

# Bury MBC Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC049997
<b>Inspection date</b>	30/10/2009
<b>Inspector</b>	Marian Denny / Sue Winson
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	20/11/2006

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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

Bury Metropolitan Borough Council has a dedicated adoption team, which includes a post adoption social worker, who focuses on adoption support. The adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The Council has commissioned a similar service for inter-country adopters from a local voluntary adoption agency.

In addition, the service carries out the matching, introduction, placement of children with domestic adopters and the support of adoption placements. Post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption is also provided and includes birth records counselling and intermediary work. In addition, the service operates and maintains a letter box system, which supports the exchange of information in adoption placements. An independent counselling and support service is provided to birth parents through commissioning arrangements with a voluntary adoption agency.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection of the adoption agency. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the adoption national minimum standards (NMS). All the standards were inspected under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. In the main, the adoption service was meeting the adoption NMS and Regulations. The outcome areas of staying safe and organisation were judged as satisfactory and making a positive contribution and enjoying and achieving were judged as good.

The adoption service has a recruitment strategy, which promotes equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. It is good at recruiting adopters and its' practice is child focussed. It is usually thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters and makes every effort to ensure children are kept safe. However, there is some inconsistency in the qualitative assessment of adopters' assessments.

Considerable thought is given to the effective matching of children and adopters. Children are matched with adopters who are suitable to meet their needs. The matching processes and documentation are of a good standard. The service has a very low disruption rate. Adoption support services are based on an person's assessed needs and services are designed to meet them. Good, effective support is

provided to all people affected by adoption.

The service makes real efforts to engage birth parents in the care planning process, encouraging them to provide information about their child's backgrounds and to contribute to the child's heritage. There are good contractual arrangements in place for independent support to birth families.

Life story work is carried out in a timely manner and the life story book produced to a good standard. Later life letters are produced for every adopted child, however, these letters are not of a consistent, qualitative standard.

Adopters are encouraged and supported wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. It also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct and indirect contact between birth families and children, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. Respect and equality is provided to all those involved in the adoption process.

The adoption policies, procedures and the literature for adopters has been revised in accordance with recent adoption legislation.

Managers and staff of the adoption team have considerable knowledge, experience and skills and work co-operatively with children's social workers to achieve positive outcomes. Improving the quality of Child Permanence Reports (CPR's), ensuring quality assurance systems are more robust, statutory visits and reviews are carried out at the prescribed frequency and a sufficient number of staff are working for the adoption service, are areas for improvement. In addition, while the recruitment and selection process is robust and safeguards children, the information relating to panel members does not meet the NMS.

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

The last full inspection was carried out in November 2006 and resulted in 4 actions and 8 recommendations being made. These related to each of the key outcome areas. The service has addressed these matters, with the result that all the actions and recommendations had been completed.

### **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.

The adoption service has an effective recruitment strategy and is successful in recruiting adopters for children requiring adoptive families. However, as Bury is a small local authority geographically, the majority of children are placed outside the area. Positive, effective working relationships exist between the adoption service, their neighbouring authorities and Adoption 22, the regional consortium of adoption agencies. The acting adoption manager is involved in this consortium and the team has access to database information about children and families. The service is child focussed and in situations where it is necessary to meet children's needs outside the region, arrangements are in place to secure funding without delay. The National Adoption Register (NAR) is used and the service also takes part in adoption exchange days to facilitate an effective match of a child with adopters.

Children are matched to adopters, who best meet their assessed needs and every effort is made to ensure siblings are placed together, if this is assessed as appropriate. Adoption placements are generally made in a timely manner, however, in the few instances where there has been delay, there are clear reasons for this, which are well documented. The service has been successful in placing older children, children with disabilities and large sibling groups. Children's views are taken into account wherever possible when family finding. Introductions and placements are well managed and mid point reviews take place. Adopters are fully involved in the matching process and their views are included in adoption placement reports. The medical adviser and other professionals involved with the children, talk with adopters or attend meetings to provide full information. The agency has only had one disruption in the past five years, which demonstrates a successful approach to careful and considered matching.

The authority has worked hard to improve the quality of the Child Permanence Report (CPR), with staff provided CPR training. However, while some improvements in the CPR have been effected, these assessments are still of variable quality, for example, some are written in an inappropriate style, contain jargon and provide limited information regarding the birth parents.

There are clear processes and procedures to handle adoption enquiries and applications from domestic adopters, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice. Inter-country adopters are referred to a voluntary adoption agency, which Bury has commissioned to provide this specialist service. All adopters confirmed that they had received 'prompt' and 'useful' information regarding the adoption process.

