

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

East Riding of Yorkshire

**31/31A Lairgate
Beverley
East Yorkshire
HU17 8ET**

Lead Inspector
**Sean
White**

Announced
26th July 2005

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

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

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Adoption*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk 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	East Riding of Yorkshire Council Adoption Service
Address	31/31A Lairgate, Beverley, East Yorkshire, HU17 8ET
Telephone number	01482 396673
Fax number	01482 396642
Email address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	East Riding of Yorkshire Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Ian Wilson
Type of registration	LAA
No. of places registered (if applicable)	
Category(ies) of registration, with number of places	

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

N/A

Date of last inspection This was the first inspection of the Adoption Service.

Brief Description of the Service:

The adoption service of the East Riding is constituted under current legislation that requires local authorities to provide, or make provision for, children to be adopted. The service, which operates from premises in Beverley, has structures in place to recruit, train and approve people who wish to adopt children from this country; a service-level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency makes provision for people who wish to adopt a child from overseas. The service also provides various means of support for adopters, children, birth families and any person affected by adoption either by its own workers or through a contract with a voluntary adoption support agency. It is a small agency that covers a large geographical area and is staffed by six workers and a team manager; it is managed within the Child Care Resources section of the Children's Services.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection was well prepared for and, despite the pre-inspection material arriving a little late, there had been a thoroughness in the collation of evidence requested that demonstrated a commitment to the event and a sound approach to organisational matters. The managers, workers and everyone involved in the inspection were helpful throughout the inspection. The facilities and hospitality provided by the agency enabled the inspection to run smoothly and efficiently and were much appreciated.

The inspection was conducted over three days by two inspectors. During the course of the visit the adoption panel was observed, interviews were conducted with senior managers, the team manager and key staff and an elected member of the council was also interviewed. Discussions were held with four adoptive families and questionnaires from adopters/prospective adopters were received. There were also questionnaires received from placing social workers. Case files for both adopters and children were read and a range of policies and procedures examined. The premises and administrative systems were also inspected.

What the service does well:

The adoption service of the East Riding places children at the forefront of all planning and practice and it is evident that this is the case across the department as a whole.

The approach to recruiting, training and assessing adopters was well considered and thorough. The service ensured that its objectives for recruiting families to meet the wide range of needs presented by children requiring adoptive placements were aimed at prioritising those who were able to meet those needs.

The recruitment pack is well presented and comprehensive and the training and preparation sessions were said to be very informative and enlightening by those who had attended. One said, "It opened our eyes to all the real issues that are relevant to adoption", another said, "Very well presented and encouraging, honest yet balanced".

The assessment process was handled professionally and sensitively by social workers, and many adopters were very enthusiastic about the service they had received. One said, "We have been more than happy with all the work our social worker and others in the team have done". The quality of assessment

reports was of a good standard, which reflected an appropriate level of skill and understanding of adoption matters within the workforce.

The adoption panel was appropriately thorough and continued the principle of ensuring children's needs were paramount; "We thought that being invited to both our approval and the matching gave us the chance to be involved", reported one adopter. Decision-making is taken seriously and in a timely way, again, in the spirit of putting children first.

The overall management of the service was of a satisfactory standard; there was evidence of thoughtful and dynamic management found in some areas, notably in respect of development initiatives. The team manager was, rightly, held in high esteem across the agency; this included service users who appreciated the improvements he had brought to the service.

There is a developing and enthusiastic approach to adoption support, and although perhaps under resourced at the time of the inspection, was clearly committed to ensuring placements were supported and had optimistic futures. Again, this was appreciated by service users;... "The support groups are really helpful", and "She has been supportive throughout". The fact that the manager attends support groups demonstrates the levels of commitment to this area.

The arrangements for managing and controlling the work of the service, including allocation and workload, were satisfactory and staff felt suitably supported and encouraged in their duties. The staff themselves demonstrated competence, skill and understanding and brought a professional approach to the work of the service. Their level of knowledge was appreciated by workers across the department; "The adoption social workers are always responsive and helpful when we seek advice", paraphrases several comments made.

