

# Darlington Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC067257
<b>Inspection date</b>	13/05/2011
<b>Inspector</b>	Michael McCleave / Dennis Bradley
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Social Care Inspection

---

<b>Setting address</b>	Darlington Borough Council, Town Hall, Feethams, Darlington, County Durham, DL1 5QT
<b>Telephone number</b>	01325 388924
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Darlington Borough Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Mary Sweeney
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Murray Rose
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	12/02/2009

---

© Crown copyright 2011

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services 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)

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality  
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong  
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound  
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Darlington Borough Council adoption service fulfils all its statutory responsibilities in respect of the adoption of children. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of people who adopt children from this country. The council makes decisions, regarding whether children should be placed for adoption and decides on matches, through its adoption panel and decision maker. A voluntary adoption support agency provides or makes arrangements for, the support of anyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults through a service level agreement with the council. Any requests for adoption from those wanting to adopt children from abroad will be managed by the service with professional consultancy support from a national voluntary agency with expertise in this area.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This service was inspected against the revised national minimum standards. All standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation.

Darlington Borough Council is a small local authority that has a dedicated family placement team that provides all the services required by regulation and national standards in respect of adoption work. The service has evolved since the last inspection in 2009 from working in partnership with a voluntary adoption agency to a single service operating within the local authority. This has improved the clarity of the management structure and clarifies the accountability of the staff. The adoption panel works well and makes timely recommendations to the agency decision maker. The panel is properly constituted and provides a quality assurance function in order to ensure that the quality of reports presented meets high standards. Matching of children to prospective adopters relies on thorough reports that enable good decisions to be made. However, the minutes of panel meetings do not always record the reasons for decisions made.

The service provides valued support to prospective adopters and some commented very positively about the standard of service and support received. This is not consistent among all prospective adopters. The level of service and the expectations upon prospective adopters lack clarity.

There is a positive approach to equality and diversity. The adoption service works positively to demonstrate an inclusive culture, welcoming prospective adopters from a diverse range of people from within the community.

There is a commitment to staff development, and training is readily available to staff and (panel) members from the central list. Joint training is not generally undertaken between these groups and the opportunity to develop a better understanding of respective roles and functions is missed.

The safeguarding of children is a key priority of the local authority and the recruitment and selection processes are sound. However, some aspects of the system do not readily evidence the checks carried out on applicants for work. The human resources section of the authority is committed to improving this and a more robust system is being implemented.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The last inspection required the manager to address a number of requirements and recommendations related to the efficient operation and management of the service. This has now been carried out and the adoption service is now able to develop and improve the overall effectiveness of the service provided to the children and public.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The safety and well-being of children placed for adoption is given a high priority by this service. The matching process is thorough and prospective adopters are approved from a wide range of backgrounds. This means that the individual needs of children are very carefully thought through in order to try and ensure that they are given the best possible placement. The health of the children is promoted by prospective adopters who are clear about what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them. The preparation and training of prospective adopters is non-discriminatory and as commented by one person, 'the training is hard hitting, dispelling any myths about how easy adoption may be'. The service prepares prospective adopters in a sensitive way which addresses the issues they are likely to encounter, including those around diversity, disabilities and social differences. The majority of prospective adopters feel they are treated fairly and are an equal partner in the process of achieving a good outcome for children who need a caring stable home. Where issues are raised by prospective adopters, the service is quick to respond and to work towards a resolution in a speedy manner. All matching meetings follow a standard recording format to ensure a high degree of consistency in the way information is presented to panel. This was a shortfall raised at the last inspection that has now been addressed.

The prospective adopters, are supported in the decision making process based on

the information contained in the child placement reports. These help them to understand the child's background, health, emotional developmental needs and any practical implications before they agree for the match to be presented to the adoption panel. The prospective adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel in order that they can have their views heard. This process ensures that they are able to make considered decisions about the realistic possibility of offering a permanent home to a child. The adoption panel is an integral part of the overall safeguarding process that monitors the role of the staff who present reports making recommendations about matches. The chair of the panel prepares a monthly quality assurance report for the agency decision maker reflecting on the standard of reports presented. Information presented to the adoption panel is scrutinised for any irregularities that may indicate safeguarding concerns. This is very good practice.

