



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

ADOPTION SERVICE

Cumbria County Council Adoption Service

**15 Portland Square
Carlisle
Cumbria
CA1 1QQ**

Lead Inspector
Jane Ivory

Announced Inspection
2nd May 2006 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
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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	Cumbria County Council Adoption Service
Address	15 Portland Square Carlisle Cumbria CA1 1QQ
Telephone number	01228 607080
Fax number	
Email address	
Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Cumbria County Council
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Mr A Carruthers and Ms Jill Greaves
Type of registration	Local Auth Adoption Service

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 11th -30th November 2004

Brief Description of the Service:

Cumbria County Council's Adoption Service is located within the Family placement teams offering a combined fostering/adoption service. The Family placement teams are based in the three divisions of the county, West, East and South. There are four teams in total in Barrow, Kendal, and Carlisle, the teams are split into two core functions. A recruitment and assessment team alongside a support and supervision team.

The Adoption Service has a central management team that is based in Carlisle. The County Adoption Manager is based in Head Office in Carlisle, as is the County Adoption Adviser.

Cumbria has three combined fostering and adoption panels, which meet in different divisions throughout the month. The same Independent Panel Chairperson chairs each of the panels. Adoption Advisers to each of the panels are still the Family Placement Team Managers.

Cumbria has approximately 460 looked after children with percentages for children looked after who have been placed for adoption being above the national average for the last three years.

SUMMARY

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

The inspection was well prepared for with all required pre-inspection material being forwarded as requested. The agency provided the best facilities available to them and engaged in the process as willing participants. The programme that was arranged was well coordinated and very manageable. This enabled the inspection to be carried out with the minimum of disruption and maximum efficiency.

The inspection was carried out over six days, with one extra-day being allocated to the observation of the adoption panel, and the interview of the Independent Panel Chairperson, professional adviser and the legal adviser to the Kendal adoption panel. During the course of the fieldwork interviews were held with key managers and staff, specialist advisers and an elected member of the council. An examination of personnel files was undertaken in the offices of Human Resources.

Visits were made to five adoptive families, with one additional adoptive family being offered a telephone interview. The views of adopters are incorporated into the text of this report. Completed questionnaires were received from adopters/prospective adopters (21), placing social workers (10), placing authorities (4) and specialist advisers (3). Two questionnaires sent to birth families were returned.

The case files of the adopters visited were read – and the files of children placed with them. Other case files were also examined. Written materials relating to the operation of the agency were read, including policies and procedures, protocols and information provided for children, prospective and approved adopters and social workers.

The inspection also considered the council's arrangements for adoption support services and interviewed staff involved in the assessment, review and provision of these services. Inspectors also attended an Adoption Support Group in the West of the county.

The inspection also took place alongside a full inspection of the fostering and private fostering services in Cumbria. Readers may find it helpful to consider all three reports for a full overview of the Family Placement Service to Looked after Children in Cumbria.

What the service does well:

The service has increased the numbers of children placed for adoption and significantly reduced the numbers of children waiting for an adoption placement since 2003. This achievement is significant and demonstrates an adoption service that is far more child focused than three years ago.

The service has developed a matching policy and procedure, which has been implemented and which is being developed to ensure that children's placements with adopters are as safe and secure as they be. There is evidence of this in the low disruption rates in the service, given the numbers and needs of the children placed.

The service benefits from having a range of skilled, experienced and dedicated staff, these are some of the comments made by adopters about their individual social worker:

"We were lucky to be given an extremely competent and dedicated worker who has been nothing but supportive and helpful throughout the whole process."

And "We have been exceptionally lucky with our social worker once allocated"

The service still benefits from committed Adoption and Fostering Panels across the county. One adopter said " We were made to feel very much at ease by everyone on the panel and we are pleased that we attended it."

The development and slow expansion of the Adoption Support Service has been one of the most positive and exciting aspects of Cumbria's overall adoption service to children and their families. Praise for the range and quality of the work undertaken by this small team was unreserved from a variety of sources. One birth parent said "The service is very good", a children's social worker said "I feel that many of my adopters value the support from the Adoption Support Service, as many issues do not arise until after the adoption. Finally one adopter commented "There is a good support group that meets every two months for us to go to, which we find helpful for information, networking and mutual support.

