

# Liverpool City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC056748
<b>Inspection date</b>	18/06/2007
<b>Inspector</b>	Jayne Ivory / Marian Denny
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	21/06/2006

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## 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

Liverpool City Council's Adoption Service is inspected against Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003 (amended 2005) and National Minimum Standards for Adoption and Adoption Support.

Liverpool City Council Supported Living Children and Families Service aims to provide a comprehensive adoption service, either directly or through partnerships with other adoption agencies for children, birth families, prospective adopters, adoptive families and adopted adults.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

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

The inspection was carried out over four days, with one extra day being allocated to the observation of the adoption panel. During the course of the fieldwork interviews were held with key managers and staff. The independent panel chairperson of the adoption panel was also interviewed. An examination of personnel files was undertaken as part of the inspection.

Visits were made to four adoptive families. In addition to this two service users in receipt of adoption support services agreed to participate in the inspection. The views of adopters are incorporated into the text of this report. Completed questionnaires were received from adopters/prospective adopters (13), placing social workers (two), and specialist advisers (two).

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

The inspection also considered the council's arrangements for adoption support services and interviewed staff involved in the assessment, review and provision of these services.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The service has been pro-active in ensuring that all of the requirements and recommendations have been met from the action plan, which came as a result of the first inspection. This improvement was also noted in the random inspection in July 2006.

The service has a dynamic recruitment strategy that is informed by the needs of children waiting, or likely to need an adoption placement.

The service has invested additional resources in the adoption team and adoption support service, some of this work was done in anticipation of the increased workload from the full implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

Liverpool has also streamlined the strategic management of the service to good effect.

The adoption team ensure that support services are available to all those touched by adoption and have ensured that their partnership with After Adoption is very well managed. The information from the commissioned service is of a good quality and provided evidence that service users, including birth families, adopted children and their families were able to access services appropriate to their needs.

## **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.

Liverpool has an effective recruitment strategy that is based upon the needs of children waiting for adoption.

The service has a recruitment team, who have developed a strategy which has a range of activities that are planned throughout the year. The strategy acknowledges that the service needs to get adopters for children with additional needs, and for sibling groups larger than two. The strategy runs from April 2007 to March 2008, and is supported by a realistic budget which has been utilised creatively to enhance the profile of adoption across the city.

The strategy is managed proactively by the staff and managers of the adoption team in the city. Liverpool offers good quality inclusive information to adopter's at the beginning of the process. All adopters that were spoken to as part of this inspection said that their initial response from the adoption team was very personable, and sensitive to their individual circumstances.

Well presented and informative information evenings have been developed as part of

the preparation process for prospective adopters. Attendees are asked to approach any of the presenting staff during the evening if they are interested in parenting any of the children waiting for adoption. Prospective adopters comments included 'as the whole adoption process moved from being abstract to very real during that evening. It really made me want to adopt'. Other adopters spoke of the positive impression that the information evening had made on them. 'There were a lot of people who had come to the evening, we were really impressed by the number of social workers who were there to answer our questions on the night, it was very professional'.

All adopters said that they had been impressed and challenged by their preparation training. A number of adopters told us that they had been very moved by the contribution of the adoptive parent during their training, and that this had influenced their positive views on promoting contact between any child placed with them and members of that child's birth family.

All adopters had found the fourth day of the preparation training somewhat challenging. All adopters who were interviewed said that, the practical exercises used during the day had given them an insight into some of the challenges they may face when parenting an adopted child. Unfortunately, although the outcomes of the preparation training were recorded on file, including write ups and self assessments by the prospective adopters, there was little or no evidence to suggest that this information had been captured and used as part of the assessment. The service should review their current practice to ensure that the information gathered during the preparation of adopters is utilised as part of the assessment process.

Prospective Adopter Report (PAR) assessments were of a good quality. The social workers in the adoption team and their managers ensure that the quality of PAR are of a good standard and are based upon a comprehensive range of safeguarding checks and references. The team leaders acknowledged that more needed to be done to ensure that social worker's analysis of the parenting capacity, strengths and vulnerabilities of prospective adopters was evident on all the reports that were submitted to the adoption panel.

The service have made arrangements with a local voluntary adoption agency who are registered to complete inter-country adoptions to prepare and assess prospective adopters who wished to adopt a child from overseas.

The observation of panel confirmed that the quality of Children's Permanence Reports (CPR's) was satisfactory in most areas, save for the support and counselling offered to the birth parents and families of children with a plan for adoption. CPR's seen during the inspection gave good up to date accounts of the needs of the children, and had comprehensive details of the history of the birth parents/birth families.