The service has not received any requests for inter-country adoption and therefore the experience of staff in this area of work is limited. In order to ensure that an effective service is provided should a request be made, an agreement is now in place with national organisation to act as a professional consultant. In addition this organisation is contracted to provide appropriate training for staff in this complex area of adoption work.

The adoption service has a robust safeguarding policy and procedure in place that is known to staff and prospective adopters. All staff understand the process to follow should there be any issues or concerns of a safeguarding nature. These procedures have been approved by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer.

### **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The prospective adopters are approved because of their commitment to providing a child with a caring and safe home to grow up in. The preparation process for prospective adopters is sound and includes exploring how they might deal with difficult behaviour or tensions that may arise later in life as children become more aware of their backgrounds. Support is available for pre- and post-adoption support. These include support from the adoption social workers and from other professional agencies available locally. A strong feature of the service is the link established with the child and adolescent mental health service. This ensures that prompt support and guidance is readily available to children and adults as required.

There is a commitment for children to develop their interests and to pursue leisure activities through encouragement from their prospective adoptive families.

Children placed in adoptive families are encouraged and supported to achieve their potential through the education system. This emphasis on establishing a positive approach to education is set in place by foster carers who have worked with the child and education professionals. Prospective adopters demonstrate a similar approach to education. This is achieved through regular contact with the child's school or other

education setting ensuring that appropriate support is provided. There are good examples indicating the high level of commitment from prospective adopters advocating on behalf of children placed with them.

The adoption service undertakes detailed assessments of prospective adopters' homes to ensure that children placed will live in a safe, warm and comfortable environment. Risk assessments cover a range of areas to promote the safety of children. These include inside the home as well as the exterior areas surrounding the home.

There is an effective support system in place for those prospective adopters and birth parents who require a more sensitive and in depth support counselling service. This is provided under a service level agreement with a well-established local voluntary agency. However, some prospective adopters, did not always feel confident that communication with the adoption service about the matching process was as effective as it could be. This is evident when matching takes place involving placing social workers from outside of the local authority area. This process could be improved if the prospective adopters were provided with a more precise agreement of what they can expect from the service including timescales.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The adoption service demonstrates a positive commitment to consultation with children, where age and understanding permit. Children are, where appropriate, encouraged to participate fully in decisions made about their future.

Information about a child's early life prior to being placed for adoption is actively sought from birth parents and birth families. This provides a picture of the child's background that will be valuable later in life should this be requested. Social workers and foster carers undertake the life story work and this is passed onto the prospective adopters when completed. There are strict timescales for the completion of this work. It is expected that at the child's second review in the prospective adopters home a completed life story book will be presented at the meeting. This process is carefully monitored by the independent reviewing officer. A later life letter is written by the child's placing social worker containing sufficient detail so that a young adult fully understands their life before adoption.

Contact between the child, siblings and their birth family are arranged depending on the needs of the child and the views of the prospective adopters and birth family members. These arrangements are regularly reviewed to ensure that a sensible balance is agreed taking into account the child's situation. Prospective adopters are aware of their role during contact arrangements and this is appropriately covered during their preparation training. Social workers have, in some cases, established good links with birth parents where contact is sensitively managed. Where possible, birth parents are involved throughout the adoption process and every attempt is made to establish a trusting relationship with birth parents. Where English is not the

first language of birth parents an interpreter is provided.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The service responds in a prompt manner to all applications from members of the public who express an interest in becoming adopters. They are treated with respect and without prejudice. One applicant commented that they had contacted several agencies in the region. They chose Darlington because of the friendly attitude of staff and found them to be 'incredibly helpful' compared to the responses from other services contacted. Prospective adopters found the preparation training to be 'really good' and ensuring that there was a good balance between positives of adoption and the challenges. Some prospective adopters did, however, find that there is a delay in allocating an adoption social worker to carry out an assessment. Nevertheless, once assessments were completed, the prospective adopters found the experience to be positive and thorough. They confirm that they are prepared to become adoptive parents in a sensitive way which addresses and gives them the skills, knowledge and techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter as adopters. One couple said the training was 'amazing, we came out with a different reason for wanting to adopt than when we started'. Some prospective adopters felt that the timescales from their initial interest and preparation training was too long. There are also examples of how the process leading to a positive match took just over twelve months from initial enquiry to children being placed.