There were systems in place for monitoring the work of the service and elected members of the council were clearly committed to adoption for children.

The administrative structure of the service was satisfactorily managed and efficiency was evident in most areas. Case recording was very good and information easy to find in case files.

What has improved since the last inspection?

This was the first inspection of the service.

What they could do better:

The main areas for development in this service were in respect of services to birth parents and families. Although there are some systems and structures in

place to enable birth parents to be involved in the adoption of their children and to be supported through it, these were not very well developed. There was a less than satisfactory approach to life-story work and although it is accepted that children's social workers have competing priorities, it must be understood that a child's heritage is of the utmost importance to them as they grow. Records did not demonstrate that birth parents are routinely asked to comment on what is written about them.

Children's adoption files, whilst containing a wealth of material, were poorly managed and were not subject to any guidance or protocol; although there was some evidence of auditing it was not fully effective. These files are very important for the future of adopted adults. Adopters' case files were better managed but, again, not subject to formal monitoring.

The personnel records of staff and panel members are held in locations other than the personnel section; they did not include all required information and there was no system evident to ensure that CRB checks are repeated every three years.

The statement of purpose had only recently been written and had not been authorised by the council; it had not, therefore been circulated around the department as a framework document. Similarly, many policies and procedures were only in draft form and as such only tentative in respect of underpinning the work of the service.

Child protection issues required more attention. Notably, there had been no recent training provided on this issue and the Area Child Protection Committee procedures did not make particular reference to children placed for adoption.

The adoption panel, although thorough in its approach to making its recommendations, would be improved by a more efficient approach to the conduct of business.

Although, as outlined above, the manager demonstrated competence, skill and commitment, the arrangements for him to attain a recognised management qualification were not in place when the inspection began and still only hopeful rather than finalised at the end of the visit.

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

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

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Management

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Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

Most of the agency's arrangements for assessing and approving adopters ensured that children were placed safely within families best able to meet their needs. There were some areas of practice, organisation and management that were not sufficiently well established that could have an impact on efficiency.

EVIDENCE:

The overall picture gained during this inspection was that the agency is very focused on ensuring that children are at the centre of the adoption process and that meeting their needs is of paramount importance in any strategy. The policies and procedures that underpin this commitment, including the statement of purpose, make clear that the processes for placing children for adoption and matching them with appropriate families are as thorough as possible. The written recruitment procedure makes clear that the service is aiming to find families for children who may be difficult to place and that this is an area of priority. This has inevitably created some frustrations for people who wish only to adopt very young children because they have had to wait considerable lengths of time to be allocated for assessment. Nevertheless, the service is clear about which children require adoptive families and is working closely with the recruitment worker to develop a clearer strategy for bringing the needs of older children and sibling groups to the attention of potential

adopters and the wider public. This strategy was not fully developed at the time of the inspection and the agency is encouraged to sustain the progress being made.

The processes for training, preparing and assessing people who wish to adopt were generally of a very good standard. There is a well-presented, three-day preparation programme that covers all the required areas - supplemented by a condensed programme for people wishing to adopt for a second time. All the comments received from adopters who had experienced these were complementary; for instance, "Found the training very useful" and "It was excellent".

The assessment reports (Forms F) were of a consistently good standard and demonstrated a thoroughness of approach and an analytical understanding of people's abilities and competence. Respondents to questionnaires and people interviewed were complementary about their assessments, feeling that they were handled thoroughly yet with skill and sensitivity. Typical comments being, "Can't fault her [social worker], very astute, very insightful" and "We found the process to be like a journey of self-discovery".

