



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## **ADOPTION SERVICE**

**Essex County Council**

**County Hall  
A518  
Chelmsford, Essex  
CM1 1YS**

*Lead Inspector*  
**Delia  
Amos**

*Announced*  
**27<sup>th</sup> June 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
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## Reader Information

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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>Telephone number</b>	01245 434355
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<b>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	Essex County Council
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	Tony Sharp
<b>Type of registration</b>	LAA
<b>No. of places registered (if applicable)</b>	
<b>Category(ies) of registration, with number of places</b>	

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

n/a

**Date of last inspection** This is the first inspection under the terms of the L.A.Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003

## **Brief Description of the Service:**

Essex County Council is a large adoption agency with a number of teams offering a range of adoption services to meet the needs of children, prospective adopters, approved adopters and birth families. The council has formed a new Children's and Young People's Service bringing together the services previously provided from Social Services and the Education Department. The adoption agency is managed by a County Adoption Manager based at County Hall.

Three adoption teams based in East, West and South locality offices recruit and assess prospective adopters and have a family finding role for children up to eight years old in the localities. A fourth team provides a county wide Family Finding function to specifically recruit and assess families for older children, large sibling groups, and children with complex needs arising from physical and learning disabilities. A fifth team, the Central Adoption team, also has a county wide remit to provide adoption support, Section 51 birth records counselling, step-parent and relative adoptions, intercountry adoptions, and administration of contact arrangements. This team also undertakes work with birth parents and birth families in relation to direct contact and the Letterbox scheme. The local authority has established a range of partnerships with other services to offer independent counselling to birth families, to provide support and training to prospective and approved adoptive families, and to provide consultancy and treatment services.

# SUMMARY

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

The agency provided thorough pre-inspection information and arrangements made for the inspection were thoughtful and enabled inspectors to make effective use of the time available.

The inspection took place over a four day period and involved three inspectors. Each adoption team site was visited. Two out of the three adoption panels were observed. Senior personnel were interviewed, as were team managers, front-line staff and administrative and clerical staff. The elected member with portfolio responsibility was available for interview and also attended the verbal feedback. Five adoptive families were visited and two birth families were interviewed.

Twenty nine questionnaires were received from adopters and prospective adopters. Fourteen placing social workers, who had placed seventy children between them, returned completed questionnaires, as did two other local authorities who have placed children with Essex families. Inspectors received written information from and also had the opportunity to meet with representatives of some partner agencies who work closely with Essex County Council in delivering a range of adoption services.

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

Overall, the service was a well-managed one that endeavoured to place children with the most appropriate adopters. 80% of children were placed with adopters approved and assessed within Essex. Clear information was available to adopters and to children about the services available.

There was a thorough approach to the recruitment and assessment of adopters, the needs of the children being central to the process. Where gaps in provision had been identified the agency was establishing strategies to address these. The adoption panels had a systematic approach to their role in monitoring the quality of assessments.

There was a well established adoption support service. This was valued by adopters and birth families. Multi-disciplinary support was available to support adoption placements through the corporate parenting team and therapeutic services.

The agency has effective relationships with a number of providers of adoption services which provide varied types of support to birth families, adopters and children. The managers of the partner agencies spoke highly of the keen and professional relationships established with the local authority managers and staff.

The strategic and operational management of the service ensured that workers had a clear sense of the priorities of the service, and that they had access to regular supervision, support and advice. The approachable management style and clear lines of communication were valued by staff as enabling them to perform their roles effectively. There was a culture of encouraging improvements in the service delivery and managers and staff responded proactively where shortfalls were identified. The agency also had a positive approach to staff training, with many of the adoption team keeping their skills and knowledge updated through external specialist courses, as well as a high proportion completing post qualifying training. Over 50% of the qualified staff in the service were holding or studying for the PQ1 award or the Child Care Award.

There were effective systems for information management, with systems for tracking the progress of children to identify any reasons for delay. The adoption service was very well supported by efficient and dedicated administrative and clerical staff.

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

Not applicable; this was the first inspection of the agency under the current legislation, (Section 43(3)(a) of the Care Standards Act2000, Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003).

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

Recruitment plans to broaden the range of adopters for the children who need families were to be extended to identify families who could match the needs of children from black and ethnic minority groups.

The agency has identified that it needs to further improve the quality and consistency of its own services to birth families. Variable practice was seen about the extent that birth families were engaged in the planning processes, although birth parents themselves were able to comment on the vast improvement they had experienced in more recent contacts with the agency.

