

Oxfordshire County Council Adoption

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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Setting address	Children, Young People and Families, Macclesfield House, New Road, Oxford, Oxfordshire, OX1 1NA
Telephone number	01865 815565
Email	sarah.clayson@oxfordshire.gov.uk
Registered person	Oxfordshire County Council
Registered manager	Sarah Clayson
Responsible individual	Sarah Clayson
Date of last inspection	21/12/2005

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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

Oxfordshire's adoption service aims to address the needs of all children within the county whose plan is for adoption. A service is also provided for adults who wish to adopt, including those who are seeking to adopt from overseas, the latter being referred to a voluntary adoption service, Parents and Children Together (PACT).

The service provides independent counselling and referral for intermediary services for birth relatives and adopted adults and access to information through AAA-NORCAP, a voluntary organisation. There is a letterbox contact system in place, and assistance to facilitate contact between adopted children and birth relatives where this is an agreed plan.

Some adopters and their children may be eligible for financial support, based on the Framework for Assessment of Children in Need. All may receive ongoing training, practical and emotional support through a wide range of services and social functions.

Since the last inspection, major changes have been implemented in the structure of the service, with the development of a County Adoption Team with dedicated social work staff. During the past twelve months, 27 adopters were approved, 24 children had permanency plans approved, 23 children were linked for adoption and 17 children were linked with Oxfordshire approved adopters.

In addition to the full time Service Manager, who also manages the county's Fostering Service, the Adoption Service has a full time agency advisor, two half-time Adoption Unit Managers and 2.8 senior practitioners. There are 3.5 adoption social workers, and normally 1.6 adoption support workers, although there is currently a vacancy for half these hours. There is a part time birth parent project worker, two recruitment officers (shared with the Fostering Service) and service support staff, including a full time panel administrator. Staff receive regular training and supervision to maintain professional skills.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a very positive announced inspection, with improvement demonstrated in all areas identified at the last key inspection. No actions have been made and just one good practice recommendation. Enjoying and Achieving was judged as outstanding, with the other three areas all judged as good. The service is very effectively managed with committed and experienced staff, and is well able to regulate itself by aiming for very high standards, identifying issues and addressing

them proactively.

Due to this inspection being re-arranged due to unforeseen circumstances, it was (unusually) completed with the help of three other inspectors.

In addition to the panel observation and interviews of adoptive families, questionnaires were sent to a sample of adopters, of which ten were returned. Interviews were conducted of the Service Manager, key senior staff and a sample of childcare social work and adoption team staff. File records, policies and procedures and staff files were examined. The records archive and three of the county's offices were visited.

Improvements since the last inspection

This service has made very good progress over the past three and a half years, helped by restructuring into separate fostering and adoption services, listening to and supporting service users and staff, and close monitoring of practice standards by the management team.

The first inspection against the National Minimum Standards for Adoption Services was conducted on 31 January 2005. At that time, the inspectors found that the service was fully committed to promoting and safeguarding the welfare of children, but in common with almost all other services at that early stage in regulation there were a number of shortfalls, as this was a baseline inspection. In Oxfordshire's case this resulted in five legal requirements (now termed actions) and 28 good practice recommendations.

There was a follow-up inspection on 21 December 2005, in which inspectors found that significant progress had been made in many of these areas. Two requirements were made, concerning the need to develop a written strategy for and provide a counselling service to birth parents, and some deficits in staff files. Four good practice recommendations were made, concerning recruitment strategy for adopters; monitoring, controlling and tracking work and additions to health and safety checks for prospective adopters. Significant improvements had already been made at that time to the process of assessment for adopters, and some further recommendations were made in this area at that time.

At this inspection, the trend for continuing improvement has continued. The service has identified and is actively addressing a number of other areas, and these were discussed in the feedback meeting.

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.

Oxfordshire's adoption service aims to and generally succeeds in recruiting sufficient suitable adopters representing a wide range of faiths, ages and ethnic backgrounds, in order to meet the needs of the county's multicultural population of looked after children. All staff spoken to praised the recruitment team, who employ a wide range of creative strategies to attract interest from individuals and couples. In the year ending 31 March 2008, 27 adoptive couples were recruited, meeting the needs of almost all the children seeking placement.

The county has processes in place to identify likely needs in advance, and in order to attract more adopters and specifically to increase the proportion of applicants from minority ethnic backgrounds, the service has appointed additional recruitment staff. The enquiry officer and two recruitment officers have made a significant difference to recruitment and the level of support offered to prospective adopters.

One member of staff focuses mainly on communication and links with specific ethnic groups in order to develop relationships and encourage prospective adoptive parents to come forward. Although the number of minority ethnic adopters approved in the last financial year was small, the agency has addressed this proactively through work with local churches and through advertising campaigns.

Specific recruitment drives have taken place in the past year for same sex couples and for single adopters, in order to increase matching options for children. No groups are excluded from application, with the exception of certain health parameters, for example, prospective adopters of children under five have to have ceased smoking for a 12 month period, and adopters have to have completed a six month interval following any in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment or miscarriage. An example of carefully considered and measured assessment, informed by specialist advice, is evident in the instance of an applicant with previous experience of significant issues who has successfully moved on from this period in their lives.

