

# Blackpool Borough Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Dancer / Sue Winson
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	16/06/2008

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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 is a local authority adoption service that undertakes or makes arrangements for all statutory adoption services. The service recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters and provides support services to anyone affected by adoption, including birth families and adopted adults. Some support services are contracted out, as are assessments for those wishing to adopt a child from overseas.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was an announced inspection. All the national minimum standards for adoption were assessed under the outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving and positive contribution. An assessment was also made of the quality of the organisation of the service and of how well the service promotes equality and diversity.

Blackpool's adoption service takes a thorough approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. One improvement was identified in the assessment process with regard to ensuring full employment histories are obtained from prospective adopters. The preparation of prospective adopters is very good and ensures that people are prepared to parent a child who is not born to them and who may have complex needs. However, applications from prospective adopters are not taken in a timely way.

While children's written assessments are appropriate for use in the courts, by the panel and the decision maker, the contents of the reports are not written with the needs of prospective adopters and children in mind.

The arrangements for the approval of prospective adopters are strong and the decision making process is robustly undertaken.

The support services provided to adoptive families is of a very high quality. It is delivered in a flexible and timely way to suit the needs of families. The support provided helps to ensure that children live in stable and permanent adoptive homes.

The service provided to birth families recognises the lifelong implications adoption has for all parties. Birth parents are encouraged to become involved in the planning for their child's adoption. Children are well prepared for adoption but life story books and later in life letters are not always completed in a timely way.

The letterbox system is efficiently run but the manager does not have formal oversight of this work. Adopted adults and birth relatives are provided with a

counselling and intermediary service and this is carried out in a skilled and sensitive way.

The service is run by a skilled and knowledgeable manager and staffed by well-trained and well-supported staff who are very experienced in adoption work. The manager is supported through regular supervision. However, she has not had access to an internal consultant, who has detailed knowledge and experience in adoption matters, for a considerable period of time. Adopters' files are comprehensively maintained; children's adoption files are not as well maintained.

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

There were no recommendations made at the last inspection.

### **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.

There are strong arrangements for recruiting prospective adopters most likely to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement. People are welcomed, without prejudice. A range of strategies are deployed to try and reach the widest audience possible. Enquirers are provided with useful verbal and written information that explains what adoption entails; this information includes details about the needs of children waiting for a placement. Blackpool children tend not to be placed within their own area, due to issues of confidentiality and the safety of adoptive placements. There are strong links with the regional adoption consortium and these are essential to ensuring that those people thought to be likely to meet the needs of children waiting regionally are progressed.

Prospective adopters are well prepared to care for a child from the care system. The preparation of prospective adopters is a real strength of this adoption service. Prospective adopters are supported in developing a sound knowledge about the complexities of adoption and the trials, tribulations and joy it can bring. All adopters commented positively on their experience of attending the preparation groups. One said preparation groups were not about 'telling you things' but more about giving information which made her rethink and reflect. Another adopter said that preparation courses 'were very good, thought provoking and information was very well presented.'

The application to adopt is provided to prospective adopters following their attendance at preparation. This is not in line with legislation which requires a formal application to have been made prior to attendance at preparation. The impact on the

prospective adopters is that they do not have a formal recourse to appeal if their application is not progressed.

The assessment of prospective adopters is firmly focused on each applicant's suitability to parent a child, who may have complex needs, through childhood and into adulthood. Assessment reports are analytical and conclusions clearly identify the applicants' strengths and any areas for development. These assessments are then used in the family finding, matching and support planning processes. One minor shortfall is that the full employment histories of applicants are not always obtained. This means that there is a risk that any gaps in employment are not explored with the applicants.

The arrangements for family finding and matching are good and ensure that children are placed with prospective adopters who are most able to meet their needs. Care is taken to ensure that adopters fully understand the child's needs and the implication of these throughout his or her life. Good attention is paid to identifying any areas that need support, or may do in the future. Likewise children are well prepared for adoption, in an age appropriate way, and this forms the basis for them to settle well with their adoptive family. However, the children's permanence reports are not written in a style that is of most use to prospective adopters and children who may wish access them in the future. It is recommended, under organisation, that social workers are provided with training in writing these reports in a more suitable and accessible style.