Whilst some social workers demonstrated considerable skill and understanding of the adoption process, not all childcare workers had sufficient familiarity with adoption, and training opportunities for them in this area needed to be developed.

Childcare teams who are placing children for adoption have suffered significant staffing shortages. This has had an impact on adoption teams who have had to cover some of the work of the childcare teams. This, as well as frozen posts within the adoption team, caused considerable delays in the assessment and preparation of adopters in the year preceding this inspection. A high number of the questionnaires received from adopters expressed considerable frustration about the delays pre-approval, and the lack of communication at the post approval stage for those not quickly matched with a child.

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**

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# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

The agency has systems in place to ensure effective and safe planning for children, and that children are matched with prospective adoptive parents who are well prepared and assessed to meet their needs.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency has clear written plans to recruit sufficient prospective adopters to meet the needs of the range of children waiting for adoption. 80% of Essex children needing adoptive homes are placed with families assessed and approved in Essex. In the last 12 months 88 children were placed with the council's adopters and 13 placed elsewhere. Effective recruitment strategies were a key theme for the award of Beacon status (2002/3).

There were positive links with the regional consortium, with Essex having had a lead role in its formation. The consortium or other agencies were used to meet the needs of children that could not be placed with Essex families. In particular external resources were likely to be sought for children from black and minority ethnic groups. The agency was broadening its strategies to recruit black and minority ethnic adopters within Essex, for example with targeted advertising, and a recently set up working group with the Diversity Project Manager.

There was evidence of a commitment to enable brothers and sisters, where appropriate, to be placed together, and sibling assessments to support the planning processes were seen on files. One case examined indicated that insufficient attention had been given to listening to the views of the child and staff had reflected on the learning to be gained from this experience. In another case where a sibling group was placed together and issues had arisen in the placement it was noted that statutory visits had not taken place between June and September 2004 owing to holiday and work commitments on the part of the supervising social worker and the adoptive parent. Support was available to the family and the children's written views were on file but it was insufficiently clear whether all concerns were being heeded. Other cases demonstrated fine practice in enabling children with disabilities to express their views and to assist their understanding.

Monthly information sessions for prospective adopters were well attended. Staff spoke of a recent event which attracted about 40 people as a relatively low turnout. Information about children across the County who were waiting for adoption was included. The agency was committed to making a prompt response to people enquiring about adoption, but staff shortages, and budgetary pressures which resulted in frozen posts in the adoption teams, in the previous year had resulted in delays for prospective adopters. 17 of the 29 responses referred to significant delays at various points in the pre-approval stage. Comments included "very slow", "long wait", and "lengthy delay". One described the process as "disjointed...it shouldn't be so stop start". Another referred to the slowness of the process as "ridiculous...we found out they were inundated with adopters and there was a long back log and we had not been told. We would have gone with another agency had we known." In one or two cases adopters reported delays but referred positively to these being "well explained".

Preparation courses were run locally by the locality adoption teams. They consisted of a four day programme held three or four times a year. Adopters generally spoke very positively about the preparation and assessment processes. The vast majority of references to the preparation programmes were that it was helpful and informative, one saying it was a "fun, rewarding process", another referring to "good input from adopters". In one case there were reservations where adopters felt the programme needed to be more flexible to recognise different peoples' knowledge base. Feedback was sought after every programme. The groups were regularly reviewed and systematically evaluated on an annual basis with the results included in the Adoption Service Action Plan. The agency has redrafted its manual used in the preparation of prospective adopters and this was to be in operation in September 2005.

Enquirers about intercountry adoption were sent relevant information, and encouraged to make contact with relevant voluntary organisations. They had

an initial meeting with an experienced worker from the Central team. Home studies were completed by independent qualified social workers. In one case seen the intercountry adopters noted that their assessor had limited knowledge about intercountry adoption. Prospective adopters were referred for preparation to a specialist Consultation Day run by the Overseas Adoption Helpline, now called the Intercountry Adoption Centre.

Adopters' files contained evidence of thorough arrangements for making background checks of applicants. Assessments were generally analytical and insightful, with consideration given to ensuring that applicants had the capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way. Guidelines for staff on checks had been extended to include recommendations following the Brighton and Hove Serious Case Review. The documentation of health and safety checks was found to be variable and this should be addressed more systematically.