The adoption panel, which is chaired independently and appropriately constituted, handled the business before it fairly well. Some improvements could be achieved by the chairperson managing and controlling the proceedings more efficiently and by being mindful of the role of the panel adviser, who is not a member but acted, on a few occasions, as if he were. The chairperson should also be careful to recognise when any member may have a conflict of interest and take any necessary steps. Nevertheless, the deliberations of the panel were focused on ensuring that children's needs were met and on minimising delays. One matter that the agency should pay some attention to is ensuring that when cases are presented to panel they are done so by a worker who is able to provide all relevant information; there were occasions during the inspection where the absence of a presenting social worker posed difficulties for the panel in eliciting all relevant, up to date details. There was some evidence that panels are becoming increasingly busy and that agendas are getting longer. Social workers responding to questionnaires said, for instance, "Would like more panels - children are not moved on as awaiting panel date".

Decision-making was handled efficiently and conscientiously; he receives all panel papers and decisions are made in full cognisance of all the information available. There is no formal arrangement for the decision-maker to meet with the panel chairperson, however. The administration of the panel was of a very good standard, it being efficient and well organised, and the minutes were of a particularly high standard; it was clear that there is significant appreciation of the well-ordered and timely approach to panel administration in the agency as a whole.

The work of the panel is determined by a policy and procedure that has been recently drafted and headed, 'Work in Progress'. Although, overall, this was a reasonably realistic document, it did not fulfil all the expectations of the National Minimum Standards; this needs to be addressed.

Recruitment and retention difficulties in child care teams has had an impact on children being allocated social workers and on at least one occasion an adoption worker was, at the same time, the social worker for a family and the child being placed for adoption with them. This is not best practice because there is a risk of a conflict of purpose in the two roles

The agency has reasonably thorough recruitment and selection procedures and all managers and workers had an up to date CRB check - and written references are verified by telephone. However, there have been recent changes in how personnel matters are handled in this authority that could be problematic. Staff personnel files have been transferred from the Human Resources section to the service locations and have become the responsibility of service managers to maintain. It was not possible, therefore, to determine with any certainty whether there was a clear system for updating CRB checks every three years – or whose responsibility it was to develop such a system. The safety of children could be compromised without a full and diligent approach to the checking and vetting of staff who work with children.

The adoption team, despite being a reasonably 'new' group of workers, demonstrated that they were knowledgeable, understood the principles, practices and legislative framework of adoption, and showed sensitivity to the principle of children's needs being paramount. Adopters were appreciative of their skills and approach, saying, for instance, "She has been helpful and supportive throughout" and "Made us feel relaxed". There were no workers who had achieved a Post-Qualifying Award at the time of the inspection, although three staff were pursuing this (although there was some frustration expressed about the route being followed); the agency should be mindful of the April 2006 deadline when 20% of workers should be post-qualified.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The approach of the agency to support adopters was responsive and forward thinking enabling placements to be maintained and outcomes optimistic.

EVIDENCE:

The agency has a thoughtful and active approach to supporting adopters. One member of the team has a specific role as adoption support worker, although all workers in the service may be allocated support work at some time or other, depending on demand or need.

All adopters are apprised of the support services available, which include direct social work input, an adoption support group, social events and specialist assistance if necessary. The individual support provided from the agency appeared to be dynamic and responsive – including out-of-hours visits when needed and seen by adopters as a very useful resource indeed; “Adoption support – excellent”, being said by one satisfied adopter. Similar appreciation was stated about the adoption support groups, which are often attended by the team manager, “The adoption support group was an excellent initiative” being stated in one questionnaire.

It was clear, however, that the resources to meet all the demands of adoption support were somewhat limited and that the agency was struggling to meet all of its responsibilities. Given the changes in legislation in respect of adoption support this will continue to be an issue that the agency must address to ensure it can cope with its responsibilities.

The medical adviser, as well as being a regular and active member of the adoption panel, is also fully involved in the wider adoption and support network. She was reported to be accessible for advice and supportive of adoption and children’s social workers activities. Similarly, the legal adviser was said to be actively involved in the work of the agency and provided invaluable support to social workers involved in children’s proceedings.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency was weak on encouraging birth parents to be involved in children's adoption and maintaining their heritage resulting in children being denied sufficient information about their backgrounds.

