



*Making Social Care  
Better for People*

# inspection report

## ADOPTION SERVICE

### **Dorset County Council Adoption Service**

**County Hall  
Colliton Park  
Dorchester  
DT1 1XJ**

*Lead Inspector*  
Rosie Dancer

*Announced Inspection*  
14th August 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
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

<b>Reader Information</b>	
Document Purpose	Inspection Report
Author	CSCI
Audience	General Public
Further copies from	0870 240 7535 (telephone order line)
Copyright	This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI
Internet address	<a href="http://www.csci.org.uk">www.csci.org.uk</a>

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.

This report is a public document. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the prior permission of the Commission for Social Care Inspection.

# SERVICE INFORMATION

<b>Name of service</b>	Dorset County Council Adoption Service
<b>Address</b>	County Hall Colliton Park Dorchester DT1 1XJ
<b>Telephone number</b>	01305 251000
<b>Fax number</b>	
<b>Email address</b>	
<b>Provider Web address</b>	
<b>Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)</b>	Dorset County Council
<b>Name of registered manager (if applicable)</b>	Andrea Orchard
<b>Type of registration</b>	Local Auth Adoption Service

# SERVICE INFORMATION

## Conditions of registration:

**Date of last inspection** Full (key) inspection 6/08/03. On 9/11/05 progress in completing the action plan agreed was assessed. (Random Inspection.)

## Brief Description of the Service:

The adoption service provided by Dorset County Council is part of the Children and Families Services the council provides. The adoption and permanence team aims to provide a high quality adoption and permanency service for children. The nominated manager, who manages the adoption team on an operational level, is Ms. Andrea Orchard.

The operational team consists of the following posts:

- Adoption team manager (Full-time) (Ms Andrea Orchard)
- An assistant team manager (Full-time)
- 2 part-time and 2 full-time social work posts with the primary role of recruitment preparation and assessment of adopters, family finding for children, assisting in the matching process and supporting placements pre- order.
- 2 full-time social work posts with the primary role of supporting families pre and post placement and providing a service to adults affected by adoption. These workers also carry out some work with birth family members.
- 1 Social work assistant (the post holder has been seconded to study for a degree in social work)
- 2 clerical officers (These individuals are a part of the administrative support team and they service the adoption and permanence team.)

There is also a family placement officer post managed within the team. The role of the post holder is to assess, prepare and support applicants who wish to foster children on a long-term basis.

The team is split between two sites, one in Dorchester the other in Wimbourne.

The adoption team:

- a. Recruits, prepares and assesses domestic adopters
- b. Assesses inter country adopters

- c. Works with children's social workers to identify matches for looked after children and assist in their placement
- d. Provides an adoption support service
- e. Provides a service to adopted adults and adult birth relatives of adopted adults including an intermediary service.

Some of the services detailed in d and e are provided by a commissioned Voluntary Adoption Support Agency. The assessments of inter country adopters are now being carried out by a Voluntary Adoption Agency.

The agency is a member of SWAC, South West Adoption Consortium.

Dorset County Council childcare services operate from eight local offices across the county, with social workers in long-term teams having responsibility for the arrangements for children whose plan may be adoption.

# SUMMARY

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

This is the second inspection of the adoption service provided by Dorset County Council. Prior to the inspection fieldwork taking place supporting documentary evidence, including policies and procedures, were sent to and read by the lead inspector. Questionnaires were received from one birth family member, 10 approved domestic adopters, 3 placing social workers, 3 placing authorities, and 3 specialist advisers.

Two inspectors spent three working days each in the agency. An inspection of the fostering service by CSCI inspectors was carried out at the same time as the inspection of the adoption service.

The inspection activity included:

Interviews with four sets of adopters

Interview with an elected member of the council

Interviews with key managers and staff

The panel was observed; the chairperson and the adviser to panel were interviewed.

A selection of files were read during the course of the inspection.

The premises and archive storage were also inspected.