Staff across children's services in Liverpool told us that they had received training in writing CPR's in addition to the informal consultation that was always available to them from the staff in the adoption team. Examination of case files and consideration of the agenda for the adoption panel confirmed that many CPR's had no or very little comments from the birth parents in their wishes and feelings section. Also social

workers had not recorded when and how birth parents would receive counselling. The panel chairperson confirmed that this was an area of development for the service.

Liverpool has excellent arrangements for matching children with their new family. There are clear joint working protocols across the service. Social workers said that they had clear practice guidance in placing children for adoption and access to professional support from the adoption team social workers and their team leaders.

Adopters told us that they had received good information about the needs of the child, and that when they had progressed the match that they had been provided with a video of the child and had opportunities to talk with the foster parent. Adopters who were going to care for children with additional medical needs were invited to discuss any queries or concerns with the agency medical adviser if they wanted to. This is a significant improvement on the findings of the last inspection.

The adoption panel has experienced some significant changes in the last twelve months. The agency adviser and the new independent panel chairperson confirmed that members of the adoption panel are committed to their roles and that attendance is always prioritised.

The new panel chairperson confirms that she has the appropriate knowledge and experience for the role. She was formally a service manager in children's services. The changes in panel chairperson had resulted in previous meetings between panel chairperson and the agency decision maker and agency adviser lapsing. This is an area that should be reviewed by Liverpool to ensure that the independent panel chairperson can provide feedback to the agency, and that they can receive information about the functioning of the panel from the agency decision maker.

Liverpool's adoption panel is held monthly and is extremely busy. The adoption panel that was observed had nine items on the agenda these included three matches, three should be placed for adoption and three approvals. Despite one of the matching recommendations being withdrawn the adoption panel still ran over by one hour. The chairperson considered that the adoption panel is diligent in their scrutiny of all the adoption panel business. She still considers that there is little or no time to discuss issues raised regarding quality with the agency adviser. Liverpool should review the time allocated to each item on the adoption panel agenda to ensure that issues regarding the quality of work submitted to the adoption panel can be properly addressed and followed up.

Panel members have already had their first appraisals in line with regulations and receive regular training and practice updates.

The service had amended the written notification letter to ensure that adopters received confirmation of their approval from the agency decision maker.

Examination of personnel files confirmed that all staff working in the adoption team were suitable. The service has had no safeguarding cases in adoption and adoption

support in the last twelve months. As a result of the last inspection all members of the adoption team have received updated child protection training specifically aimed at children who are looked after. Interviews with key staff confirmed that there are joint working practices and protocols regarding safeguarding in adoption and adoption support cases with the safeguarding and support teams in the city.

The safeguarding procedures are in the process of being updated and Liverpool should update the current child protection procedures with a policy that refers specifically to adopted children and cases of historical abuse.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

Adopters confirmed that they could contact Liverpool whenever they wanted to and they knew that they would get a good response from their individual social worker.

Families in receipt of adoption support services confirmed that when they had contacted Liverpool adoption team in need of assistance that they considered that they had received a good assessment of their needs as a family or individual and that the adoption team were very supportive.

Assessments were comprehensive, and reviewed in accordance with the regulations. The service had introduced an adoption duty system to ensure that all enquiries regarding information for adoption were managed sensitively. One of the adoption team managers had taken over responsibility for being the adoption support services adviser, in accordance with the regulations.

Liverpool have an extensive service level agreement with After Adoption, who provide a range of support groups and events for children, young people and adoptive and birth families on Liverpool's behalf.

The team leader for adoption reviews the agreement with After Adoption in a meeting every month. This helps to ensure best value. The service produces an end of year report about the range of services offered and to whom. The service also ensure that they receive an annual report on activity, detailing work completed. However the service have acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure that children and families touched by adoption have a degree of choice about the services that they receive and that Liverpool should consider the 'in house' arrangements for adoption support services as part of the developmental strategy.

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

The provision is good.

Liverpool does provide independent social work support through their relationship with After Adoption for birth parents and their families. One of the team leaders of the adoption team ensured that the arrangements with After Adoption were reviewed

regularly to ensure the number and range of services delivered by the agency to Liverpool's service users were of good quality and promoted good outcomes.