The service has not had any experience of inter-country adoption; a contractual agreement is in place with a national agency specialising in this work to provide consultancy, guidance and formal training to the adoption team in this complex area.

The adoption panel is properly constituted with members drawn from a central list. Good advice and guidance is provided by medical and legal representation at panel meetings. The panel meets regularly to consider all applications in line with its regulatory functions. The adoption panel operates efficiently taking into account all the available information. Recommendations made at the panel, are considered by the agency decision maker in a prompt timely manner within the required timescales. Administration support for the panel is effective and minutes of the proceedings are checked for accuracy by the chair before being sent onto the decision maker. However, the minutes do not consistently record reasons why decisions are made. A key role of the panel is quality assuring reports ensuring that information provided is of a sufficiently high quality to enable effective decisions to be made. There are extensive training and development opportunities available to adoption staff and



panel members.

The Statement of Purpose provides a clear and concise outline of what services are provided and how outcomes for children are to be achieved. Good quality information is available to children through the 'Children's Guide to Adoption'. This document is designed by a national adoption organisation and is age appropriate. It contains details of how they can contact key staff and other agencies independent of the adoption service.

The day-to-day management of the service is sound. Weaknesses were identified at the last inspection in the management of the service because of a joint arrangement with a voluntary agency. This has been addressed and the service is wholly managed from within the local authority. This now ensures a consistency in decision making and clarity of accountability for adoption staff.

The recruitment and selection of adoption staff and those on the central list aims to ensure only appropriately qualified and suitable persons are appointed. This is to ensure that children are safeguarded. The service exceeds the regulations by requiring three written references instead of two. This is good practice. Telephone enquiries are carried out to verify references, although some records do not clearly identify if this has been done. Additionally, the human resources section of the local authority actively seeks information from applicants as to the reasons why they left their previous employment working with children. However, this has not been the practice for work with vulnerable adults. The authority has reviewed the recruitment and selection systems. Positive changes have been made to ensure a more robust process is established to include verifiable checks being carried out, as to why applicants for work with children left employment working with vulnerable adults.

The staff and members on the central list are able to access good quality training from a schedule of training opportunities throughout the year. This programme is extensive and ensures that staff are appropriately trained to improve their skills and competences in order to deliver good quality outcomes for children.

All new panel members are required to undergo induction training to ensure that they are well prepared for the complex array of information that is presented at panel meetings. Each person on the central list is given the opportunity to attend joint training with the adoption team staff in order to keep abreast of relevant changes to legislation, regulation and guidance in respect of adoption services. However, there is no formal annual joint training organised for those on the central list and members of the adoption team.

There are affective systems in place to support staff in their daily duties and, with the service now being managed in-house, there is a clearer system of accountability for all staff. This is enhanced through planned formal supervision and annual appraisal.

Records are appropriately maintained and contain the required documentation. These are structured files that enable easy access to required information. The

records are kept secure in the office and archived records are safely stored in suitable conditions with robust safeguards. The staff work in good conditions with effective administrative support to enable them to undertake their duties.

The promotion of equality and diversity is Good. This is a receptive organisation that attempts to attract prospective adopters from a range of applicants including same sex partnerships, single adults, minority ethnic couples and people with a disability. The service is part of a consortium of adoption agencies that supports a project known as Sahara. This project seeks potential adopters from minority ethnic backgrounds. The service has successfully approved prospective adopters from diverse backgrounds including those with medical conditions. Matching of children to prospective adopters is carried sensitively and issues of ethnicity, religious and cultural considerations form part of the overall process to ensure, as far as possible, that children are placed with adults who can meet their needs.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure the service user knows, and receives written information about the service they are to receive; what the service is designed to achieve; what is involved in the service provision and how the service will be monitored to ensure that it is delivering the intended outcome (NMS 15.3)
- ensure that the minutes of the adoption panel clearly records the reasons for its recommendations (NMS 17.10)
- ensure each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the agency's adoption staff. (NMS 23.15)