The inspectors would like to thank the managers and staff for their cooperation during the inspection and the hard work that they put in when organising both the pre-inspection material and the inspection programme. The openness and helpfulness of staff at all levels enabled the inspection to be carried out efficiently and effectively.

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

The service has addressed fully or partially most of the recommendations and requirements made as a result of the last key inspection. This is a good achievement as there were a number of areas to address. This achievement shows the commitment managers and staff have in developing the quality of the service provision.

The agency has good matching processes that are child focused.

The agency delivers a good preparation programme for adopters.

The agency demonstrated some good examples of listening to children and where appropriate acting on the child's wishes.

Although there are some recommendations in respect to the standards relating to panel the panel process is thorough and panel members committed in their role.

Some adopters commended individual members of the adoption team for their professionalism and sensitively.

The new management arrangements for the service had led to staff feeling confident in their employer.

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

The agency has made a number of improvements since the last inspection of the service. Improvements include the following:

The agency has compiled a statement of purpose that clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the service and provides the reader with a clear view about the overall functions of the adoption service. The executive side of the council has ratified the statement. The agency now has two guides to adoption for children, one for up to 8's and one for over 8's. (While these documents require some additions it is clear that a significant amount of work has gone into developing the statement of purpose in particular.)

The agency has developed a written recruitment strategy for adopters.

The agency had begun to offer some birth parents a service via the adoption support workers and has entered into a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to which all birth parents will have the opportunity to access.

The management structure of the adoption service is now clear. Staff commented on their confidence in the management team and were clear about their own roles and responsibilities and those of others in the agency.

Although not in place at the time of the inspection a further two posts for the adoption team had been created; this shows a good commitment to ensuring the further development of the services to adopters, birth parents and others affected by adoption.

The agency has produced clear written information for adopters, which is sent out to all adopters and will be a useful reference tool for them throughout the adoption process.

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

The agency needs to ensure that it is evidenced, within personnel files, that all people working for the purposes of the adoption service have been subject to a robust recruitment process.



The agency must ensure that child protection procedures in respect of children placed for adoption and children receiving an adoption support service are developed in line with regulations.

The services to birth parents need to be further developed. While developments have been planned these were not fully operational at the time of this inspection.

The support service to all adopters need to be further developed.

The timescales some adopters have experienced at various stages in the process need to be improved.

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

The report of this inspection is available from [enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk) or by contacting your local CSCI office.

# **DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS**

## **CONTENTS**

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

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

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

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements identified during the inspection

# Staying Safe

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The visit identified that overall the arrangements for assessing and approving adopters were satisfactory; the matching processes were good and the panel process thorough. However, issues around staff recruitment processes and child protection procedures need to be addressed to ensure the safety and well being of all children is ensured.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency has devised a written plan for the recruitment of adopters who are likely to be able to meet the needs of local children needing an adoptive placement. The strategy identifies that in the past the agency has recruited significant numbers of adopters seeking to adopt young children with uncomplicated backgrounds; it also identifies that there are few children available for adoption in this category. The plan is clear that the aim is to recruit adopters who are prepared to adopt older children with a range of needs.

It was noted that in at least one recent case adopters had been approved for the younger age range. There are a number of adopters who have been waiting for well over a year for a placement and some of these are waiting for children from the younger age group.

It is essential that the recruitment strategy is complied with and that a more robust approach is taken in accepting applications only from those adopters who are most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement. The agency should consider expanding the recruitment activity, for example to include specific communities in Dorset such as church and minority groups.

All applicants wishing to adopt from another country are now referred to a registered voluntary adoption agency that specialises in inter-country adoption. This agency undertakes all aspects of the assessment, preparation and approval of such adopters on behalf of Dorset County Council.

The preparation and assessment of prospective adopters was, overall, of a good quality. Preparation groups are held, usually three times a year, at the offices in Wimborne. They are run over four Saturdays and delivered by two of the family placement officers with other relevant people co-presenting the programme. Attention has been given, since the last inspection, to ensuring that adopters are informed about the likely needs of children placed for adoption through the care system.

