

# North Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	23/10/2007

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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

The agency undertakes all statutory duties in relation to the adoption of children. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of prospective adopters, matching and placing of children with families, and adoption support.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The purpose of this visit was to undertake a full announced inspection. Key standards were assessed under outcome areas for staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. A judgement is also made on the promotion of equality and diversity.

All outcome areas are judged as good, and the service is good overall. Children, adopters and birth parents receive an effective service which is delivered within a clear corporate framework and underpinned by a range of relevant policies and procedures. A well-administered adoption panel provides good scrutiny of assessments and ensures that no one who is unsuitable is recommended for approval.

The way to successful adoptive placements for children is paved by thorough preparation and assessment of adopters and carefully considered matching. Effective planning and case management from childcare and adoption social workers, along with timely interventions from external agencies, mean that children and their adoptive parents are empowered to begin their journey from a solid, well-informed, well-supported foundation.

Adoptive parents are provided with detailed knowledge about children's heritage and background and they enjoy good support to enable them to develop and sustain positive relationships with the children they adopt. The importance of birth parents in the adoption process is recognised, and support for them is good.

There is clear leadership from the adoption manager, who has overseen a range of improvements since the last inspection and supports staff to develop their range of skills and expertise. There is generally good monitoring of the service and its functions. Two recommendations are raised, however, to further improve practice in ensuring that prospective adopter assessments are taken to approval within reasonable timescales, and in relation to strengthening the service's quality assurance processes.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the last inspection a number of recommendations were made. These included improving the quality of child placement reports, strengthening post-approval support for adopters, and developing policies and strategies on the recruitment of prospective adopters.

The responsible individual was also asked to improve practice in respect of amending adoption panel procedures, reporting to the executive, recording decisions and auditing case files. Evidence from this inspection demonstrates that these recommendations have been met and adopters note that post-approval support is particularly effective and helpful.

## **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.

Effective safeguarding practice and sound processes ensure that children are provided with secure, safe adoptive placements. The manager is suitably vetted, qualified and experienced to manage the adoption service and ensures that all staff undergo appropriate checks before they begin working for the service.

Staff working for the service hold the appropriate social work qualification and receive training and development which equip them to maintain their knowledge and skills in adoption work. Although no allegations or complaints have been made since the last inspection, sound procedures are in place to deal with such matters should they arise.

The service's recruitment strategy generates sufficient adopters to meet the needs of children needing such placements. This includes applicants from a range of diverse cultural and religious origins, sexuality and marital status. Where children's needs cannot be met from the pool of in-house adopters, specific recruitment is undertaken and use is also made of external resources when necessary.

Some prospective adopters experience delay in the early part of the application process and a recommendation is raised to improve practice in this area. Once the assessment begins, however, applicants are taken to panel for approval within a reasonable timescale and the process is managed well.

Adopters are complimentary about their contact with the service. One adoptive couple commented that they 'experienced a positive approach' from the service 'right from the first enquiry' and the majority of enquirers receive a useful information pack

from the service which covers all aspects of the adoption process.

Children benefit from being placed with adopters who undergo rigorous and comprehensive assessment. The service counsels out those unsuitable or not ready for the commitment of adoption. Successful applicants attend an intensive training course, described by one adopter as 'challenging but very effective'. A birth parent contributes to this training which adopters found particularly helpful as it 'dispelled my presumptions about birth parents'. Adopters stated that the service made very clear that children's needs are central to the whole process.

Prospective adopter reports are competence based and written to a high standard. There is sound analysis of the information gathered which helps to determine the applicants' strengths and needs and their suitability to be adoptive parents. Referees are interviewed and statutory checks are in place, with any health matters followed up by the medical adviser if required.

Once an adoption plan is agreed the majority of children proceed to matching and introduction to their adopters within reasonable timescales. The very low occurrence of placement disruption demonstrates that the matching process works very effectively. This enables children to cultivate secure attachments and experience long-term security and stability.

In general, child permanence reports clearly delineate children's needs and family background although it is recognised that there is still room for improvement in the writing of these. There is close working and good communication between childcare and adoption social workers which is instrumental in achieving successful matches. Foster carers also play an important role in facilitating successful transitions for children to their new adoptive parents.