Some examples were seen of assessments which did not meet the general high standard. Shortfalls in individual examples included:- issues raised in interview notes were not mentioned in the assessment report, not seeking information from a school or extended family, a lack of clarity about which parts were written by the assessing social worker or the applicants, and information to panel not being up to date. Management strategies to ensure consistency of quality could be enhanced by including, for example, checklists, second opinion visits or assessment reviews.

The agency had a strong commitment to ensuring matches of children with prospective adoptive parents were achieved without delay, and processes were in place to ensure that appropriate links were made to meet the needs of the children. Several adopters described rapid linking processes following approval. A larger number of approved adopters spoke of a frustrating wait and indicated they would welcome a clearer system of communication at this stage. Comments included "we felt at a loose end", "the waits are so long then once approved you are not told anything except 'how long is a piece of string'...", "we sometimes felt ignored," and "we have no idea what is happening, if anything." One described having "no contact from approval to the initial call re our child...10 months". The agency needs to ensure that post approval processes and expectations about contact are clear to adopters. Survey responses from intercountry adopters also indicated uncertainty about the role of the agency post approval.

There were various strategies which contributed to ensuring matches were achieved. Information about children was regularly updated, and a directory is kept of all the families waiting for a match. The Unit managers meet monthly and children and waiting families are discussed at this meeting. The adoption teams have a family finding role and are proactive in seeking appropriate matches for children referred to them. Proposals about potential matches are sometimes made informally, a reference was made to "serendipity" playing a

role. A childcare social worker described actively seeking families in the Essex directory rather than wait for an offer. Informal networking and opportunistic planning may lead to positive outcomes, but the agency may need to review its arrangements, to ensure a cohesive approach to all the children and all the adopters waiting.

Adopters in the main confirmed they were given full information about the child/ren placed with them. Some examples were heard where the information was less satisfactory, coming in "drips and drabs", and containing inaccuracies. The agency used a linking report which comprehensively focussed on the elements of matching and support needs that were considered. Adopters received copies of the information. There was detailed documentation of the issues agreed with adopters at the placement planning meetings although it may be that some of these areas need more careful revisiting, as it was not the case that adopters seen had taken in all the issues discussed at this critical stage. Good practice was evident in the availability of the medical advisers for consultation by the adopters.

There are three adoption panels, each meeting twice a month; two were observed in the course of this inspection. The panels are all chaired by the same independent chairperson. The panels were properly constituted and policies and procedures were in place to underpin the essential role of the panel in ensuring that safe and appropriate arrangements were made for children. A panel handbook was available to members and policies were being revised to reflect current regulations. Panel membership included people with relevant experience and attributes to inform their understanding of the adoption process. Legal advisers were available for each panel, as were different medical advisers. Some staff referred to the varying approaches experienced with the medical advisers.

Vacancies, and anticipated vacancies, were an opportunity to broaden the range of experience and diversity of the panels. At this point no panel included a birth family member, or a person with disability. The panel chair acknowledged that the broadening range of applications before panel, including same sex applicants, was a challenge to certain members. It was reported that anti-discriminatory and diversity training had been commissioned for this financial year for staff and panel members.

It was noted that panels paid appropriate attention to the quality of reports presented to them and feedback was given in some cases directly to the worker, or via the panel chair to the relevant manager. Panel members demonstrated a child focused approach; various instances were seen of them encouraging amendments to reports which would be helpful to the understanding of the adopted adult reading the records at a later date, for example the removal of judgemental terms, and clarifying inconsistencies. Good practice was seen in the use of a checklist completed at the end of each

substantive item to ensure that everything that needed to be, had been addressed.

There is a well established practice (since 1997) for prospective adopters to attend panel. Adopters reported that they had found the experience helpful. The agency regularly receives the adopters' evaluations following panel attendance. At this point the possibility of adopters having the good practice option to attend matching panels is under discussion in the agency.

Panel members received relevant induction and training. Details of an annual Panel Conference confirmed that this was a well attended and valuable occasion with learning opportunities relevant to the needs of panel members. Each adoption panel also had an annual business meeting to reflect on the work undertaken. It is suggested that opportunities for panel members to broaden the range of training they attend would be beneficial to promote the development of individual skills, attitudes and confidence.