Adopters' comments about the courses included:

- "We found the preparation course and application process very useful and a genuinely positive experience."

And

- "Preparation course was very good... lots of different adopters spoke to us and also a birth parent and an adult adoptee."

Placing social workers comments included:

- "Thorough assessment and training package."
- "Adopters are offered guidance and advice on good child caring practices by the agency social workers."

A Dorset social worker stated:

- "They (the adopters) were well prepared and knowledgeable about the issues that adopters encounter."

Adopters are asked to complete a questionnaire about their experience of the courses they attend and this information is subject to evaluation by the adoption team. It was noted that as a result of the adopter's comments changes had been made to various aspects of the course.

Adopters seemed aware that the preparation sessions are a part of the assessment process; this is clearly stated in the new information pack being provided to adopters.

The adopter assessment reports sampled were overall of a good quality. A competency approach to assessment was being introduced. This approach should further enhance the quality of the assessments.

All necessary checks were made, including contacting previous partners and the completion of health and safety questionnaires. These questionnaires included the safe use and storage of guns and other dangerous weapons. The agency should consider also including a section in the questionnaires about dangers for young children from any pull cords on window blinds.

A form for recording the outcomes of CRB checks on adopters has been introduced. While the files sampled did not contain these detailed forms the files viewed were of assessments which commenced prior to its introduction.

Comments about the quality of assessments from other professionals included:

- " Assessments (are) usually excellent and the matching process careful."

(A specialist adviser)

And

- "Comprehensive"

(A Dorset social worker)

It was noted that where issues had arisen about adopters early on in the assessment process there is a brief assessment report presented to panel for advice about the viability of the assessment continuing; this is good practice and in line with the new guidance.

Children's permanence reports were of a variable quality. This is further discussed under the "Making a Positive Contribution" section of this report.

There is a system for identifying children for whom adoption may be the plan and for tracking the children.

The assessing social workers undertake the task of family finding for children and consider if potential adopters are available from within their own pool of adopters. If a local match is not possible the agency will seek a match within the South West Adoption Consortium, through national advertising, the national adoption register and other local authorities. There are 3 monthly "adoption exchanges" where details of children needing a placement are shared across the region. Adopters waiting for a placement are invited to attend these.

Some adopters felt that they had not been kept informed by their social workers about family finding efforts being made. As a result some of these

adopters had been approaching other agencies in respect of children they were interested in. This is unsatisfactory as local authorities expect to be contacted by other professionals to enable a full discussion about the often complex needs of the children to take place. The agency should discourage this and review their practice.

Where children were of an age and level of understanding it was noted that their views had been sought and taken into consideration during the care planning process. At least one case was noted where by a plan for adoption had been reviewed and changed to long-term fostering partly at the instigation of the child concerned. In this case this was good practice as the child's needs had also been fully assessed.

In terms of information about specific children it was noted that overall the information provided to adopters was comprehensive. Adoption placement planning meetings are held routinely, adoption support plans are developed on the basis of need and some good examples of detailed placement plans were noted.

A specialist adviser commented that matching is

- "Careful and considered"

Another local authority social worker who had placed a child with Dorset adopters commented that:

- "Comprehensive (joint) assessments are done on adopters and children"

There was one case whereby adopters were of the view that information about a child's needs was not as comprehensive as it should have been. This issue was subject to a formal complaint and at the time of the inspection was being investigated by the agency. The agency will need to ensure any shortfalls identified by the investigation are used to inform future practice.

The agency might like to consider introducing child appreciation days for each child. These meetings provide an excellent opportunity for full information sharing about a child and provide adopters with a focused arena to check out any areas of need they are unsure about.

The agency has developed a system whereby a written record is kept of the adoptive parents' decision to agree to notify the agency in the event of the death of an adoptive child and pass that information on to the birth family.

While there are documents in place in respect to the adoption panel these need to be developed into a clear policy and procedure document and should include all elements stated in standard 10.2.

