

# Manchester City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC056753
<b>Inspection date</b>	05/01/2009
<b>Inspector</b>	Sean White / Dennis Bradley
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Registered manager</b>	Ciaran Rafferty
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Michael William Livingstone
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	07/11/2005

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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**

This local authority adoption service undertakes, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption provision under current legislation. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents; it also matches and places children with approved adopters. Support is either provided by the service or through arrangements made by them, or contracted by them. Support is provided or arranged for anyone, adult or child, who has been affected by adoption.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This is an agency that has many positive qualities, particularly in respect of the core business of assessing and supporting adopters, which is underpinned by a strong ethical base that promotes a very positive view of equality and diversity. The recruitment and preparation of adopters, whilst undertaken with due diligence, would benefit from more detailed input

Its success overall, however, is hampered by a managerial and organisational infrastructure that prevents the service having an overall coherent and manageable operation. It is, nevertheless, well managed within this system and skilled and experienced staff provide a professional service. There is less experience, however, in the children's teams with plans for children being inconsistently monitored. There is, despite this, a good record of successful matching and placing children with suitable families that are able to meet a wide range of complex needs.

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

The agency has made some strides since the last inspection and is committed to developing the service further. The situation of having managers in temporary, acting, positions is having some impact on strategic development, as is the organisational structure, but it is acknowledged that the authority has plans to re-configure the structure into a more coherent organisation.

There have been improvements in the approach to assessing adopters and to the panel processes. There has also been strides made in respect of the support services to families and people affected by adoption. Administration and records management is also much improved.

## **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.

This is an agency that takes seriously its responsibilities to children placed for adoption and which matches a considerable number of children with suitable adopters each year. There are, however, structural issues (identified further in the Organisation section of this report) and operational matters that impact negatively on the performance of the service.

There are serious efforts made to ensure that children are matched and placed with the most appropriate families to meet their needs and there have been very few disruptions in recent times. Considerable attention is paid to meeting the cultural needs of children and there are systems in place to liaise with other services to meet the needs of children with disabilities through adoption. However, the inconsistent and often poor Child Permanence Reports, a result of poor quality control, inexperience and lack of training, often do not provide sufficient information and has created delays for children in several instances. There are, nevertheless, systems in place to monitor children that are awaiting an adoptive placement.

The recruitment and preparation of prospective adopters is undertaken with due diligence. The structural systems that are in place, though, lack coherence and present some difficulties in maintaining an overall quality management overview. Whilst all first time adopters are provided with preparation training, those seeking to adopt a second or subsequent child are not required to undertake this. The preparation training is undertaken over two days or four evenings; this is less input that comparative agencies where current practice is usually three, often four, full days.

The assessments of prospective adopters are undertaken by different teams depending on the circumstances of the applicant. Whilst most are undertaken with full rigour and attention to detail, this system has caused inconsistencies in the process.

The adoption panels approach their responsibilities with commitment and present a thorough and rigorous approach to ensuring that the recommendations they make are based on a detailed analysis of the cases presented to them. Although suitably constituted, the independent chairperson has recently come to the end of her tenure and there is no current incumbent in either panel. There are also minor inconsistencies in the procedures that govern the panel which do not reflect current legislation. Nevertheless, the panel is well managed, has a sound administrative and organisational infrastructure, and makes coherent recommendations from which the

agency decision-maker makes well informed judgements in a timely way.

All the managers involved in running the agency are very experienced and suitably qualified; two managers, however, are in 'acting' positions, and have been for some considerable time. The workers in the service have significant, varied and wide experience of adoption and social work with children. They demonstrate skills, understanding and professionalism to a high degree. The recruitment and selection processes of the authority are sound, with all required procedures followed, including that Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are obtained every three years.

There is a child protection procedure, both corporate and service-specific (Allegations Against Adopters), that provide, in the main, a sound approach to safeguarding children. The procedures do not, however, provide for children who are placed for adoption in another area and do not address the safeguarding needs of children receiving adoption support services.

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

The provision is good.