The Adoption Support Service has a wide remit but is offering a range of services including support groups for approved adopters in all parts of the county, a newsletter, children's art group and access to specialist therapeutic assessments and support for children and their families. The service also offered intermediary support and counselling and assistance to birth parents and birth families regarding post adoption contact arrangements. Families spoke with great warmth about the Family Fun days that have been organised in the County and spoke of how their child's opportunity to meet other adopted children had in some cases really helped, as well as being a grand day out!

The Adoption Support Service has sought the views of service users by sending out questionnaires. Services have been developed wherever possible to meet the needs of children and their families and further areas for growth and development have been identified.

The Adoption Support Service is a centrally managed but locally delivered service that has contributed to good outcomes for adopted children and their families by offering appropriate support to improve placement stability. Cumbria and the staff within the Adoption Support Service should be commended for what has been achieved within the resources available.

What has improved since the last inspection?

Staff members working within the Adoption Service have a clearer understanding of the principles behind Cumbria's recruitment strategy. The priority wheel for fast tracking applications of adopters who could best meet the needs of children waiting was implemented in 2004. However the full implementation of the strategy had been restricted by poor staffing levels in some parts of the county, and by a lack of effective countywide strategic and operational management of the Adoption Service. This had led to real frustration by some staff in the Adoption Service who knew what they should be delivering but didn't have the staffing to do it.

Cumbria had recruited some excellent managers and key advisers into the service since the last inspection, and had successfully appointed a replacement for the Adoption Support Service Team Manager. The new arrival of a permanent Head of Children's Social Care was also helpful given some of the challenges the service has faced and will continue to face with regard to demonstrating effective strategic and operational management of the Adoption Service.

The Interim Head Of Children's Social Care had resolved the issue concerning unequal terms and conditions between staff in the children and families teams and the family placement teams in April 2006. This should be communicated to all staff in the service.

At the time of the last follow-up visit inspection the County Adoption Adviser Post had been vacant. This post had been appointed to and the County Adoption Adviser had come into post in January 2005. The County Adoption Adviser had ensured that the details of children with a plan for adoption were

circulated to the local Family placement teams. The numbers of children waiting for an adoption placement had been slashed from approximately 50 in 2003 to 8 in May 2006, and the incidence of drift and delay in children's care planning had been significantly reduced. The County Adoption Adviser has sought to collect significant data concerning children's needs, approved adopters and prospective links and matches. More importantly this data is then shared with each of the Family placement teams in order to develop a countywide pool of Adoption Service information.

Cumbria has improved access to information technology, and electronic communications. Staff now has access to their own mobile phones and an adequate service user database. The current client information system is being updated; this will coincide with the full roll out of the Integrated Children's System (ICS). As one member of staff told us, "Cumbria has been on a real improvement rollercoaster ride, things have changed so much here in the last three years."

The service had invested considerable resources, time and energy to electronically backing up all adoption records and archives. This was a work in progress in November 2004 and is now completed.

What they could do better:

The management structure and the role and function of the County Adoption Manager was raised as an issue for action in 2003 and 2004. It is disappointing to find evidence that the service has not addressed this fundamental weakness, despite the appointment of a skilled and knowledgeable County Adoption Manager in January 2006. The County Adoption Manager does not line manage Family Placement Team Managers who are responsible for supporting social work staff to deliver the Adoption Service to adults. The County Adoption Manager cannot ensure a countywide approach to the recruitment strategy, as they do not have the final say in where resources are allocated. Cumbria must develop and implement an effective countywide Adoption Service Strategy, which challenges the Teams or Team to deliver a demonstrably equitable service based upon the needs of children waiting. A countywide consistent service would be best delivered, developed and managed if there was a clear line of management accountability and direction from the top.

Staffing levels remain very problematic in some areas. This not only impacts on recruitment but the effective support of adopters who are waiting, or who have children placed. The service had responded to staff shortages by employing staff from Family placement teams and from other parts of the

social work service to do overtime in order to progress assessments, however the quality of some of this work was not always of a good standard. Many adopters complained of the length of time it had taken from initial enquiry to approval, with one couple who had been assessed as high priority taking over two years to get to the adoption panel. The speed of the approval process was acceptable within some cases that were tracked during the inspection, however the overwhelming evidence was that many adopters had to wait too long, and that the service is not resourced or managed to meet the timescales for approval set out in the new legislation. This is an area that must be addressed as part of the service's action plan.