Adopters are routinely invited to attend the panel at which their application for approval is being heard. Adopters overall felt that while it had been a daunting experience they had been glad that they had attended. It was noted at the

panel observed that adopters attendance had been handled sensitively by the panel chair and panel members.

Adopters are not invited to attend the matching panel where the placement is an internal one. The merits of this had been discussed by the panel and the view was reached that adopters' attendance would add little to this process; the agency may like to canvas adopters views about attending the matching panel and review their decision in light of the comments they received.

The adoption manager attends panel twice a year to update the panel on the progress of cases. It would be good practice for panel to receive updates, in some form, on a more regular basis to ensure that panel remains up to date with the progress of cases. The updates should include details of all adopters approved.

The constitution of the panel membership should be reviewed in respect to the following:

- The panel must only have one elected member unless the second member is in another role prescribed by the regulations
- There should be a more practice based membership among the social work representatives

Files for panel members were poor. All four sampled had a number of gaps in required information, for example a lack of references, CV, application forms and photographs.

Panel members must be subject to the same checks as staff and evidence that all checks have been carried out must be retained.

The panel observed was well chaired and conducted, panel members had clearly taken into account all of the available information and recommendations and advice given to agency were reached following full consideration of all of the available information.

There is an induction and training plan in place for panel members. It was noted that training in the new legislation had been provided to members in January 2006, a further training session had been planned for October 2006. Panel members are also invited to attend specific training provided for social work staff and training events delivered by BAAF.

Panel dates are set in advance and it seemed that the frequency met the level of business generated.

The administration of the panel was efficient; panel minutes were clear and included reasons for conclusions reached and all recommendations made.

The decision maker receives the panel papers and draft "short" minutes written by the panel chair after the panel hearing. While the decision maker has access to the panel adviser where there is a contentious issue it would be better practice to ensure that the panel papers are sent to the decision maker at the same time they are sent to panel members and that full minutes are provided to her before she makes her decision.

However, the decision was made in a timely way and relevant people were informed of the decision promptly.

The manager of the agency was a suitable person to manage the service. She had been subject to a range of recruitment checks and was very experienced and knowledgeable about adoption issues.

Social work staff were suitably qualified and experienced, and had a good knowledge about adoption matters including the new legislation.

The countywide recruitment and selection policy and procedures did not include details about good recruitment practice in safeguarding children. These need development.

Staff HR files viewed did not meet regulation, however the manager keeps recruitment files for all of the adoption staff which she could confirm contained the missing information the inspectors identified. It is required that an audit is carried out of all staff files and any shortfalls are addressed.

While there was not any evidence noted to show that issues of a child protection nature had not properly been addressed the ACPC procedures submitted as evidence did not meet the regulations. It is required that this is addressed to ensure that all staff and other professionals working with children placed for adoption or children receiving an adoption support service are aware of the correct actions to take in the event of an allegation or concern being made.

Child protection procedures need to be developed in line with legislation



# Enjoying and Achieving

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

6,18

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

Dorset has shown a commitment to further developing the support service to adopters and children. The developments will ensure that all families are fully supported in meeting the children's changing needs.

## EVIDENCE:

The agency was in the process of reviewing the adoption support arrangements. This has been in part due to a disappointing take up by adopters of some of the support groups and activities planned. One adopter stated difficulties in attending support groups and other activities due to them being far away geographically. The agency should ensure that such issues are considered during the review as some adopters, and staff members felt geographical issues impacted on various aspects of the adoption work including attendance at meetings.

The agency also acknowledged the need to improve the support service to adopters who are awaiting placements; this was pleasing to note, as a number of adopters awaiting placements expressed a high level of frustration with what they described as lack of communication from the agency.

The manager and deputy manager had carried out annual reviews for all adopters; in the main these are adopters who have been waiting for a long time for a placement. This is a good development as it allows for a "second party", at a management level, to consider with the adopters the options to progress their case.