Panels were conducted efficiently, each panel being supported by dedicated panel administrators. Information provided to adoption panel was in some cases insufficiently comprehensive and the agency should develop more adequate quality assurance processes. Examples were seen of children being presented for consideration of best interests, where panel were not able to reach a recommendation because of lack of information or where the plans lacked clarity.

Intercountry adoption applications were considered at only one of the panels, in order for that panel to develop greater expertise in this area of work. Panel briefings were given by the Central team staff or by the legal adviser for that panel.

The decision making process was timely. There was a strong commitment to avoiding delays in planning for children. The agency's procedures for parallel planning included clear expectations that referrals of children to the panel for consideration of adoption in their best interests should be made within two months of the four month review. In this way panels were alerted to the range of children who may need adoptive homes and progress reports were expected on a regular basis. The decision making process was in the process of being transferred to the Head of Looked After Children's Services, having previously been the County Adoption Manager.

The agency had identified that there was a need for continuing development of the processes by which birth parents are helped to understand the decision making process. An example was seen of the panel decision being conveyed in writing by a childcare social worker to a birth parent in a manner which lacked sensitivity. It is recommended that the agency review practice to ensure all staff follow appropriate guidelines.

The agency is managed by an appropriately qualified management team, and a sample of personnel files seen confirmed that satisfactory safeguarding recruitment processes were in place to ensure that staff and managers were suitable and safe to work with children. The manager confirmed that all staff have enhanced CRB checks and that a system is in place to update these every three years. The practice of making telephone enquiries to verify references was reported to be established, although this was not clearly documented in the sample seen. It is also recommended that internal appointments should be supported by two written references. (see also comments and recommendations made about personnel files elsewhere in this report)

Staff in the adoption teams had a range of relevant qualifications and included highly skilled and experienced workers. They demonstrated a commitment to keeping up to date in their understanding of adoption issues. Each adoption team was responsible for hosting a practice workshop quarterly in order to share knowledge, skills and experience. The council was committed to ensuring staff had access to post qualifying training. 50% held a postqualifying award.

# 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 and 18

The adoption agency had well established and effective support services for adoptive parents to ensure appropriate placements are made and maintained. Staff and adopters had access to specialist advisers which enabled the provision of services to meet the needs of the children and their adoptive families.

### EVIDENCE:

The adoption agency has provided an adoption support service since 1997 when the current teams were established. There was an impressive range of services with evidence of ongoing development of services in response to growing needs. Partnership working was well established.

Adopters confirmed they had been prepared well in advance for the children coming to live with them. Adoption support plans were prepared although there was a need to ensure more clarity in some of these proposals. Some examples seen with panel reports were insufficiently clear and potentially confusing.

Examples were seen of adopters being supported in the provision of a range of out of school hours learning opportunities for children, including musical interests and sport.

Other practical support for adoptive families typically included start-up payments, funding activities for children newly placed to help boost their self esteem, funding domestic help and respite care. Outreach workers are available to provide practical support including childcare if required. In certain circumstances the agency meets the cost of legal expenses, although one adopter expressed some frustration about delays experienced in clarifying this. Some adopters indicated that arrangements for financial support were insufficiently clear, with one foster carer who was adopting reporting that the “goal posts move” and they are not likely to receive the level of support they had been promised.



The council has a Corporate Parenting team which aims to drive forward the agenda for improving outcomes for looked after children. Staff include teachers, an educational psychologist, educational support project workers, a diversity manager and an information development officer. Services can be accessed for children with an adoption care plan and placed for adoption. An advice only service remained available post adoption order. The agency identified that the corporate parenting services to children placed for adoption remain an area for continuing development. One adopter reported that the school did not accept the child placed with them, but "would have been forced to accept them as a 'looked after child'." The model of support now established would include mediating for children placed for adoption.

Support packages in some cases have included therapeutic interventions. The Lionmede Clinical Support Service was highly spoken of by staff and adopters, and file evidence was seen of supportive interventions. An adoption co-ordinator from the Lionmede service regularly attends the post adoption referral meetings and support is available post placement, and post adoption order if required. At the time of this inspection twenty adoption support cases were open to the service.

Good practice was noted in the provision of an independent reviewing officer, experienced in adoption, who regularly reviews all adoption placements up to the making of the order. The review style and consultation processes were responsive to the circumstances of adoptive placements, for example a specially adapted adoption placement review form. It was of concern that several examples were seen where support and supervision from the child's social worker did not continue post placement. An adopter reported "we were satisfied with our social worker but our child only saw their social worker once in the first year".