Staffing levels also impacted on the experience of some adopters of the whole process. Some adopters spoke about feeling lucky to have had the same social worker supporting them all the way through the assessment, matching and to the placement. Other adopters spoke of their frustration at losing their social worker after the approval at panel, "We were changed to another social worker though we asked to stay with our original one but were not allowed to! This has been a major delay in the matching process as our Family Placement Officer can't match us to a child until they know us."

Cumbria must ensure that all staff have accessed training in permanence planning, life story work or life work, preparing children for adoption and the lifelong impact of post-adoption assessments. Not all staff had received formal training in the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This is an area that should be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

Cumbria should review the arrangements, policy and practice guidance concerning the separation of siblings for adoption. One example seen in case tracking highlighted a case of siblings who had been separated. The decision to separate was made at a statutory review and based upon limited evidence. The lifelong impact of this decision would have benefited from the oversight and agreement of a senior manager in the service.

Social workers and adopters suggested that despite the good work completed by the Adoption Support Service that they were not adequately resourced to deal with post-adoption direct contact issues. This is an area of demand and growth that would benefit from being kept under review, and resources increased to deal with assessed and growing demand.

Cumbria had withdrawn from a service level agreement (SLA) with an Adoption Support Agency for the provision of birth parent support. The service considered that the current SLA did not provide value for money, and that money saved could be better spent elsewhere. The Adoption Support Service does provide some independent social work support to birth families but this has been limited by the other demands on their time and by the lack of resources available to the team. Cumbria must ensure that the independent social work service's to birth parents and birth families is adequately resourced to meet need.

Senior managers need time to develop links with other agencies in order to overcome the services isolation from other adoption agencies.

The current developing arrangements for commissioning a service for or on behalf of inter-country adopters needs to be finalised and implemented.

Cumbria needs to develop tighter policy and practice concerning the referral and assessment of children's and families needs for post adoption support services where there may be elements concerning safeguarding. Joint working protocols must be developed and evidenced to ensure that risks are effectively identified and managed by an appropriately qualified and experienced lead professional.

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

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

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Management

Scoring of 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)
- 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 the following standard(s):

Standards: 2,4,5,10,11,12,13,15 and 19

Cumbria's adoption service has developed a clearer child-focus, however staffing issues, poorly deployed resources and under-developed management oversight compromises the safety of some children placed for adoption.

Quality in this outcome area was considered as poor.

EVIDENCE:

Cumbria had improved outcomes for children placed for adoption since the last inspection. This had been achieved by ensuring that numbers of children placed for adoption had been increased as a percentage of the numbers of Looked After Children and the numbers of children waiting for adoption had been substantially reduced. The County Adoption Adviser had ensured that information concerning the children, who may have a plan for adoption, was collected and then shared with the Family placement teams across the county. The information concerning the children was gathered from the point of the second review. The Adoption Adviser considered that more should be done to systemise this information gathering exercise.

The outcome of this work had resulted in the development of an Adoption Service that was far more able to evidence good outcomes for children by reducing unnecessary delay.

The service was able to demonstrate low disruption rates, with staff and adopters working hard to ensure that the majority of matches were managed

and well supported. Some adopters said “ we had to wait a long time to get approved, and sometimes communication was difficult with the service during this stage, but once we were matched we could not fault the support we have received from our social worker.”

The Adoption Adviser had introduced clearer policy and practice guidelines around matching, which had again proved to have a positive impact on the placement of children in the county.

The priority wheel for adopters choosing to adopt with Cumbria had been implemented in some cases seen. There was evidence to suggest from case file analysis, staff interviews and service user questionnaires that some Family placement teams in Cumbria had fast tracked some adopters. However staffing issues in some areas and the failure to implement key changes in the management of the service had resulted in a piecemeal implementation and a re-active approach to recruiting adopters. The need to develop, implement and then keep under review a countywide strategy, for recruiting adopters for the children who need an adoption placement should be one of the most pressing items in Cumbria’s Adoption Service action plan.

Cumbria had developed an Invest to Save Strategy. This strategy sought to invest resources in an enhanced Family Placement Service, with separate Fostering and Adoption Teams. The Acting Head of Service confirmed that although this strategy had been agreed with the members in February 2006, that the timescales for implementation remained unclear due to imminent management changes and financial restrictions. The need to enhance the core functions of Cumbria’s Adoption Service through the implementation of a clear strategy that supports continuous improvement should form one of the key aspects of the action plan.