A requirement was made as a result of the last full inspection of the service in respect to the development of a support strategy. Progress has been made in

this area but further work is needed and accordingly a recommendation has been made.

Support services in place include:

- Adoption support plans made at the point of placement
- Paid membership of Adoption UK, a registered adoption support agency, for 3 years
- Various support groups
- Social work support wherever possible from the assessing social worker up until an order has been granted. Alternatively where it is not possible for the assessing social worker to undertake this role another family placement officer will be allocated the case
- A Christmas event
- An annual summer event
- A newsletter for adopters twice a year
- Invitation to attend some of the training sessions available to social workers

One adopter said of the support received during the introduction and placement processes that:

- "The adoption social worker was very supportive."

Two adopters spoke of a recently trialled parenting course and both had found aspects of this useful in developing strategies to manage behaviour. Two social workers were trained to lead these courses.

The agency has developed disruption procedures; it is recommended that they consider introducing a requirement that a manager independent of the case chairs these meetings.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advisers. These include:

- The adoption adviser provides advice
- The medical adviser
- The legal adviser
- The CAMHS

Overall the advisers were reported as being accessible to staff. The adoption and the legal advisers are employed by the county council and are available to provide advice. Staff reported that a good level of advice and support are readily available from these advisers.

The medical adviser to the panel and the agency is a consultant paediatrician. It her role to advise on health issues for children and adopters and to participate as a panel member.

While the medical adviser was reported as being knowledgeable and conscientious in her role, the arrangements for the provision of time for her to

carry out the work appeared limited. For example, it was reported, due to time constraints social workers are sometimes required to follow up medical issues with consultants in the health field. The agency should explore, with the adviser and her employer, if the time allowed for her to carry out this essential role is adequate.

The quality of and access to the CAMHS advice available to the service is good in one part of the county. It was pleasing to note that there had been a meeting with the health authority to discuss the shortfalls in another part of the county. An agreement was to be drawn up to ensure that all parts of the county had equal access to this service.

The current service includes:

#### For professionals

- A half day a week consultation service for social workers
- Input to groups of professionals who are developing support plans
- Training on use of attachment style interviews

#### Direct work with families

- Face to face work with children and carers/adopters including training on attachment related issues and helping the development of strategies aimed at managing difficult behaviour

## **Making a Positive Contribution**

### **The intended outcomes for these standards are:**

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

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

#### **7,8,9**

Quality in this outcome area is adequate. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

The service to birth families can be inconsistent, in particular pre adoption order, and this results in a lack of positive involvement in adoption plans.

#### **EVIDENCE:**

It has not been possible in assessing this outcome area to base the assessment on the views of birth parents. Although the agency sent out 6 questionnaires and tried to arrange interviews with two birth family members only one questionnaire was received and the birth family members decided not to meet with the inspectors.

The manager in her self-assessment of the agency acknowledged that the service to birth parents needed further development and she stated that a service level agreement has been agreed with a voluntary adoption support agency. This initiative has been developed jointly with two neighbouring local authorities and it was hoped that by September 2006 it would be fully operational.

The arrangements at the time of this inspection for supporting birth families were limited. The role of "independent" counsellor rested firstly with the child's social worker. This is a conflict of interest for the social worker as where birth parents are contesting the plan for adoption there is little chance of them engaging with the social worker in a meaningful way. This is in no way suggesting a lack of commitment by social workers to supporting birth parents, but the expectation that they were in a position to carry out this work effectively was unrealistic.

It was however noted that in some cases the adoption support workers had carried out some very sensitive work with birth parents and acted in the independent counselling role. This work had led to some good examples of:

- Information having been gathered which fed into life story work for the child
- Helping parents come to terms with the plan for their child.

Evidence was noted to show that the views of birth parents were sought and recorded on permanence reports. However, there was no evidence to show that they had been given the opportunity to comment about what had been written about them. The manager in her self-assessment had identified that this was an area that is being integrated into practice; this needs to be urgently progressed.