The adoption panel provides an important layer of scrutiny and safeguarding to the matching process and recommendation of approval of adopters. The adoption panel is properly constituted, quorate at each meeting and includes a local councillor, adoptive parents and adopted individuals. Each panel member is appropriately vetted and is subject to regular appraisal.

All panel members bring important insight and experience to deliberations, along with expert advice and guidance from legal and medical advisers. Panel members take their responsibilities seriously and come well prepared to the meeting. Adopters are routinely invited to panel for decisions on recommendations and matching and say they are made to feel very welcome.

The panel chair has a wealth of experience and ensures that all panel members have chance to contribute to discussions. The panel offers valuable feedback to the service on the quality of reports presented for consideration and on other aspects of practice.

There is effective communication between the panel chair and panel adviser on practice and other issues. Excellent administration enables panel business to be

conducted in an efficient manner and decisions on suitability and matching are taken promptly by a senior manager.

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

The provision is good.

The adoption service's strategy for working with and supporting adopters is effective and a real strength of the service. The need for placement support is carefully assessed and effective adoption support plans are implemented to help achieve successful placements.

Adopters are carefully prepared in advance of the child coming to live with them. This includes helping adopters understand the impact of separation and loss and the importance of heritage and identity. Adopters confirm that they receive good, detailed information about the children placed with them. They are encouraged to prepare a 'welcome book' for the child and to acquire and keep significant memorabilia.

Adoptive parents receive ongoing post-adoption support from a range of individuals. The service has excellent partnerships with external agencies such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and local child and adolescent mental health services. Adoption staff facilitate a post-adoption support group which was noted by adoptive parents to be particularly valuable and helpful.

Adoptive parents report that the range of support is 'fantastic', enabling them to develop their skills in parenting and their understanding of the child placed with them. These measures help in building positive attachments which mean children have every chance of experiencing long-term secure outcomes.

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

The provision is good.

All those affected by adoption are offered a range of services and support. The service makes every effort to engage birth parents in planning for their children's future and their views and wishes are clearly recorded in children's placement reports. Records show that these matters are handled sensitively and with care.

Where appropriate children are actively engaged in the adoption process, and are fully supported to make a successful move to their new adoptive homes. Introductions to their new parents are managed in a way that meets the child's needs, and placements continue to be monitored to ensure that things are going well. Life story work is a very important element of this process, and each life story book is lovingly crafted and individualised to reflect the child's unique journey and experiences.

There is a strong emphasis on enabling children to be aware of their own heritage

and keep in touch with siblings or family through indirect and direct contact arrangements. Post-adoption contact is carefully considered throughout the process, with the interests of the child central to these discussions. Every birth parent, and other relatives such as grandparents, are offered support if required from an independent support agency.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The adoption service is delivered by a confident group of staff who are skilled and knowledgeable. They are supported by strong management, regular supervision and a range of relevant training opportunities. There is good communication and effective working practices between childcare and adoption social workers. This means that children's needs remain central to proceedings, and every effort is made to quickly match and place children in adoptive homes as soon as this has been agreed.

Managers provide clear leadership and report to senior management and the council's executive on the performance and delivery of the service. Staffing levels are good and the service ensures that there are a sufficient number and range of adopters to meet the needs of children needing adoptive placements.

The service operates within its Statement of Purpose and there are helpful children's guides available for children of different ages. This information helps children and prospective adopters to understand what the service will offer and what they can expect to happen throughout the process.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service actively implements equality standards and this is integrated into all aspects of the work. Values related to discrimination are addressed in preparation courses. The strong emphasis on life story work ensures that children are fully aware of their history, culture, heritage and identity. Adopters are drawn from a range of diverse backgrounds, and additional support, such as the use of interpreters, is provided where necessary.

The administration of and record keeping within the service is good. Children's records are in good order, methodically and systematically arranged and contain all essential information required by regulation. Adopters' files are similarly compliant with the regulations and standards and all documents and files are kept securely.

There is generally good oversight of how the service is performing. Files are regularly audited and the manager monitors the operation of the service. Some of the shortfalls highlighted in this report could, however, have been identified by greater



scrutiny and clearer quality control, so a recommendation is raised to improve practice in this area.

## **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 quality assurance and monitoring systems are consistently implemented and maintained for all aspects of the adoption service (NMS 17.1)
- ensure assessments and approvals of prospective adopters are managed effectively. (NMS 20.5)