EVIDENCE:

Although it was clear that the agency was committed to providing a service to birth parents, the actuality was difficult to assess. There was little evidence on children's adoption files and Forms E to demonstrate that birth parents had been consulted about their children's adoption, or that they had been invited to comment on what had been written about them. Children's social workers stated that they found it difficult to engage with birth families and, so far as they were concerned, the adoption team did not get involved at all in birth family support.

The agency has a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption support agency to provide support for birth families – and it monitors this contract with due vigilance – and brings this service to the attention of all birth parents. It was not possible to ascertain, however, whether the means of promoting this service was effective. The agency should look to creative means of promoting this service to ensure that all birth families are as informed as is possible.

Encouraging and enabling birth families to contribute to the life-story information that should be gathered for children is not a particularly strong aspect of the agency's work. It appears that much of the responsibility of compiling life-story work rests with foster carers; this is not the most appropriate means of achieving this because key information lies with the birth families. Social workers should be collecting and collating life-story information as soon as a child becomes looked after as 'windows of opportunity' can be lost once the difficulties that transpire in care proceedings are experienced.

There were several reports from adopters that life-story work was not undertaken effectively, including such comments as, "We are still waiting for life-story work after two years" and "We still have no life-story book for our first child".

Contact arrangements (letterbox) were well organised and managed having been recently reviewed.

Management

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency was managed, in the main, to a satisfactory standard with some areas of good practice. This provides for an enabling and supportive working environment within which staff are able to undertake their responsibilities in a way that promotes children's welfare.

EVIDENCE:

Overall, both structurally and operationally, the adoption service was well managed at all levels of the organisation.

The statement of purpose was a well-written document that laid out clearly the work of the agency, its services and its aims and objectives; it will, once ratified by the executive of the council, provide a sound framework within which the service can develop and operate. The agency used two children's guides, one produced by BAAF which, is generic and does not give details of East Yorkshire's services, and an in-house guide that was not of a very good standard. It contained language and information that was not appropriate for children's level of understanding and was not presented in a particularly accessible manner.

There were a range of policies and procedures in place that underpinned and informed the work of the service. Many of these were only in draft form and some were incomplete. The manager was in the process of re-writing or updating many of these and it was evident that he was undertaking this as a means of improving the service. The Area Child Protection Committee Procedures, whilst in the main comprehensive, did not specifically address the safety of children in adoptive placements. The Director stated that this would be addressed as a matter of immediate urgency.

The information pack produced for prospective adopters was of a good standard. It provided an accessible, easy to read outline of adoption issues and what people could expect from the agency. It clearly states which kind of children require adoptive placements and illustrates that people able to meet their needs will be prioritised. The pack also ensures that all members of the community are welcome to apply but makes clear that certain people cannot be considered. The Prospective Adopters' Follow-up Pack, given after preparation groups, provides a wealth of information to supplement the introductory pack.

The managers, at all levels in the organisation, demonstrated a high level of understanding, knowledge and experience in both adoption matters and children's work in the wider sense. The management arrangements were structurally sound and operationally it was evident that there was a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities and lines of communication.

The organisation had structures and protocols in place that ensured staff had realistic and fair working conditions. The team manager is held in high esteem by colleagues across the service and it was clear that service users were also complementary about the way the team was managed – "Things have got much better since he got the job", reported one adopter. It was also clear that senior managers were pleased with the direction of the adoption service. The manager does not, however, possess a management qualification although arrangements were being made for him to enrol on a relevant course in the near future.

Monitoring and quality control of the service was undertaken through a range of practices; managers at all levels were up to date with their knowledge of the service and management information and performance indicators are routinely assessed through quarterly bulletins. This information is also presented to elected members. The agency does not, however, present a six-monthly report to the executive of the council on its activities; arrangements must be made to do this.

