should be explicitly recoded in the file documentation.
10	AD10	The Adoption Policies and Procedures should be revised to ensure the matters raised in standard 10.2 of the Adoption National Minimum Standards are met.
11	AD10	The frequency of meetings between the panel chairperson, advisor and service manager should be increased and include the agency decision-maker.
12	AD10	Consideration should be given to enhancing the panel leaflet provided adopters through the inclusion of photographs of panel members.
13	AD7	The independent counselling and support service provided should be actively promoted.
14	AD9	The agency should develop a clear strategy for working with birth parents and their families.
15	AD12	Consideration should be given to enhancing the panel minutes, specifically in giving greater attention to the reasons for the panel's conclusions.
16	AD17	The agency should ensure a six monthly report regarding the activities of the adoption agency is provided to the Council's executive members.
17	AD13	Consideration should be given to re-wording the form used by the agency decision maker.
18	AD18	A written protocol governing the role of specialist advisers should be developed.
19	AD25	The agency should ensure statutory visits to children are clearly recorded.
20	AD27	The adoption agency should produce a disaster recovery plan.

## **Commission for Social Care Inspection**

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