There is a formal preparation, assessment and approval process of domestic adopters. Preparation training is provided twice a year, however, adopters can attend the preparation training provided by other neighbouring authorities. This ensures training takes place frequently and effectively meeting adopters' needs. The training materials used are appropriate and includes contributions from an adopter and

adopted adult. Adopters spoke positively about the preparation training, which they stated was 'well presented' and 'informative'. Several adopters stated that the training enabled them to really consider 'the reality of taking a child into your life' and others, that it was the 'beginning of a journey in the adoption process'.

Adopters' assessments are generally of a good quality; in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover issues of parenting capacity well. However, some assessments were less thorough; for example, one assessment did not fully reflect the work undertaken in relation to the adopters' child and in another the parenting capacity of the adopters was not fully explored. The service carries out written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. All necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household, who are aged 16 years or over are obtained. The service also ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of a health and safety checklist. The service has introduced an effective system to monitor the timescales of adopters' assessments. Adopters' assessments are now carried out in the prescribed timescales.

Adopters commented positively about the assessment process. Staff were said to carry out their work in a 'professional', 'knowledgeable', 'skilled' and 'sensitive' manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report presented 'a realistic picture' of them and had been given them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters are provided with written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the NAR and the Independent Review Mechanism. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process.

Adopters prepare a book or DVD about themselves for use in preparing children or provide photographs for younger children. There is a written system in place for notifying the authority in the event of a serious illness or the death of an adopted.

Following the placement of a child, statutory visits and reviews are carried out at the prescribed legislative frequency. However, this is not true in every case, for example, the service did not recognise the changed legal status of a child, following the commencement of their adoption placement.

The adoption panel has a clearly written set of policies and procedures, which govern its function and operation. These documents fully meet the adoption NMS and Regulations. Adopters are invited to attend the adoption panel, with good preparatory work undertaken with them, prior to their attendance. The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask relevant questions. Panel minutes are informative, clearly state the panel's

discussion, with reasons for the panel's conclusions and recommendations clearly recorded.

Adopters stated that both the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them and made 'real efforts to put them at ease'. They stated that the questions asked were 'relevant' and 'appropriate'.

The Agency Decision Maker (ADM) ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are personally signed by the ADM and sent out within the necessary timescales.

Staff recruitment practices are robust, which ensures children are effectively protected. The acting manager and staff are suitably qualified and have experience, knowledge and skills in adoption work. Social workers in the childcare teams have variable experience in adoption work, however, they have access to more experienced colleagues, adoption social workers and the guidance documents prepared by the adoption team. Staff are positive in their comments about the acting adoption team manager and workers, clearly valuing their expertise and the support provided.

There is a safeguarding policy and procedure, which fully meets the adoption NMS and Regulations. A good recording system is in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the service are well supported to handle and manage safeguarding issues.

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

The provision is good.

The adoption service fully recognises the importance of providing sensitive and qualitative support to adopters in maintaining stable and permanent homes for children. Considerable efforts are therefore made to ensure that adopters retain their social worker following their approval. This arrangement continues throughout the matching, introductions and placement of children, until at least the adoption order is made.

A variety of support services are available to adopters both before and after the adoption order. They are individually tailored to meet the family's assessed needs and provided in a creative and flexible way. This support can range from informal support from the worker to more complex work, including therapeutic input, if needed.

Support services available, includes support from staff during the introduction and placement of a child with their adoptive family. Financial support packages, a news letter, which is produced twice a year, a buddy scheme for adopters and a support group. Internal and external training is available.



The integration of the council's services has enabled adopters to access a variety of specialist services to meet specific needs, for example, involvement with the educational support team to address educational issues. It also allows a complex package of multi-agency support services to be provided to meet the holistic needs of the family. In addition to these support services, Bury has commissioned a voluntary agency, which specialises in inter-country adoption to support inter-country adopters.

Adopters are made aware of the support services available, at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Adoption placement plans and children's adoption care plans are well written. Adoption support plans are generally of a good standard. The plans were signed by all necessary parties and had been distributed in a timely manner. Requests for support are responded to promptly and support services are provided in a sensitive and thoughtful manner.

The service has access to a variety of specialist advisers and their are written protocols in place regarding their roles. Specialist advisers are used to support adopters, for example, adopters have the opportunity to see the medical adviser and the clinical or educational psychologist. The range of specialist services available ensures adopters receive appropriate support, at all stages of the adoption process.

People affected by adoption receive a service that is appropriate and tailored to their particular need. They are treated fairly, openly, respectfully and sensitively. Written policies are carried out in practice by experienced workers, who respond promptly to adoption enquiries or service requests.

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

The provision is good.