The agency has had few recent disruptions of adoptive placements. Where they have occurred the practice is for disruption meetings to be chaired by an adoption manager who has not had management responsibility in the placement arrangements, with a summary of the conclusions been considered by the adoption management team meeting and the relevant adoption panel. Consideration should be given to achieving a higher level of independence in these meetings.

It was noted that support had been available to the adopters following a disruption but the adopters reported there was some confusion about the various roles of the people involved and the file indicated that communication issues about roles had meant that support was not as forthcoming or clear as it could have been.

Medical advice was readily available to adopters from the panel medical advisers and from Looked After Children's Nurses. The medical advisers meet

quarterly with the County Adoption Manager and Panel Chair to ensure consistency and standards are met across the service, although staff commented critically on variations in presentation.

The agency has had a partnership arrangement with Adoption UK since 2003. All newly approved adopters are referred to Adoption UK, subject to their agreement, and the agency paid a year's membership for them. Adoption UK facilitated support groups, a buddy scheme, a newsletter, and training opportunities. It was encouraging to hear that the buddy scheme included male adopters, although this support had not been available in the case of the disruption. The agency funded Adoption UK to regularly run 'It's A Piece of Cake' training package for adoptive parents. There was also a service level agreement with the Post Adoption Centre to provide support to birth parents and adoptive families. The independent multi-disciplinary adoption service, Family Futures, was also available in some cases for consultancy to social workers and adoptive parents on adoption and attachment issues.

Adopters seen who were adopting a child from another country confirmed that they were confident they could look to the agency for support if required, although had not been given any specific guidance about this. Membership of intercountry adoption support networks was encouraged and there was a local group available. An adopter in a survey response reported that "really only Chinese children /processes were discussed at any great length", leaving adopters from elsewhere to "find out for themselves". The adoption service subscribed to the Association for Families who have Adopted from Abroad.

Representatives from partner agencies reported that relationships with the Essex adoption service's manager and staff were effective and supported by clear systems for evaluation and review. There was considerable praise for the "keen and active" approach of Essex staff and managers in working with other agencies. It was also noted that issues were dealt with openly and with a productive dialogue.

## **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**

There was a clear commitment to providing services which enable birth families to contribute to their children's futures, although the agency was aware that more consistent practice needed to be established.

### **EVIDENCE:**

The agency had expectations that workers would work closely with birth parents in enabling effective plans for the child. This included the provision of independent support services. Written information is provided and the views of birth families are sought wherever possible, in respect of the plans for the child, but also about the service they receive. As family finding teams, the adoption teams had a role in providing advice and counselling to birth families, although they acknowledge their focus is on life story work.

Good practice in working with birth families was seen in a number of examples. This included birth parents being offered support because of reading difficulties. Two sets of birth families were visited in this inspection who gave very positive accounts of the services they had received. One spoke positively about feeling that "all the family's views were taken into account". It was heard that descriptions of several adopters were given to a birth parent and that the agency kept them closely informed of the matching arrangements: "The adopters were a lot nicer than I imagined".

The agency's information for birth parents and birth families was under revision. Other written information was available from Barnados LINK, with whom Essex has had a service level agreement since 2003. An independent helpline, support groups and counselling sessions are available through this service. It was reported that take up of these services by birth family

members was low and the agency was aware that it was a continuing challenge to ensure that services were promoted. Social workers spoken with had a positive approach to ensuring that birth families had information about services available to them.

In the case seen of a relinquished baby, there was good evidence of the extent that the birth mother had been involved throughout the process. On other files birth parent's views were not clearly recorded, for example about religion, and Form Es seen did not indicate whether parents had been given the opportunity to see them. There were examples of Form Es with confusing, and contradictory information indicating a need for training to childcare social workers about the purpose of the Form E. The adoption panels monitored the documentation and some amendments were achieved. A checklist was used at panel to specifically ask whether the birth parents had seen the Form E and reasons for non-disclosure. The agency acknowledged that there has been a need to review the information, training and procedures for staff across children's social care in their work with birth parents in order to continuously improve.

Life story work was not always vigorously undertaken when children became looked after and in some cases there were delays and gaps in achieving the work, although there was evidence of excellent practice in other examples. Birth families confirmed they had provided information and had been enabled to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage.