The improvements in Cumbria’s Adoption Service have been noted, however some of the deficits in the service remain. The recruitment, assessment and support of adopters who are waiting for a placement remain areas of concern. Some of the service improvements concerning the reduction of the numbers of children waiting were undermined by some of the practice seen concerning the placement of children. The poor preparation for some children for adoption, separation of siblings and the continuing inconsistency in ensuring that all children were placed with their adopters with the benefit of some life work were features of this inspection.

Not all staff had received comprehensive training in the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This is an area of concern given the additional requirements about providing counselling for children who have a plan for adoption, the impact of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 on the care planning process and placement framework and the enhanced role and function of the adoption panel.

A number of adopters expressed concern about the lack of supervision and support that the children they had placed with them had received from the child’s social worker. Statutory visits were not completed in all cases selected for case tracking within the required timescales. This had left some children and their adopters feeling very vulnerable. One adopter commented that” The

placement experience has been such that should we wish to apply for further children we are likely to look outside of Cumbria.” Other adopters had a much more satisfactory experience, but many reported an awareness of a service under real pressure and lacking in staff.

The majority of adopters confirmed that they had a very speedy response to their initial enquiry. Information was sent out promptly and initial visits were, in most cases, conducted within timescales.

The service has developed information sessions as part of the preparation process. Formal preparation was offered to prospective adopters around the county. Preparation was well received by adopters and informed by sessions with existing adopters and the needs of children waiting. Preparation training also dealt with issues concerning inter-country adoption. However as part of the service’s action plan the agreed arrangement with a Voluntary Adoption Agency to undertake Inter-Country Adoption Assessments should be implemented. The service had re-drafted policies and procedures to support the change in practice concerning the new timescales for assessments.

Timescales for the completion of assessments varied widely. In Family Placement Team adopters who were not considered a service priority could be approved because staff time allowed. Where staffing was more problematic assessments of adopters regarded as a high priority for the service could not be progressed. For example one case of a couple with the potential to offer a placement to a child with a disability took over two years to get to the adoption panel. The lack of staff in some teams had contributed to the use of sessional staff, or staff employed within the service doing overtime. Whilst a number of managers suggested that this was a pragmatic response to a difficult situation, there are concerns that these arrangements mask the need for ongoing support and contact for adopters. A number of approved adopters who are waiting have identified in their questionnaires that “ we are left feeling forgotten about.... ...we believe it would be very beneficial if social services contacted everyone in our position from time to time.”

There was also some inconsistency in the way that different Family placement teams managed the business of recruiting, assessing and supporting adopters. Some Teams offered the same social worker throughout the process whilst other Teams adhered to the existing structure, transferring adopters to a support social worker when the case had been to panel. Many adopters disliked having to change their social worker or conversely felt “lucky” to have been able to keep their worker throughout. This lack of clarity reflects localised management responses to service users, which does not offer a consistent countywide service, and leads to some anger and disappointment for those who are not able to keep their social worker, whilst other service users are.

Cumbria has a combined Fostering and Adoption Panel that meets in each one of the three divisions in the county once per month. The Fostering and Adoption Panel provides a child-focused and robust forum for considering children’s permanence reports and the suitability of adopters. The panel has an experienced chairperson who is in the final year of their final term as the chairperson of the adoption panel.

Panel policies and procedures are complete and address the national minimum standards and the new regulations.

The combined panel has experienced some problems with consistency of administrative support. Further to this each of the fostering and adoption panels have a different panel adviser who is the Family Placement Team Manager. This arrangement must be reviewed in line with the new regulations. Cumbria had implemented a panel review and was considering the establishment of a separate county adoption panel to deal with the issues raised in the new regulations. The review was considering the impact of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 on adoption business and was seeking to address issues concerning panel advice and to ensure more consistency in the administrative support for the adoption panel. Many business support staff had to manage panel minute taking in addition to their other administrative functions. Panel administrators would also benefit from being incorporated in further training in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to inform them of the changes in the panel's function.

Agency decisions were made in a timely way, however written notifications should be reviewed, improved and ideally personalised to reflect the status of the applicants. One foster carer who had been approved to adopt received a standard letter advising them that they had just been approved, but could not be guaranteed a child being placed with them in the near future. The foster carer/adopter had applied to adopt a child who had been in placement with them for a long time and found this standard letter upsetting. Further to this few children's files contained any evidence of written notifications being sent to birth parents.

