

# Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Howard Cooper
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	12/07/2005

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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**

Wirral's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters, placement support and some post adoption support. Contractual arrangements are in place for the assessment of inter-country adopters and for support for people affected by adoption.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the National Minimum Standards (NMS) were addressed under the four outcomes of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation. This is a satisfactory service with some good aspects.

The service has a strong commitment to improving outcomes for children and is focussed on their safety and well being. There is a thorough approach to the preparation, assessment and support of adopters and an emphasis on achieving suitable matches based on full assessment of children's needs.

A range of services are provided to birth families which encourage them to be involved in planning for their children's futures. Independent support is available to them. Contact arrangements are supported.

The manager and senior managers provide leadership and support to staff and the whole team are committed to moving the service forward. They are aware of areas which are in need of improvement and the planning process to address these had started prior to the inspection. Two actions and a number of recommendations have been made in regard to these matters.

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

The last inspection took place in 2005, and since then the service has made progress in many areas, including improved staff training, preparation and assessment of potential adopters, adoption support planning and working with birth parents. The arrangements for the archiving of adoption files has been improved. Staff personnel files now largely comply with regulations.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

In the last twelve months all children placed for adoption have been matched with families who can meet their ethnic, cultural, religious and language needs. A small number of children have not been placed with their brothers or sisters due to individual need assessment and reasons for this are documented. There is a low level of disruptions of placements and reviews are held which look at what can be learned from these to inform future practice. These are internal reviews with no independent element.

The adoption service recognises that the time taken to place some children has been too long. Independent reviewing officers and the adoption team communicate well but tracking tools to monitor care planning are not always failsafe. Adoption workers are involved in early meetings and provide an advisory role to the district social work teams which serves to promote and reinforce good practice.

The quality of Child Placement Reports (CPR's) are variable and they do not always include a comprehensive record of the wishes and feelings of the child. In some cases chronologies are not up to date nor are the views of birth family members included. Contact arrangements were not always correct or clear. The managers of the adoption service are aware of this and are piloting a revised version of the CPR with guidance notes for social workers. This has been compiled in conjunction with the Adoption Panel Chair. A psychotherapist is attached to the team and is involved in assessing children's needs and provides information and advice during the matching process. Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place but are not consistently recorded.

Clear processes are in place to manage enquiries and applications from prospective adopters which are congruent with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. The authority has a service level agreement with an agency to handle inter-country adoptions. Adopters have an initial visit and attend training prior to making a formal application. The agency acknowledges that the time taken to process the approval adopters has been too long in the last 12 months and plans to address this through improved tracking and auditing arrangements. Some adopters expressed concern about the delays in the progress and said they were not given reasons.

Prospective adopters are involved in a thorough assessment process in which comprehensive information is analysed with a focus on their ability to meet children's needs. All checks are taken up prior to presentation at panel and there is evidence of

in-depth interviews with family members and personal referees. Adopters commented positively on the sensitivity of workers undertaking their assessments. Health and safety checks are completed during the assessment. These are limited in scope and there is no evidence of updating them to ensure that identified actions have been taken or to take into account specific children. At the assessment stage adopters prepare a book about themselves for use in preparing children for placement.

Adopters are fully involved in the matching process and receive sufficient information to make an informed decision. Matching meetings take place to share information. Adopters agree in writing to notify the agency about the death of their adopted child.

Panel policies and procedures are in place which are comprehensive and which are largely carried out in practice. Processes for the appointment of the chair and members are robust. The specific remits of specialist advisors are outlined and signed. The chair and members of panel have a wealth of experience in children's services and this is reflected in the quality of discussions and scrutiny of the information before them. Minutes are comprehensive and outline clear reasons for the recommendations made. Adopters are invited to attend panel and were positive in their comments about being prepared and put at ease.

Panel's role in raising standards in respect of quality of reports presented to them is clear. Concerns are communicated to relevant people but there is no system for feeding outcomes of their comments back to panel. A system to enable panel to track children who for whom adoption is the plan but who have not been placed has recently been implemented. The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) has access to all the case information and panel minutes. There are delays in the decision making process and in sending out written confirmation to adopters both at the approval and matching stages.

The service is focussed on protecting and safeguarding children and child protection issues are monitored by the manager. Appropriate policies are in place which are followed in practice and monitored by the manager. Adoption support workers are clear about their remit and where appropriate refer children and young people to other services to ensure that their welfare is safeguarded.

The manager and staff working for the service are appropriately qualified and skilled and are experienced in adoption work. Staff recruitment practices are robust. No systems are in place to update Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks every three years.

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

The provision is good.