Workers in the service were appreciative of the way in which their duties were organised and managed – “The manager is always looking at ways to improve practice”, and felt that allocation and monitoring of workload was fair and efficient within the resources available. The team, however, was overstretched; this has led to some delays in allocation of assessments causing some frustration amongst applicants – “...waiting for social workers is very frustrating” and “The team seemed incredibly under-resourced”, were two statements amongst several similar ones from questionnaire respondents. However, the imminent appointment of a senior social worker – and a commitment from the executive to increase resources – should alleviate these difficulties when finalised. Nevertheless, it was clear that the manager exercises organisation and control of the service in an efficient manner and provides a supportive environment within which workers can undertake their duties and develop their skills. The agency provides training opportunities for workers, both in-house and externally. There had been no recent training provided, however, on child protection matters. Staff that do not work in front-line services do not have day to day opportunities to keep abreast of current thinking and should have follow-up training as a regular feature of their continued development.

The administrative arrangements for the service were efficiently organised.

Case recording was of a high standard and all relevant details were included on case files and children’s adoption files. Much of the recording, however, was hand-written which poses a risk of information being lost should a disaster occur. Hard copy file material that had been produced electronically was securely ‘backed-up’ on a daily basis. There was no system in place, however, to routinely audit the case files within a formal framework. Children’s adoption files were not well managed and there was no protocol or guidance in place to inform workers of content or the arrangement of material; neither was there any system to audit or manage the contents prior to them being archived.

The staff files, as described earlier in this report, are maintained by service managers, not the personnel section and the difficulties associated with this arrangement have been made clear already. The contents of the staff files did not meet all regulatory requirements and neither did the records of adoption panel members. An audit of files against the NMS needs to be undertaken and they should be maintained thereafter in a robust HR system.

The premises used by the service were fit for purpose although somewhat cramped and lacking in storage space. They are located in the town centre of Beverley and are accessible to people with a legitimate interest, it has only very limited facilities for access, however, for people with mobility impairment. There are ample car parking facilities nearby but public transport is limited by the rural nature of the authority.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

STAYING SAFE	
Standard No	Score
2	3
4	3
5	3
10	2
11	3
12	3
13	3
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	1
3	3
14	2
16	3
17	2
20	3
21	2
22	3
23	2
25	2
26	3
27	2
28	2
29	3
30	N/A
31	N/A

N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

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

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	1	2 (2003)	The statement of purpose must be approved by the executive of the council. The agency must produce a children's guide that meets the standards and is accessible and readable by children with a range of abilities.	01/11/05
2.	2	9 (2003)	The agency must produce a child protection procedure for children placed for adoption, including children placed in another authority.	01/11/05
3.	28	15 (2003)	Records in respect of staff and panel members must be maintained in a way that includes all required information.	01/11/05
4.				
5.				

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.	10	The agency should ensure that the policies and procedures

		relating to the adoption panel include all information outlined in the NMS
2.	7	The agency should ensure that systems are in place to demonstrate that birth parents' views have been sought and recorded.
3.	8	The agency should make more efforts to collect life-story information as early as possible. Life story books should be compiled and completed as soon after a child is placed for adoption as possible.
4.	9	The agency should have a more active approach to ensuring that birth parents are fully aware of the support that is available for them.
5.	14	The agency should ensure that the plans in hand for the manager to pursue NVQ level 4 management training are realised as soon as possible.
6.	17	A written report on the activities of the adoption service should be provided to the executive of the council every six months.
7.	21	The agency should ensure that there are sufficient workers in post at all times to undertake the needs of the service.
8.	23	The agency should make arrangements for all staff to receive training in child protection matters and for this to be regularly updated.
9.	25	Children's adoption files should be maintained in a way that would enable archiving and future access to be more appropriately managed.
10.	27	Adopters' case records and children's adoption files should be monitored or audited in a way that can be evidenced.

Commission for Social Care Inspection

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