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 places a duty on every local authority to assess the need for post adoption support for all those touched by adoption. Cumbria had responded to the anticipated challenge of meeting this new requirement by developing an adoption support team. The good work of the adoption support team will be described later on in this report.

Cumbria must ensure that the welfare of children is paramount when considering undertaking assessments for post adoption support and must ensure that any risks within this work are clearly identified and managed by an appropriate member of staff. Some evidence found in the case tracking suggested that joint working arrangements between child protection staff and the adoption support team, where an adoption support social worker was dealing with considerable safeguarding issues were not as explicit as they should have been. This is an area that must be addressed.

The inspection confirmed that the Cumbria's Adoption and Permanence Manager is an extremely skilled and knowledgeable manager who has the ability to manage the service. The manager of the service was appointed into their current position in January 2006 and will commence management training within six months of their appointment. An examination of staff files confirmed that all staff, including the manager, working for the adoption service were suitable.

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):

Standards 6 and 18

The adoption support service is developing to ensure that adoptive parents are supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children who are placed with them, however, wider challenges in the service impact upon the quality of support offered to some children and their adoptive families.

Quality in this outcome area was considered as adequate.

EVIDENCE:

There was a wide range of evidence to suggest that the staff in Cumbria work hard to support adopters to provide stable and permanent homes for children, within their current resources.

The adoption support team had been developed to address many of the assessed support needs for prospective and approved adopters. All adopters have spoken positively about the support groups that the service runs across the county.

The adoption support team offers direct work with children and their families with an assessed need for adoption support services. The Team also sends out regular newsletters to all adopters, has developed a children's adoption support group and a birth parent support group. The Team has responsibility for managing the post-box, supporting post adoption contact arrangements and providing counselling and intermediary services for adults.

Adopters and children provided evidence that Cumbria provides excellent support services. One adopter said that they could not have continued to cope without the support and intervention of their adoption support worker. Other adopters said that their children or child had really benefited from the opportunities to get to know other adopted children at groups or during the annual family fun day.

The investment by the service in the adoption support team has produced a superb return, with increased expectation and information about the service

for adopters and their children. The outcome of this will be increased placement stability and reduced adoption breakdowns. The adoption support team is an exciting, although necessary development for the service. The positive impact that the manager and the four staff in the team have made cannot be underestimated. However the team would benefit from being expanded to deal with the full range of post adoption contact issues for all children placed, and would also benefit from developing clearer practice guidelines for making and receiving referrals. Further to this social workers in children and family teams would benefit from further training in identifying need and developing assessments for post placement or post adoption support.

The adoption support team has developed a therapeutic social work post in partnership with CAMHS in the South of the county. This post will allow children and their adopters to access specialist assessment services and is an exciting development for the service. Despite the access to the Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) Team and the recent appointment of an Education adviser to the Adoption and Fostering panel the educational needs of children who have been adopted seem to be an issue for many adopters and the need to develop stronger service provision from an educational perspective for children who have been adopted would be very beneficial.

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):

Standards 7, 8 and 9

The adoption service ensured that some birth parents and families were involved in adoption plans, however more should be done to ensure adequate countywide support services are available to all birth family members to meet their assessed needs.

Quality in this outcome area was considered as adequate.

EVIDENCE:

There was evidence in the child's permanence reports that the wishes and feelings of birth parents with regard to their child's plan for adoption had been considered and recorded. Birth Parents had signed their child's permanence report and had in one case provided valuable information for the placing social worker about the birth father's love of music. Some of the Form's E that were seen during the case tracking did not provide this evidence so it was pleasing to see how the services need to record the wishes and feelings of birth parents has improved. Some placing social workers have clearly worked extremely hard to ensure that birth parents have been able to make a meaningful contribution to their child's plan for adoption. This practice should be supported and developed throughout the county.

Support arrangements for birth parents have changed, with Cumbria withdrawing from the SLA with an adoption support agency. The intention is to invest further resources in the adoption support team who currently provide advice and assistance to birth parents and birth families around post placement/ post adoption contact issues. The Team has recently researched some of the demand for services for post adoption support from birth families. The findings of the report and the need for a member of staff to be available to offer and develop this range of services should form part of Cumbria's action plan.

Despite the annual training events available in life story work the inspection found evidence of inconsistency in practice concerning the timely production of

life work. A number of children were placed with excellent life story work having been completed prior to their placement. Other children and their adoptive parents had to wait considerable periods of time for the life story work to be presented. This is despite the recommendations of reviewing officers. This is an area that must be addressed as part of the service's action plan.