The quality of the permanence reports was found to be variable. Some of the reports provided a clear view about the family history and the information was presented in a sensitive way; some lacked sensitivity. Permanence reports are one of the key documents that an adoptee can access in adulthood and it is essential that key facts about the birth family history are presented in a sensitive way.

Some training had been provided to social workers in writing these reports but not all social workers spoken to had been able to attend the training by the time of the inspection. This is especially relevant in this agency as the childcare social workers carry out the full range of children and families social work tasks and hold adoption cases infrequently.

There was some evidence noted that showed efforts had been made to develop life-story work for children. However, this was not found in all cases and placing social workers talked about difficulties, in some cases, in finding the time to carry out this work. There was also a level of uncertainty about the best ways in which to do this important piece of work. It has been recommended that consideration is given to how to achieve good quality life story work for every child who has a plan for adoption.

The arrangements for direct and 'letterbox' contact were well managed.

Another local authority placing social worker stated that the:

- "Adoption service gives appropriate advice and support" (this was specifically in reference to encouraging adopters and children to maintain birth family contacts.)

A small number of adopters expressed concern about the potential for changes in contact arrangements agreed before placement. The agency had developed

information for adopters, in line with the new legislation. This contains details about how the new legislation could impact on contact arrangements. It was planned that this information would be sent to all adopters and this should provide them with some clarity about the situation in respect to contact.

The adoption support workers carry out birth records counselling for adults who wish to access their birth records. These workers are very experienced in this work and have received appropriate training. The workers also get involved in intermediary work such as tracing birth relatives, for adoptees or for birth relatives. Once a month the adoption support workers facilitate a support group for adopted adults.

# Management

## The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

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

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

Quality in this outcome area is good. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service. The changes in management arrangements have resulted in an improved service that provides more efficient outcomes for children requiring adoption.

## **EVIDENCE:**

There is a clear written statement of purpose in place, which has been subject to formal approval by the cabinet. The statement is subject to annual review and update. The statement needs to include the contact details for the Dorset adoption team and the procedures for assessing adoption support needs.

The statement is made available to relevant people and is available to download from the County Council website. A social worker from another local authority reported that the statement, in their view, is "a very detailed and specific statement."

For the younger age range the agency provides children with a guide to adoption, produced in co-operation with SWAC. The guide was stated as being a useful tool to initiate discussion with children about adoption.

For the older age range the agency uses the BAAF guide. This includes some information about adoption in Dorset.

It was stated that other means were also used to explain the adoption process to children including BAAF books written for this purpose.

Both guides need to include a summary of the adoption support service provided in Dorset.

The general policies and procedures were in the process of being amended and updated in line with the new legislation, this must include child protection policies and procedures.

The agency is developing information for adopters that is being updated in line with the new legislation. The information viewed by the inspectors was as follows.

Initial information pack includes:

- Clear information about the eligibility criteria
- Information about the preparation assessment and approval process,
- Information about rights to leave from employment,
- Information about the adoption letterbox
- Case samples of children needing a placement

The post approval pack includes:

- Information about the matching and placement processes



- Details about the arrangements for decision making and appealing decisions via the Independent Reviewing Mechanism

The pack contains a clear statement about adopters' rights to make a complaint and informs adopters that while they are welcome to provide feedback to the agency on any part of the process they will be provided with a feedback questionnaire after the adoption order has been granted. This is a good development as a number of adopters either felt unsure about how to complain or felt unable to make a complaint

Adopters are also provided with the informative book produced by BAAF 'Handbook for Adopters'.

Some of the information detailed above has been very recently completed and it is planned that all new information is sent out to adopters regardless of the stage they are at. This will provide up to date information to those adopters who have been approved for some years and are awaiting a placement.

Information about the adoption process is also available on Dorset County Council website.

Four adopters stated that they were very satisfied with the information provided to them.

It was clear that the new arrangements for the management of the agency were beginning to have a positive impact on service delivery. A manager had been appointed to manage the adoption and permanence team and the senior practitioner post had been upgraded to a deputy manager's post. The post holders were working well together in raising the standards of the service. This was evidenced by the good progress made in addressing the large number of previous requirements and recommendations.