The service has a strong approach to providing effective support to adoptive families from early stages which is supported by written policies and procedures. A wide range of services are available to adoptive parents some of which are provided

directly by the adoption team. Other services are available through the authority's child in need teams or through agencies such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. The psychotherapist who works with the adoption team three days a week provides support to children, adopters and adoption workers prior to adoption orders being made. There is a focus on providing therapeutic adoption support to enable understanding of need and effective planning for children.

Bi-monthly support groups are held which include training on specific issues relating to parenting a child through adoption, support in sharing life story work with children and financial assistance. A youth group for young people involved in adoption has been established in consultation with young people and a 'mums and tots group' set up at the request of adopters.

Written plans for adoption support are in place from an early stage which outline clearly what support is needed and how it will be provided. Adopters praised the support available and know about after-adoption services. The service is active in contacting parents six and 12 months after the Adoption Order is made to check out if they need further support.

Specialist advice readily accessible to the adoption team through the legal and medical advisors on panel and the linked psychotherapist.

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

The provision is good.

Policies and procedures which recognise the role of birth parents in adoption are carried out in practice. It is evident that social workers and independent reviewing officers are committed to engaging birth families in the adoption process. Examples were given where positive relationships with birth families resulted in them providing information and photographs for children in later life. There is a facility for the case responsibility for children to be transferred to the adoption team where this aids positive relationships with birth parents. A dedicated worker has responsibility for life story work in the adoption team.

A service level agreement with a voluntary agency provides a range of services which includes counselling to birth parents and families. Personal and sensitively written letters from the adoption team inform birth families about this resource. The letterbox system is effective and well managed and signed contact agreements are on files. The service supports adopters with contact arrangements where necessary.

A campaign to raise public awareness about post-adoption support has led to a significant increase in the workload for the team. This has resulted in some delays and as an interim measure the manager writes to people advising them of the reasons why this is happening. Where appropriate people are referred on to other services within the borough or to a local voluntary agency. Examples were given where the adoption team has worked effectively with young people and their families to prevent disruptions.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The service has a Statement of Purpose which outlines their aims and objectives and describes the services they provide. This and the children's guide are up to date.

The service has a recruitment strategy in place which includes action planning to meet the needs of children in Wirral. Analysis of local need has been carried out which informs recruitment targeting. Good quality initial information is sent out to enquirers about adoption and systems are in place to prioritise assessments to meet the needs of children waiting. Adopters are informed of this at early stages.

The adoption team manager has considerable experience, knowledge and skills and staff were positive about the manager's leadership role and style. The manager is appropriately qualified and is well supported in their role. Lines of accountability, responsibilities and levels of delegation are in place and are known to the staff. Staff are well supported and supervised in their work. The staff are experienced and enthusiastic about their work and open to new ideas and improving outcomes for children. There is an evident commitment to team and individual professional development. Team meetings provide a forum for discussion of practice issues and training needs are largely addressed. Not all staff are yet competent enough in IT skills.

Systems for tracking, auditing and quality assurance are not yet robust enough to allow for effective management monitoring. The service is very aware of the need to improve timescales and quality of reports and managers are focussed on improvement. Systems are in place to record complaints and actions taken. Reports to council on the adoption service's activities are not done each year.

Case records for children are not well organised, contain information which should not be retained there and do not provide a coherent account for the adopted child in later life. Supervisor's case decisions are not always recorded. The service's recording policy predates the last Adoption Act and does not contain any specific information on the content adoption files. The system for the archiving and retrieval of files is secure and robust. Social workers commented on the ease in which they can request files. The archivist is aware of the confidential nature of the files and ensures that only those with appropriate access can view them.

The adoption service's premises provide for safe storage of confidential material.



Where necessary other rooms in premises in the borough can be booked for meetings.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
5	ensure that full and correct information on children are contained in their Child Permanence Reports (Reg 17 Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	01/11/2008
25	ensure that case records for children contain the required information (Reg 12 The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005).	01/11/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that all children for whom adoption is the plan are placed in a timely manner (NMS 2)
- ensure that adoption assessments are carried out in a timely manner and that prospective adopters are kept informed of progress throughout (NMS 4)
- ensure that applications from prospective adopters are received prior to preparation training (NMS 2)
- improve the range and scope of health and safety inspections to include action planning (NMS 4)
- ensure that decisions are made by the Agency Decision Maker and communicated to applicants and adopters without delay (NMS 13)
- ensure that Criminal Record Checks for each person working for the purposes of the adoption services are renewed every three years (NMS 19)
- ensure that the service is monitored to ensure quality performance (NMS 17)
- ensure that reports are provided to the council (NMS 17)
- ensure that supervisor's case decisions are recorded (NMS 25).