There are sound arrangements for the approval of prospective adopters. The adoption panel is well managed and effectively conducted by an experienced panel chair. Panel members are provided with the panel papers well in advance of the panel date. This adoption service has a system for devising some of the questions for social workers or prospective adopters prior to the panel. This does not preclude any further questions being asked at the panel by members. It does provide prospective adopters and social workers with the opportunity to consider, in full, their responses. Prospective adopters and social workers are invited to attend panel and prospective adopters' attendance is sensitively handled. Panel members are recruited to sit on the panel in line with safe recruitment practice. Members are provided with training and support and this means they undertake their roles effectively. The arrangements for decision making are robust and the relevant people are informed of the decision in a timely way.

The staff and the manager of the adoption service are recruited in line with safe recruitment practice and the manager and staff of the service are experienced, knowledgeable and skilled in their respective roles.

The arrangements for safeguarding children receiving a service from the adoption service are sound. There are clear safeguarding procedures and staff are trained in using these.

## Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for supporting families are especially strong. The careful matching processes and arrangements for planning support ensures that the right support can be provided to families in a timely way. There are a full range of pre- and post-adoption support services. Some are provided in house, some are spot purchased and some are provided via a service level agreement with an adoption support agency. Adopters and children are involved in the development of the support services through consultation with them. In response to these consultations the agency has developed services that adopters and children have identified there is a need for. This is outstanding practice and ensures that people are provided with the support they have identified as being the most useful.

Adopters are informed, throughout their contact with the adoption agency, about the services available. There is an adoption support newsletter sent out every six months that outlines the support groups and events that are planned and it provides adopters with other useful information. The wide range of support services available include events that provide opportunities for families to meet informally. For example, adoption support groups, coffee mornings for families with pre-school children and annual social events. There are also a range of training opportunities, including one for relatives and friends; this is very good as it informs the people who will be supporting the family about how best to provide support. In addition the adoption service pays for adopters to have membership of an adoption support agency, for one year. The adoption service also signposts people to other community based support services and works to raise the awareness of other professionals about the complexities of adoption.

If families need more focused and individual support the adoption service provides this in a well planned and timely way. When it has been assessed that there is a need for individual work the adoption service commissions services to support families; this support allows stable, safe and secure placements for children to be maintained.

Adopters' comments about the support, training and other activities were very positive, one adopter said of a training course, 'very well presented and really useful information; thought provoking.' Another said more generally, 'the after adoption support is very useful, it is parent led and relevant.'

In the sad event of a disruption occurring the adoption service ensures that all parties are supported, the reasons for the disruption are identified and lessons are learnt from these.

The adoption service has a good range of specialist advisers. These include medical, legal and educational advisers who are proactive in ensuring that adopters are well equipped to meet the child's needs. In addition the adoption support social workers have been trained in a specific therapeutic technique and use this to teach parents

how to help their child to build healthy attachments. The commissioned adoption support agency is also available to provide specialist advice to the adoption service and to adopters.

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

The provision is good.

There are clear arrangements to encourage birth parents to be as fully involved as possible in the planning for their child. It is difficult for many parents to cooperate in this work as usually their children are being adopted against their wishes. It is clear that social workers and family centre workers try hard to obtain information about the child and his or her early life from birth parents. Birth parents' wishes about the child are recorded within the permanence reports. This means that there is information about the child's history and this supports the child to maintain a sense of his or her heritage.

Blackpool has a contract with an adoption support agency to provide independent support and counselling to birth parents and families. Birth parents are informed about this service at an early stage of the adoption process and are reminded that it is available at various stages of the process. The service is monitored through the contract arrangements and through regular meetings between Blackpool and the agency to ensure that it is providing a good service and remains value for money.

There is a strong commitment to ensure that children are provided with information about their histories through life story books and later in life letters; however, although the standard of the work is high, these are not always provided to children in a timely way.