The service has a strong approach to providing support to adoptive families and is developing a range of initiatives for post adoption. Placements are well supported and agency workers demonstrate a committed approach to ensuring that children's futures in the chosen family are established with optimism and positive endeavour.

A range of specialist resources are available. These bring a positive, multi-disciplinary dimension to supporting families with complex situations, enabling them to understand and manage difficulties and provide children with stability from an informed standpoint. Children with disabilities are particularly well served by well-coordinated support packages.

In addition, there are contractual arrangements in place with an independent, registered, adoption support agency to provide support services if its expertise is determined as appropriate to meet particular needs.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a committed approach to involving birth parents in the planning for their children's futures, and wherever possible their views and wishes are sought and recorded on the child's permanence report.

The agency struggles, however, with some aspects of maintaining children's heritage and recording their histories through life-story work. Limited training in this area, and the competing demands of social workers' responsibilities has resulted in less priority being given to this area of work. This has resulted in many life-story books not being completed in a timely way and lack of experience in this area has produced work of

inconsistent standards. Nevertheless, there is a commitment and enthusiasm within the agency to develop this area of responsibility, and some developing expertise that is bearing fruit.

Contact arrangements, through the 'letterbox' system, however, are well administered and managed in an efficient way.

The agency has a long term and trusting relationship with a registered adoption support agency (ASA) with which it has a contract to undertake support and counselling for birth families. This is monitored frequently and both value for money and outcomes are part of this arrangement.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The authority has a committed approach to ensuring that diversity is a central tenet of its work and this is reflected in policies and procedures, and is demonstrated in practice; workers and managers are clear and enthusiastic about this very positive aspect of their responsibilities.

The agency's statement of purpose provides a generally clear outline of the aims and objectives of the service, includes all required information and has been authorised by the executive. The children's guide, however, is limited in scope and is only suitable for older children.

The information provided for people considering adoption is of a very high standard and is clearly aimed at providing as much relevant information as possible. It is very well presented in accessible and interesting media, gives a very positive introduction to the agency and welcomes applications from all members of the community.

The agency is managed by very experienced and qualified professionals who, collectively and individually, have wide experience and who demonstrated managerial understanding and competence. They provide a supportive environment that enables workers to undertake their roles and responsibilities to the best of their ability. The organisational management of the adoption service, however, is challenged by a disparate structure that is not coherent and which mitigates against operational efficiency. Different teams have different responsibilities and are managed separately. This creates inconsistency in overall management and has led to a lack of organisational fluidity.

The service is under-resourced to undertake the current range of responsibilities.

Workers carry very high caseloads and this, in addition to the difficulties created by the structure, results in delays in adopter assessments.

The authority has a positive approach to its workers, ensures equality is central to its staffing policies, and promotes good practice and innovation. Training is provided for workers but this has been limited in scope in recent times.

There is an efficient administrative support to the service, both in respect of resources and competence. Case files are well kept, are easy to locate information and are audited. Staff personnel files had all required information, but panel members' records were not well maintained and contained contradictory information.

The premises used by the adoption service are suitable for the purpose, are accessible to people having business with the agency, including people with disabilities, and are appropriately equipped and resourced. There was a security system failure during the inspection with no extra measures put in place to protect the premises.

## 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
11	appoint a chairperson to each of the adoption panels (Regulation 3(2) The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005)	02/03/2009
28	include all required information on panel members' files (Regulation 11 The Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulations 2003).	02/03/2009

### Recommendations

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

- create a more thorough system of quality controlling Children's Permanence Reports to ensure all required information is available (NMS 2)
- increase the preparation training input, including formal preparation for applicants seeking to adopt for a second time (NMS 4)
- undertake adopter assessments in a more coordinated structure (NMS 4)
- update the adoption panel procedures to include all information, including



- reference to current legislation (NMS 10)
- produce a child protection procedure that includes all required details (NMS 32)
- undertake life-story work in a more timely way (NMS 8)
- produce a children's guide suitable for all children for whom adoption is the plan, or are receiving adoption support (NMS 1)
- develop a more coherent management structure (NMS 20)
- employ sufficient staff (NMS 21)
- develop better training opportunities for experienced staff (NMS 23).