The Essex Post Adoption Service, within the Central team, will respond to requests from birth families for help and assistance. Input from this team was very much valued by birth parents spoken with. There was a large letter box scheme with 459 active agreements, and 1,870 exchanges of information in the previous twelve months. This is administered by the Central adoption team. In view of the growing volume of cases, there was some concern about the resources available to systematically review and administer the growing direct and indirect contact arrangements.

Contact arrangements between siblings were not clear in one example seen and the agency responded promptly to concerns expressed about this during the inspection.

# 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 adoption agency was found to be well managed at all levels, with effective systems of communication that supported workers in developing services to meet the needs of the children.

## **EVIDENCE:**

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose issued 1<sup>st</sup> May 2005 that has been formally ratified by the executive of the council. The details

provide an overview of the responsibilities of the agency and reflect the policies and procedures available to staff. Some policies are being revised and an Essex Adoption Service Policy Statement is currently being updated to take into account new legislation. An area to include will be specific reference to the arrangements for the protection of children placed for adoption (in accordance with Regulation 9, Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003).

There are a number of booklets for children designed to help them understand the adoption process and the services available. The children's guides have relevant details about the service in Essex. Several social workers made positive comments about the "useful and child friendly" information for children. The council has facilities to make any public document available in other languages and formats, and evidence was provided that communication about adoption with children with disabilities has been well facilitated by specialist workers if required.

The information pack provided for people who are interested in adoption is comprehensive and gives clear details about who is able to adopt and the needs of the children requiring placement. The council's Corporate Communications service assists the adoption service in preparing a twelve month recruitment strategy. There are systems for prioritising prospective adopters who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting. Information about children waiting is available at the monthly information sessions.

Applicants were given information about becoming an adoptive parent. For enquirers about intercountry adoption, this included information about the relevant voluntary organisations, for example FLICA (Friends Linked by Inter-Country Adoption), with whom the service had links.

The manager of the service was appropriately qualified and experienced and confirmation of relevant checks was provided. The managers of the various adoption teams were all experienced and qualified social workers. They did not in every case have relevant management training.

The strategic and operational management of the service was of a high standard, with clear roles for managers and staff. Managers, especially the County Adoption Manager, were seen to be approachable and readily available for consultation or advice. The management arrangements were being reconfigured at a senior level with the County Adoption Manager taking over the supervision of all the adoption team managers, a responsibility which has been shared with the Service Manager responsible for adoption and fostering.

The council had an Equal Opportunities and Diversity policy and an impact assessment was being completed on all policies in line with the Race Equality action plan. It has been noted that the agency was seeking to broaden its

strategies in regard to the recruitment and support of adoptive families from black and minority ethnic groups.

There was evidence in files of management oversight and discussions in supervision. Staff at all levels confirmed that regular supervision was available and valued. There were systems in place to monitor workloads, and to track the progress of children and adopters from referral to adoption order.

Senior management and council members have received, for six years, annual Adoption Service Action Plans, which have set clear objectives and provided detailed analysis of the previous year's activities of the service. The evaluation relies on regular service user feedback at different points in the adoption process. The executive side of the council receive regular reports detailing the adoption service's performance against government indicators and quarterly reports were received by the Cabinet. Actions recommended following a report considered by the Policy and Development Group in 2004 included establishing a regular reporting cycle to members within the new council.

Managers received monthly financial reports and there was a dedicated person in Financial Services who was the point of contact for the adoption service. The adoption service was well supported by administrative staff and procedures. The quality of administrative and clerical support was a considerable strength to the agency. Clerical workers participate in the information sessions, attend team meetings, and are well integrated into the focus and delivery of the service. They meet twice a year on a county wide basis. A designated administrative post included the function of linking with the Adoption Register and liaising with the operational teams.

The adoption teams included a high proportion of workers with considerable experience and longevity within the agency, and staff turnover was not seen to have been such a major problem as in other teams. Budget pressures had resulted in the temporary freezing of some adoption posts; the resultant staffing shortages were acknowledged to have had an adverse impact on some processes, particularly in causing delays in the assessment and preparation of adopters in the preceding year. It was reported that there were some continuing vacancies in the Central Adoption Team but that even after these were filled there was concern that meeting the growing demand for services would need careful monitoring. The use of outreach workers was providing a flexible and practical service, although the job description seen in respect of this post did not make clear that the work was with birth families and adopters.