There is a clear, strategy in place in relation to work with birth parents and their families. The service is committed to working with birth parents and encourages them to be as fully involved as possible, in planning for their children's future. At times their cooperation is difficult to maintain, however, it is clear that every effort is made to address this and engage birth parents in this care planning process. Views of birth parents are sought and recorded in the (CPR'S). In situations where it is not possible to obtain their views, the reasons for this are fully recorded.

The agency has a contract with a voluntary adoption agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Written information regarding this service is provided at various stages of the adoption process. The service makes real efforts to ensure support is provided to birth parents and their families at an early stage, for example, when an adoption plan is being considered for their child. Birth parents and their families are able to access this service at any time and the work is carried out in a thoughtful, sensitive manner. This contract is carefully monitored to ensure that it provides a qualitative service and value for money.

The service is committed to gathering information about children's backgrounds and

encouraging birth families to contribute to their child's heritage. They fully recognise the importance of ensuring life story work is undertaken with a child and the work is carried out in a timely manner and to a good standard. The life story books produced contain comprehensive information, so ensuring the child has clear and appropriate information about their life before adoption. Latter life letters are also completed. While the majority of the letters seen were sensitively and well-written, this was not true in every case.

Contact arrangements are well recorded. Direct contact is usually managed by the adopters; however, Bury will provide adopters' support, where the arrangements are difficult or complex. Arrangements for indirect contact are managed through the letter box system. This is a robust, well managed system. It is evident that adopters are prepared for one off meetings with birth parents and understand the value of maintaining letterbox contact. Assistance is provided to adopters and birth families in writing the letters. The agency provides birth records counselling, access to files and intermediary services. These services are provided to a good standard. Experiences and learning derived from this work is used to inform adoption practice.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Promoting equality and non-discriminatory runs through policies and is carried out in practice. Assessments of prospective adopters provide a good consideration of the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture, both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and also their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works hard to find appropriately matched placements for children, taking into account their background or specific needs and provides effective adoption support for children with complex needs. Work with birth parents is carried out in a way that demonstrates respect and endeavours to engage them in the planning for their children.

The adoption service has an up-to-date statement of purpose (SOP), which quite clearly details its aims, objectives and the services provided. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency. The service has a colourful, attractively presented children's guide which is in a user friendly format and contains all the required information.

Adopters are provided with well written, comprehensive information about the adoption process, which is sent out in a timely way. This literature is attractively

presented, does not discriminate and clearly reflects the service's practice. A system is in place to prioritise the assessment of those prospective adopters, who are most likely to meet the needs of children waiting to be adopted and this is effectively communicated to adopters.

The acting team manager has considerable experience, knowledge and skills. Staff are positive about their acting manager and are complimentary with regard to her leadership and management style. 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. They are experienced and enthusiastic about their work, are open to new ideas and improving outcomes for children. All managers have a strong commitment to adoption and there are links at all levels to other social work teams and services within the authority including the safeguarding unit.

There are clear written procedures and systems for monitoring the adoption service's performance. However these quality assurance systems are not robust for example, the deferment of a case which had been considered at the adoption panel.

The adoption service is managed as effectively as possible, given its' resources. However, insufficient professional staff at times impairs its effectiveness for example, family finding for children with complex needs.

The service gives a high priority to training. Staff are encouraged and enabled to take up any training and development opportunities available. Staff are very positive about the range of training and professional development opportunities provided, which they state are of a good standard.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording. Case records are well organised, maintained and ordered in line with file index. The records contained full, up-to-date and accurate information. Decisions by supervisors are recorded on case files and they are audited on a frequent basis.

There is a clearly written policy and procedure in place for accessing records, which meet the legislative requirements and is strictly followed. The service ensures that separate records are kept for staff, and any allegations or complaints that are made. These records are well maintained and securely stored.

The premises occupied by the agency are well located. The arrangements for security and administration of the agency are well managed and it is suitably equipped with information technology and all necessary resources.

Personnel and Panel Members files are well ordered and securely stored. Panel members' files contain most of the required information, though they did not contain documentary evidence of panel members' qualifications.

## **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 prospective adopters' assessments are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 4)
- improve the quality of child permanence reports (NMS 5)
- ensure statutory visits and reviews are completed in the prescribed legislative frequency (breach of regulation 36(2)(3)(a)(b) and (4)(a))
- ensure later life letters are of a consistent qualitative standard (NMS 8)
- ensure robust quality assurance systems are implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (breach of regulation 7(1)(a)(b) and 2 of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure there are a sufficient number of staff working for the purposes of the adoption service (breach of regulation 10 (a)(b) of the Local Authority Adoption Service (England) Regulations 2003)
- ensure all the required information relating to adoption panel members is obtained (NMS 28).