There was little evidence that other child-focused work, for example letters for later life and life appreciation days were completed on behalf of children in Cumbria.

The use of Resource Allocation Panels was also a cause for concern for one case relating to the accommodation of a relinquished baby. The birth mother had requested that her child should be placed for adoption. The Resource Allocation Panel acts as a gateway to Cumbria's resources and all social workers have to attend to request accommodation for children. The child relinquished for adoption had to be accommodated, and although the social worker attended the panel in retrospect to request a foster placement, the advice from the panel to seek a family group conference seemed highly inappropriate, given the concealed nature of the pregnancy. As recommended in the headline feedback to the service and in the fostering inspection report the role and function of the Resource Allocation Panels should be reviewed to ensure that that they do not contribute to unnecessary delay.

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):

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

Cumbria must address longstanding weaknesses in the strategic and operational management of the adoption service to ensure good outcomes of children and their families.

Quality in this outcome area was considered as poor.

EVIDENCE:

There was a statement of purpose in place that had been reviewed in June 2005 and had been formally approved by the executive of the council. It clearly outlined the aspirations and operations of the agency and was written in

an easy to read style. The children's guide to adoption was well presented and gave a realistic overview of the issues involved; it also provided contact details of other relevant agencies and explained how a child could complain. The policies and procedures of the agency, many of which had been recently reviewed and revised to comply with the change in regulations, supported the statement of purpose and most indications were that the agency operated in line with these.

The inspection confirmed that the Cumbria's Adoption and Permanence Manager is an extremely skilled and knowledgeable manager who has the ability to manage the service. The Adoption and Permanence Manager was appointed into their current position in January 2006 and will commence management training within six months of their appointment.

The management structure and the role and function of the County Adoption Manager was raised as an issue for action in 2003 and 2004. It is disappointing to find evidence that the service has not addressed this fundamental weakness. The County Adoption Manager does not line manage Family Placement Team Managers who are responsible for supporting social work staff to deliver the Adoption Service to adults.

The County Adoption Manager cannot ensure a countywide approach to the recruitment strategy, as they do not have the final say in where resources are allocated. This has resulted in an uneven and inequitable service. For example in some areas of the county staff shortages were found to have delayed the approval of adopters who were considered a high priority to the service. Another team who were fully staffed were able to approve adopters who were significantly lower priority. Cumbria must develop and implement an effective countywide Adoption Service Strategy, which ensures that the adoption service delivers a demonstrably equitable service based upon the needs of children waiting.

A countywide consistent service would be best delivered, developed and managed if there was a clear line of management accountability and strategic and operational direction.

The County Adoption Adviser has played a clear role in ensuring that information about children waiting is collected and shared to facilitate timely matching. The Adoption Adviser has also taken over as panel adviser on some occasions. The need to develop a mechanism to ensure effective quality assurance of all adoption work is essential if the service is to develop more consistent countywide practice.

In some respects the service has a model of an effective countywide service that is centrally managed but locally delivered in the Adoption support team.

The majority of staff that were spoken to confirmed that they were well supported by their manager and had access to regular team meetings and supervision. As has already been stated not everyone in the service had received formal training in the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and this is an area that must be addressed as part of the services action plan. The service had acknowledged the need to work towards ensuring that all the staff in the adoption service had achieved a post-qualifying award.

All staff interviewed said that staffing was inadequate and prevented a better organisation of work. Managers commented on vacancies and long term sickness in all areas other than in a Family Placement Team in the south of the county.

Cumbria had addressed the inequalities in terms and conditions for new staff in the service. It is hoped that the recent resolution of unequal pay and terms and conditions between fieldwork staff and family placement staff will resolve some of the longstanding recruitment issues in the service. The service still needs to review how it will implement the Invest to Save strategy and must give consideration to how it will ensure business continuity and the delivery of practice which fulfils all of Cumbria's obligations as an adoption agency.

The file auditing tools that were developed for the adoption service were not consistently used or completed.

Despite the challenges of working in the service the Family placement teams had a generally positive working relationship with placing social workers and their respective Team Managers.

Administrative staff were seen to be hardworking and sensitive to the nature of the work of the service. However, the agency should consider the adequacy of its provision and should urgently review the arrangements for adoption panel administration in line with the Adoption Panel Review.