Senior managers showed a commitment to further improving the service and as a team worked well together.

Staff expressed their confidence in the management team and felt that there were clear roles and lines of accountability in place.

There were a range of monitoring systems in place; these systems should be underpinned by clear written procedures.

It would also be of benefit for the reports presented to the executive to include a wider range of information about the work of the agency to ensure members are aware of the significant amount of work, which is underpinned by legal expectations, the service is expected to undertake.

The creation of two new social work posts to the team will, hopefully, allow for improvements in many areas of the service delivery. The extra posts should

help improve timescales and communication issues. These two areas caused particular frustrations for some applicants.

A sample of the negative comments from adopters about delays and communication included:

- “No response to e-mails... we are not aware of how matters are progressing, we don’t get updates. We feel at the bottom of the barrel and forgotten about”
- “Not enough communication and support once being approved.”
- “Lack of communication we did not hear anything unless we made contact.”
- “Dorset adoption team have usually been supportive but at times difficult to contact.”

It was not possible to establish in each case the reasons for the poor service but the manager was made aware of the comments made by adopters. Social workers have recently been issued with mobile phones so this may ease some of the communication problems identified.

Positive comments were also made by adopters in terms of timescales and communication.

The following are examples of these:

- “The ongoing support was available as and when requested.”
- “Kept fully informed and reassured about the next steps.”
- “I am extremely satisfied with the support that Dorset gave us and especially with our social worker who was conscientious and compassionate.”

Another local authority placing social worker stated that the service was:

- “Very well coordinated and collaborated service....the service is child focused.

The adoption staff with whom the inspectors met with were clearly experienced and knowledgeable in adoption issues. The childcare staff showed a commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children. The administrative staff were skilled and competent, staff in all offices commended their admin workers. However, it was reported that for some teams clerical support was not adequate, in terms of the number of staff available. With new members joining the adoption team a review of administrative support services across the teams should be carried out to ensure all have sufficient support.

The Job descriptions viewed in relation to the social workers on the adoption team were not adoption specific. These need to be reviewed to ensure they are appropriate to the role and responsibilities each worker is carrying out.

Staff reported that they felt that Dorset was a good employer; they cited good support in terms of the arrangements for supervision, appraisal and training and a good level of peer support. Although a busy team, all social workers felt that managers ensured caseloads were evenly distributed. Training was an area that was identified as having significantly improved since the last inspection with a range of training opportunities having been made available. Overall staff reported that they felt Dorset was a good employer to work for.

Files kept for adopters were overall well constructed and comprehensive. There were shortfalls in some files; such as social workers not always signing all case recording and panel minutes were missing in one file. Adoption files for children had a number of gaps that were discussed with the agency. It was pleasing to note that wherever possible original copies of documents had been placed on the adoption files.

It was noted that as recommended at the last inspection that supervisors decisions are being placed on files.

A file audit system is in place but had not been implemented on the files inspected. The system would have pick up the shortfalls on both adopters and children's files.

The arrangements in respect to accessing files from the archives were satisfactory in practice. However, there was not a written policy and procedure document in place and one should be developed. The agency had produced practice guidance in respect to access to records in terms of disclosure of information when undertaking birth records counselling for example. These guidelines were comprehensive but need some amendment in line with the new legislation.

The storage of adoption records in the Dorchester adoption teams office and the archiving facilities in county hall were viewed; the arrangements were satisfactory.

There were some shortfalls in respect to the content of personnel files. these have been discussed under the staying safe section of this report and a requirement has been made.

The premises are identifiable, accessible and secure. There are appropriate security systems in place for the storage of records and the IT systems. The council has a disaster recovery plan but this does not specifically address the arrangements for the adoption agency and this should be developed to cover the premises amongst other things.

