

# Northumberland County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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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

Northumberland County Council operates a comprehensive adoption service which includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of adopters for both domestic and inter-country adoption. The pre and post-placement support of adopters, as well as the approval of non-agency adopters, is also provided.

In addition, the service assists field work staff in the assessment of children's needs, preparation of children for adoption, which includes undertaking life story work with the child, the production of relevant reports for court, the matching and placement of children with adoptive parents, support for children pre and post-placement and post adoption contact. The service also provides and maintains a post box scheme that supports information exchange in adoption placements.

An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents, their families and adopted adults through a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. In addition, a birth records counselling and support service is provided to adopted adults.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This agency places the welfare of children at the forefront of its practices. There is an active approach to recruiting the most appropriate families to meet the needs of children requiring placements, rigorous assessments and careful planning of matching and introductions. The panel provides effective scrutiny of these activities. Placement support is well considered and consistent. The arrangements and practices of the agency keep children safe.

Birth families are encouraged to be as involved as possible in the adoption process and are provided with the levels of support that meet their needs. They contribute information regarding children's histories and background but the agency is struggling to integrate this into life-story books in a timely way.

The agency's management and organisation provides a coherent infrastructure within which the service operates and there is clarity in its policies and procedures. Experienced and skilled workers are well supported and enabled to undertake their duties to the best of their abilities. Quality monitoring of the service overall is well managed but there are some discrete issues that are not as well audited as most parts of the service.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The agency has addressed the issues raised as requirements and recommendations following the last inspection and demonstrates a commitment to service improvement; there are some matters still outstanding however, particularly in respect of life-story work and the monitoring of case file quality. There are clearer, more structured, systems in place to monitor the practices of the service and a more open approach to organisational procedures. Policies and procedures have been introduced to inform a more robust approach and management practices are more efficient.

## **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.

This agency places the needs and well-being of children at the forefront of its operations and practices.

There is a focused and well thought through strategy for ensuring that the needs of children placed for adoption are clearly identified, including their heritage. The practices in respect of recruiting and targeting those adopters most able to meet the needs of these children are well considered and imaginative. Prospective adopters are fully informed of the histories and circumstances of children they consider and have access to all necessary details, including complex medical histories or circumstances. There have been very few disruptions in recent times with almost all placements moving on to successful adoptions, which demonstrates a thoroughness of approach aimed at positive outcomes for children.

Prospective adopters are provided with informative preparation that leads them into their assessment fully aware of the processes and possibilities. Assessments are rigorous, detailed and aimed at ensuring applicants are suitable people to be adoptive parents: there is, however, some inconsistencies in the way prospective adopters' reports are written and presented. There is a clear focus on not approving people who demonstrate weaknesses or where there is clear evidence that children may not be safe or their needs not met.

An appropriately constituted adoption panel brings further rigour to the process through its detailed scrutiny of the cases placed before it. The panel is well organised and administered with detailed minutes providing accurate information about the deliberations and the reasons why recommendations are made. The management of proceedings, however, is a little inefficient. Decision making is timely, conscientious and well informed, which provides the agency with a clear outcome for the business

it has undertaken.

The manager and staff of the agency are suitable people to be involved in the specialist area of adoption and have been recruited, in the main, to a high standard. They demonstrate a thorough understanding of adoption matters and social work with children, including current thinking and legislation, and bring a highly professional approach to their work and responsibilities.

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

The provision is good.

The agency acknowledges the importance of providing effective support to families where there is a child in placement. Practices demonstrate a clear and focused approach to sustaining placements through partnership working and levels of trust are developed between workers and families. Careful consideration is given at all times of the process from matching, through introductions to placement in order that the outcome can be as positive and optimistic as possible. Support plans are thorough and detailed, and given due scrutiny at the adoption panel.

Specialist medical and legal advisors provide a high quality of support to the adoption process through their commitment, involvement and availability. Other specialist advice is sought wherever there are particular needs to be addressed, including disability and mental health matters.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

There is a strong commitment in the agency to working with birth families. Every effort is made to engage them in the adoption process and to encourage them in enabling their children to be fully informed about their family history and circumstances.

However, although the service works hard to gather information about children's families and backgrounds, a number of children have not had their life-story books completed in a timely way. This work is being given lower priority than other areas of responsibility, including preparing permanence reports and family finding. Some workers who are not sufficiently trained or skilled in the production of life-story work which also leads to delays.

Independent support to birth parents is arranged through a contract with an independent agency and all birth parents are encouraged and enabled to access this service. However, although the contract with this agency is well monitored by the authority, there is no clear monitoring of outcomes or service-user satisfaction.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The organisation and management of the service is underpinned by a well presented statement of purpose that informs and complements other policies and procedures. The children's guide is a generic pamphlet that has not been produced by the agency and is not of a similar standard. Other information and material produced by the agency, however, is of a good, or very good standard and provides prospective and approved adopters with a wealth of detail that enables them to be fully informed about processes, services and what the agency provides.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. There is a clear policy statement and all written material and practices reflect this.

The agency is well managed and efficiently organised in most areas of its work and the more systemised approach to structures has improved the way the service operates. Staff are well supported and encouraged to work to the best of their abilities within an atmosphere of enablement and respect for professional abilities.

Although there are very experienced and competent workers throughout the agency, there are capacity issues that are having an impact in some areas of the agency's responsibilities that are affecting overall efficiency, although they do not impact directly on children's wellbeing or safety. This is addressed in more detail in the previous section.

All social workers have access to training opportunities and undertake sufficient training to maintain their professional registration. More specialised training is available to an extent, but this is limited by budget considerations; nevertheless workers are encouraged to develop their skills and knowledge and there is a high proportion of staff with a post-qualifying award.

Case recording is of a good standard, which enables access to all relevant and necessary information in case files; all required information is maintained for both adopters and children placed for adoption. File management and monitoring, however, is not consistent which makes files cumbersome to read and to locate specific items of information.

Administrative systems, although effectively structured and managed, are somewhat hampered by staff absences and this has placed a strain on efficiency. Procedures and systems are in place to ensure that the sharing of confidential information is managed appropriately and records are kept safe and secure.

The agency maintains personnel files for all employees and panel members that include all required information.

The agency's premises are located in a rural setting and are suitable for the purposes of the agency; they are secure and accessible to people with genuine business with the service.

## **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):

- provide life-story books in a timely way (NMS 8.2)
- ensure decisions by supervisors are recorded in all case files (NMS 25.5)
- monitor all case files on a regular basis. (NMS 27.3)