Other childcare teams had been subject to more critical staff turnover and serious staff shortages were still reported in some localities, with a 25% vacancy rate overall. Childcare workers met during this inspection showed a strong commitment to offering a good service to the children and their families, with some individual examples of passionate and innovative practice.

Pockets of knowledge and expertise had developed in various teams but the pressure on time and resources was felt to hinder the workers in developing specialist skills and implementing best practice. There were comments in surveys that some workers perceived the guidance as mechanistic, with an emphasis on targets and timescales and that the focus should be more child centred. It was reported that childcare workers often felt very pressured and sometimes felt there was insufficient support and guidance for them on adoption issues, especially if they did not have ready access to a manager or colleague with significant experience of adoption.

Recruitment and retention strategies had included family friendly policies, bursaries for students, and secondments. Despite these efforts, it was reported that Essex offered less favourable terms and conditions to staff than other neighbouring authorities and this was continuing to be seen as a significant reason for childcare social workers leaving. Staff described how the adoption workers picked up work, for example statutory visiting, from the depleted childcare teams to help through the staffing crisis. As stated this had implications for the adoption team's work, causing considerable frustration to adopters facing delays.

In other respects, Essex county council was described as a good employer, with staff feeling valued and with opportunities for professional development being supported. Support for training was reported to be 'excellent'. This included administrative and clerical staff. At this point the adoption service did not have a dedicated training budget and discussions were taking place about introducing this to make it easier for staff to book and reserve places, especially in respect of specialist external training.

The adoption service managers acknowledged that there was limited training about adoption issues available to the childcare workers, although they had access to personal guidance and advice from the adoption team workers. There would be benefit in ensuring that adoption training was more readily available to those workers with the responsibility of placing for adoption and communicating with birth families.

There were written guidelines, currently being redrafted, about access to records which were seen to be implemented. There were procedures to cover the confidentiality of all records and indexes. Computer records relating to children and adopters are locked to adoption staff and the child's social worker. On the making of the adoption order the case worker loses the access unless specifically authorised. The SWIFT data base was currently being updated to take on board the Integrated Children's System.

Record keeping was generally of a good standard. Children's adoption files and case records for prospective/ approved adopters met the requirements. Some improvement in the style of case recording would benefit some files to make sure the information was focused and more readable. An improved



system of file audit was to be introduced. It would also be better practice to ensure records of complaints and allegations were clearly identifiable in the file structure.

Personnel (Human Resource) records seen were poorly organised and although the agency was able to confirm that relevant CRB checks had been completed, this was not apparent in some of the files. Panel members' files were also sampled and indicated that measures have been taken to ensure the relevant information is recorded, and that recent appointments have been made following appropriate enquiries and references.

The adoption teams operate from a number of different sites, of variable standard. There were plans for relocation of some of the teams and the manager reported that the new office specification takes full account of the minimum standards required. Each site visited had restricted access with security alarms. The main adoption archive is currently with a specialist company and was not seen during this inspection. Scanning of records takes place. Within each adoption team, closed files are retained for three years before being sent to the central archive. The arrangements in the various offices should be reviewed to ensure that risk of fire or water damage to these records is minimised. The agency reported that discussions were taking place about the production of a disaster recovery plan which would address risk in regard to premises and records.

# SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>1</b>	3
<b>3</b>	3
<b>14</b>	3
<b>16</b>	3
<b>17</b>	4
<b>20</b>	4
<b>21</b>	3
<b>22</b>	3
<b>23</b>	3
<b>25</b>	3
<b>26</b>	3
<b>27</b>	3
<b>28</b>	3
<b>29</b>	2
<b>30</b>	N/A
<b>31</b>	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	LAAS Regs 2003 9(1)&(2)	The local authority must amend the child protection policy to include specifically the details for the arrangements for the protection of children as laid out in this regulation.	31.10.05

## 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.	5	The agency should ensure that expectations are clear for post-approval contact with approved adopters waiting for a match.
2.	13	Measures should be taken to ensure that consistent and sensitive practice is maintained in written communication with birth families.
3.	19	Procedures for internally recruited and appointed staff should include documenting that two satisfactory references have been sought.
4.	20	Team managers in the adoption service should each have relevant management training.
5.	23	Training and development opportunities for childcare workers involved in adoption work should be expanded.

6.	29	The agency should review its arrangements for the storage of records in each of the offices to ensure adequate risk assessments have been made in respect of potential fire or water damage.
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