# SCORING OF OUTCOMES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<b>MANAGEMENT</b>	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
<b>1</b>	1
<b>3</b>	3
<b>14</b>	3
<b>16</b>	3
<b>17</b>	3
<b>20</b>	3
<b>21</b>	3
<b>22</b>	3
<b>23</b>	3
<b>25</b>	2
<b>26</b>	2
<b>27</b>	2
<b>28</b>	2
<b>29</b>	3
<b>30</b>	N/a
<b>31</b>	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	AD11 AD19 AD28	14 LAAS REGS 2003 17 LAAS REGS 2003	The agency must ensure, through an audit of the staff and panel member files, that all required recruitment checks have been carried out. Clear evidence that these checks have been completed and are satisfactory must be retained on files.	30/11/06
2	AD1	2 LAAS REGS 2003	The statement of purpose must include the contact details for the adoption and permanence team and the procedure for assessing adoption support needs in Dorset.	30/11/06
3	AD1	3(1) LAAS REGS 2003	The children's guides must include a summary of the adoption support service provided in Dorset.	30/11/06
4	AD1	9 LAAS REGS 2003	The agency must ensure that the child protection procedures meet the requirements of Regulation 9 of the LAAS Regs 2003	30/11/06

## 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.	AD2	The manager should ensure that recruitment activity in practice is aligned with the clear recruitment strategy and that recruitment activity targets a more diverse audience.
2	AD4	The agency should consider also including a section in the health and safety questionnaires about any dangers there are for young children from any pull cords on window blinds.
3	AD5	The agency should ensure that social workers make at least the initial contact with other agencies where adopters have expressed an interest in knowing more about a child awaiting an adoptive placement.
4	AD5	The agency should ensure that someone independent from the case chairs meetings held in the event of a disruption.
5	AD6	The agency should consider introducing child appreciation days for each child.
6	AD10	A clear written panel policy and procedure document should be developed. The document should include all elements stated in standard 10.2. Specific attention should be given to increase the frequency of updates to panel in respect of all adopters and children.
7	AD11	The agency should consider the constitution of the adoption panel as detailed in the main body of the report.
8	AD13	The panel papers should be sent to the decision maker at the same time they are sent to panel members and full minutes should be provided to her before she makes her decision.
9	AD19	The agency should ensure that there are clear written recruitment and selection procedures for appointing staff which follow good practice in safeguarding children and young people.
10	AD6	As a part of the review of the developing adoption support service the manager should consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If geographical constraints limit adopters ability to access services</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The support adopters awaiting a placement need.</li> </ul> <p>The strategy, as it develops, should be in writing and provided to adopters.</p>
11	AD18	The agency should review if the time allowed for medical advice to the agency is sufficient. The plans to draw up an agreement in respect to the CAMHS service should be progressed.
12	AD7	The agency should ensure that every birth parent has an opportunity to read and comment on what has been written about them and that assistance is provided to parents who have difficulties reading and writing.
13	AD8	The social workers who write permanence reports for children should be supported in writing such reports to ensure that the reports inform the reader in a sensitive way about the family history. Consideration should be given to how to achieve good quality life story work for every child who has a plan for adoption.
14	AD17	The agency should produce clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the agency.
15	AD20	Adoption specific job descriptions should be developed specific to the role of the post.
16	AD20	The agency should carry out a review of the level of admin support to each team involved in the work of the adoption agency.
17	AD26	The manager should ensure that the written policies, procedures and practice guidance in respect to access to records are in place and updated where necessary.
18	AD27 AD25	The manager should ensure that all case files are subject to a regular file audit and that remedial action is taken where required.
19	AD29	The manager should ensure that a disaster recovery plan for the adoption agency is developed.

## **Commission for Social Care Inspection**

North West Regional Office

11th Floor

West Point

501 Chester Road

Old Trafford

M16 9HU

National Enquiry Line: 0845 015 0120

Email: [enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk)

Web: [www.csci.org.uk](http://www.csci.org.uk)

© This report is copyright Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and may only be used in its entirety. Extracts may not be used or reproduced without the express permission of CSCI