It is recognised that it is important to all parties that, if appropriate, birth and adoptive parents meet. These meetings are sensitively handled. This means adopters have first-hand information to share with the child in the future. It can also provide a sound basis for any future contact planned and can help birth parents fears about who will be caring for their child to be allayed.

There are a number of letterbox contact arrangements and this service is run effectively and efficiently. When there are any issues about the content of letters or about any other aspect of the arrangements the letterbox coordinator refers the issue to a social worker. Help is given to all parties to write letters and contact arrangements are reviewed. This adoption service has a good system which identifies if adoptees wish contact to continue after the age of 18. This ensures that the adoptee is in control of what happens to contact. While the arrangements are efficiently carried out there is no formal management oversight of this work.

The adoption service also provides a service to adults who want to find out about a birth relative. This work is provided in-house and via the service level agreement with an adoption support agency. The work is carried out sensitively by skilled



workers and enables people affected by adoption to understand their situation, and if they wish, enables them to trace and meet other birth relatives.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity issues are threaded through the service's policies, procedures and practice. For example, while the adoption service is child-centred applicants are welcomed without prejudice. Social workers value and support people's differences and birth families are treated with respect.

The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out the aims and objectives of the adoption service. There is useful information available for children about adoption and this is used to ensure that children understand adoption and what it means for them. Likewise adopters are provided with a range of written information at various stages of the process. This helps prospective adopters understand the complexities of adoption and of parenting a child not born to them.

The service is managed by a qualified and appropriately skilled and experienced person. Staff feel very well supported by the manager in their work and adopters were also positive about the management of the service. The manager receives regular supervision from a suitably qualified senior manager; however, for some time, she has not had access to someone who has up to date experience of adoption work who she can use for consultation.

The adoption service is managed effectively and efficiently. There is a reorganisation taking place within the local authority. The planned changes are not yet fully in place therefore it is not possible to assess the impact the reorganisation may have on service delivery. The staff are very experienced in adoption work and committed to ensuring that children are placed with people who can meet their needs, to a high standard. Staff are very supportive of adoptive families and adopters remarked on their sensitivity and professionalism. One adopter said their social worker was 'open and supportive' and another called their social worker 'wonder woman'. A third adopter said 'the social worker fights our corner, the team is great, they support, they have a sense of humour, they are real people and they make sure kids are happy.' Staff confirm that they receive good opportunities to attend training related to their work and that this is planned through supervision and annual appraisals. However, as identified in the staying safe section the children's permanence reports are not written in a style that is appropriate for all of the intended uses.

Case files for adopters are well organised and maintained; adoption files for children were not as well organised and are not audited prior to being archived. This means that the adoption service cannot be confident about the quality or content of these files which are so important to an adoptee wishing to access information about their adoption.

The adoption service is administered by a small but efficient administrative team. Arrangements for access to records meet the legislative requirements. Records required in respect to staff, and any allegations or complaints made, are maintained.

The adoption service operates from appropriate premises that are accessible and secure. There is adequate information technology equipment for staff to use.

## **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 that all enquires are undertaken about prospective adopters, this is with particular reference to ensuring that their full employment histories are obtained and any gaps in employment are explored (NMS 4.8)
- take the formal application to be considered as an adoptive parent prior to the preparation training and before undertaking any statutory checks (NMS 4 and Guidance on the Adoption and Children Act 2002)
- ensure that information about a child's birth and early life is provided to children and adopters in a timely way (NMS 8.2)
- ensure that the manager of the adoption service has access to someone, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption work, she can use for consultation (NMS 20.6)
- ensure that the on-going training plan includes training for social workers in writing children's permanence reports (NMS 23.4)
- ensure that there is a system implemented to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and that remedial action is taken when necessary. This is with particular reference to children's adoption files (NMS 27.3)
- ensure the manager monitors and reviews the service provision in relation to letterbox contact. This is with particular reference to ensuring the service is delivering the outcomes that it is intended to achieve. (NMS 34.7)