Cumbria had invested substantial resources into the electronic backing up of all adoption records. This task had been completed and was now subject to regular updating. Practice and procedure for retrieving adoption records was well developed.

Staff files were found to meet the regulations and standards however panel members' files do not meet the regulations; CRB disclosures were present, however the full range of information required was not present on all panel members files.

The range of office facilities available to staff varied. However at least 2 offices were not suitable for staff with a physical disability in that there was no lift and the offices were located above the first floor. Some offices were cramped and there was a lack of storage facilities for equipment.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

“X” in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 “N/A” in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

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

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
Standard No	Score
7	3
8	1
9	2

STAYING SAFE	
Standard No	Score
2	1
4	2
5	3
10	1
11	1
12	2
13	2
15	3
19	1
24	N/a

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
Standard No	Score
No NMS are mapped to this outcome	

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
Standard No	Score
6	2
18	3

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

yes

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	AD2	7.1 (A) and (B) AAR 2003/Amended 2005	The management of the service must manage the adoption and adoption support service with sufficient care, competence and skill to promote and safeguard the welfare of children placed for adoption. (Original timescale not met 30.3.05)	30/01/07
2	AD3	7.1 (A) and (B) AAR 2003/ Amended 2005	The management of the service must ensure that there is an effective countywide recruitment strategy for children who need an adoption placement that is implemented in practice and is kept under review. (Original timescale not met 30.3.05)	30/01/07
3	AD4 AD6	21.1 (A), (B) and 2 AAR 2005	The plan to commission Inter-Country Adoption Assessments from a partner agency should be	30/09/06

			implemented.	
4	AD2 AD23 AD19	10 (B) AAR 2003 Amended 2005	All staff working for the purposes of the in the adoption service must receive training in the implications of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.	30/01/07
5	AD2	36.2, 3 (A), (B) and (C) AAR 2005	The adoption service must ensure that all children placed for adoption have reviews in accordance with the regulations.	30/09/06
6	AD10 AD17	8.1 AAR 2005	The service must appoint an adoption agency adviser who is a senior member of staff who can enhance consistency of practice and quality assurance across the service.	30/09/06
7	AD20 AD16	7.1 (A) and (B) AAR 2003 Amended 2005	The service must ensure that all staff are organised and managed in a way, which delivers an efficient, effective and equitable countywide service.	30/09/07
8	AD21	10 (A) and (B) AAR 2003 Amended 2005	The service must ensure that there is sufficient number of suitably experienced and qualified staff working in the adoption and adoption support service.	01/01/07
9	AD25	12.1 (A)-(I) AAR 2005	The service must set up a case record in respect of the child in accordance with the regulations. (Original timescale not met)	30/01/07
10	AD6	9.2 AAR 2005	The service must ensure that adopted children in receipt of adoption support services are subject to clear safeguarding policies and procedures which are implemented in practice.	30/09/06
11	AD8	13.1 (A)- (C)	The service must ensure that all children, so far as is reasonably practicable, receive counselling regarding all aspects of their adoption,	30/09/06

			including appropriate preparation for their placement and the completion of life work within the child's timescale.	
12	AD28	15 LAA 2003	The service must ensure that panel members' personnel files comply with schedules 3 & 4 of the regulation. (Original timescale not met)	30/09/06

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	AD3	The service should develop a countywide strategy to ensure that prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting are prioritised.
2	AD4	The service should demonstrate how adopters most likely to meet the needs of children waiting are assessed within the timescales set down in the Practice Guidance of the Adoption and Children Act 2005
3	AD12	The service should review and enhance the current arrangements for adoption panel administration.
4	AD13	The service should review and enhance the current written notifications to approved adopters and should amend the current standard letters in line with best practice.
5	AD23	The service should ensure that staff have training in undertaking children's permanence reports, all aspects of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, preparing children for adoption, undertaking life work and undertaking assessments for post adoption support.
6	AD8 AD7	The service should enhance services to birth parents and birth families and should increase the resources available to the Adoption support team in offering support groups and facilitating post placement and post adoption contact.
7	AD21 AD20	The service should implement the Invest to Save strategy to enhance the Family Placement Service to children and their families.
8	AD10 AD11 AD12	The service should implement the findings of the adoption panel review.
9	AD14	The managers of the service should have the opportunity to meet with other managers from neighbouring authorities and agencies to develop practice.
10	AD14	The manager of the service should be supported to complete management training in line with National Minimum Standards.

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