Case file analysis and a group interview with independent reviewing officers confirm that they do have a checklist to ensure that birth families get information concerning independent support services from After Adoption in children's reviews. In an attempt to improve the uptake of services to non-relinquishing birth parents After Adoption are being asked to get involved far earlier in the process. This will hopefully ensure that birth parents contributions and understanding of their child's assessment for adoption is improved. The team leaders of the service knew that this was an area for improvement and had sought to enhance current provision and keep strategies for service improvement to birth parents and their families under review.

Despite some set backs in the commissioning of an interactive electronic life story book, the service had developed strategies to ensure that children and their adoptive families were provided with excellent life story work. Liverpool have a template for life story books that is expected to be personalised and overseen by a social worker in the adoption team. The independent reviewing officers said that delays in the production of life story work is never an issue, adopter's are shown a draft copy before the book is laminated, and get the books early on in the placement. Social workers within the adoption team had provided training on the significance of life story to staff across the service. Adopters confirmed that they were pleased with the content and detail of life story books that they had been presented with on behalf of their child.

Liverpool also has access to a range of internal direct work resources to help children to prepare for their adoptive placement. Interviews with social workers in the family support service confirmed that they have a range of materials and access to external professional advice and training that can assist them to support older children to move into their new family.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

Liverpool's adoption service delivers standards which are good for children and their families. There is a clear Statement of Purpose that is reviewed every year in accordance with the regulations.

The adoption team has developed and now incorporates staff who hold caseload responsibility for children with a plan for adoption. Caseload responsibility transfers to the adoption team when children are subject to a placement order. The team also

retains responsibility for preparing and assessing prospective adopters and offering an adoption support assessment service to all those who are eligible.

Adopters confirmed that Liverpool provides good quality information about the adoption service at the outset. The information is attractive, inclusive and gives a clear indication of the steps involved in adopting a child or children. The service has worked hard to ensure that service users access a member of the adoption team quickly by developing an adoption team duty system. Some of the issues regarding difficulties in contacting the team in the last inspection would appear to have been resolved as a consequence.

The adoption team's management structure has changed since the last inspection. The adoption team now has two team leaders who are accountable to the principal officer for corporate parenting provision within children's services. The principal officer reports to the assistant executive director for social care and commissioning, who also acts as the agency decision maker for Liverpool. This streamlined management structure works well, with good communication between senior and operational managers evident throughout the inspection. All social work staff interviewed confirmed that they received good professional supervision, opportunities to attend regular team meetings and team development days.

Social workers within the adoption team said that their management support was of a high standard. The principal officer also considered that the managers of the adoption team offered clear direction and good operational support to staff in the team.

Liverpool's adoption service has well developed Personal Development Plans and all staff members confirmed that they had been able to access a range of training and learning opportunities throughout the year. Access to external training events was also supported if it met an identified learning need for a member of staff in the team.

Liverpool has a adequate arrangements for storing and archiving adoption records. Case file analysis confirmed that the quality of written evidence and information stored on adopters files was inconsistent. Some files had a tracking sheet at the front of the file. Other case files did not.

Liverpool does not systematically record compliance or non-compliance with the timescales laid out in the statutory practice guidance for counselling, preparing and assessing prospective adopters. A system should be developed to ensure that this aspect of their work is recorded and reported upon. Further to this the adoption panel may also benefit from considering this information as part of the decision making process.

Reading of case files confirmed that evidence of the team leaders involvement in the decision making processes concerning adoption are not consistently captured on case files. The service should develop a system to ensure that case decisions by the team leader are recorded on file, signed and dated by both the team leader and social worker.

There is insufficient dedicated administrative support in the service. Although the adoption team has a dedicated adoption panel administrator much of the other work completed by the team is either on their own laptops or with a generic administrative support team in the same building. Many of the problems in the administrative support noted during the last inspection would appear to have been resolved, but the lack of dedicated administration to the adoption team has compromised some of the evidence of service improvements seen across this inspection. A review of the administrative support is to take place later in the year.

## **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):

- consider reviewing the current arrangements for the adoption panel to promote good practice across the service and enhance quality assurance (Standard 10.2)
- consider updating the current safeguarding and child protection procedures with a policy that refers specifically to adopted children and cases of historical abuse (Standard 33)
- review the "in house" arrangements for adoption support services as part of their developmental strategy(Standard 6 and Standard 34)
- develop a tracking system to ensure that compliance with the timescales laid out in statutory guidance is recorded and reported upon (Standard 27)
- develop a system to ensure that case decisions by the team leader are recorded on file, signed and dated by both the team leader and social worker (Standard 25.5)
- review the current administrative support available to the adoption team to improve that quality and consistency of case file contents(Standard 20.8).