Staff work very hard to reduce the time that children wait for a placement, and delays for children are kept to a minimum. In one instance advice was sought from the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) regarding a child of dual heritage who had been the subject of five separate searches for an ethnic match. The agency responded to BAAF's advice that to address the child's attachment needs a more immediate placement was required and therefore ethnicity should no longer be the prime objective in matching. The agency was then able to find a suitable family.

Seven children have been referred to the Adoption Register within the last financial year in order to improve their chances of finding a placement. Inspectors saw evidence of some good work with children who are old enough to express their views about planning and adoption.

The agency has a clearly stated process for application and assessment of prospective adopters. There is a free-phone number to encourage prospective adopters to make enquiries. The role of the Enquiry Officer is particularly successful in that this member of staff receives many of the calls, sends out an information pack, gives initial advice, takes basic information if the person is ready to provide it, greets prospective adopters at the information meetings, and if they wish to proceed further, provides a valuable and friendly link between potential adopters and the agency until the formal assessment process begins. Staff and managers said that feedback from adopters about this member of staff and the role has been very positive.

Introductory meetings are held at convenient times for working people, mostly in the evenings, with some in the mornings. They comprise a presentation, an opportunity to mingle with and speak with social work and recruitment staff, and a question session. Questionnaire responses are positive about these meetings.

Prospective adopters then have an initial home visit, and may then be invited to a half day Reflection Workshop, which is provided by an independent trainer to encourage prospective adopters to consider the losses and issues they bring to adoption, why they wish to adopt and what they might have to offer. At this workshop more detailed information is given about the complex needs of the types of children who may be seeking adoption placements.

Social work staff and managers work very hard to support the recruitment and training events. Some comments were made about administration staff time being overstretched, particularly as it is still shared with the fostering service, but the adoption service is aware of the pressure points and has taken active steps to reduce these.

Adopters and file records confirm that applicants are subject to statutory checks including Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, references are taken up and previous partners and birth children are interviewed where appropriate. Adopters say that they are kept fully informed throughout the process, although some inevitably find that the gap between approval and matching can be frustrating.

In one instance a child had been placed with adopters on a fostering basis in an emergency when the foster carer had become seriously ill, but in most cases the move was very well planned and timely. In this one case, the decision was taken in the best interests of the child to avoid further moves.

All adopters who had been through a formal matching process say that the service is very good at matching children with parents. Adopters say they receive good quality written information about potential placements, including the Child Permanency Report (CPR) and medical information, and they have access to specialist advice from the agency medical advisor and a clinical psychologist. They report that placement timing and the planning are carefully organised in terms of timescales and practical arrangements, and that sufficient support is provided. Adopters interviewed commented on help received from foster carers in preparing the child for their move.

After approval adopters are given a pack of information about adoption which includes details about the National Adoption Register, one year's membership of Adoption UK, and Oxfordshire Social Services Department's own training programme.

As some minority ethnic communities in the county are often in relatively small geographical areas, placements for children from these communities are sought out of county in order to protect confidentiality. The service works with other members of a small consortium of nearby authorities and a voluntary adoption agency in order to maximise the chances of finding good matches for children.

Adoptive parents are now asked to notify the adoption team of any death of a child. Fortunately this has only been necessary on one occasion, when the birth parents were informed in a sensitive manner by a social worker who knew the family well.

Oxfordshire's Adoption Panel has policies and procedures in place to guide practice. Adopters have the opportunity to attend Panel, and most do attend. Inevitably it is a challenging experience for many people, but adopters say that it was made as comfortable for them as possible. They receive a friendly and welcoming letter advising them on where to park, what to expect and even what to wear, so that they feel more at ease when they arrive, and this is good practice. Adopters say that their social workers are supportive and that questions asked during the panel meeting are appropriate and understandable.

Panel chooses not to inform adopters of their recommendation before they have left the building, but does inform them verbally as soon as possible after this. The advantages and disadvantages of this practice were discussed with the Service Manager.

Panels are correctly constituted and all members have had Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks completed and have signed confidentiality agreements. There is an excellent booklet with photographs of all panel members to inform prospective attendees. There are three panels which each meet once a month, with the same Chair to ensure consistency. The Chair is highly experienced and also chairs other panels. He has considerable knowledge of adoption law and practice, and is involved in the recruitment, induction and training of new members. The agency advisor is independent of the service hierarchy in terms of not holding cases, but she is a member of the Adoption Team.

An inspector observed the adoption panel, which at that time, met at Yarnton House. In 2009, the panel will meet at the new city offices at Knights Court. The panel is a well run meeting supported by comprehensive minutes. Panels are very busy and often sit all day. Minutes are very efficiently produced within a very short time frame to go to the Agency Decision Maker.

The Agency Decision Maker said that 95% of decisions are made within the timescale allowed. Decisions are made within a few days and letters are sent out two to three weeks later. On two occasions the Decision Maker has not ratified panel

recommendations, for sound practice-based reasons.

The agency maintains satisfactory staff records which show that the agency has robust recruitment procedures with all the necessary checks completed to comply with regulation, including renewal of CRB checks every three years. Although in theory the Director of Social Services can still overrule the need to have a CRB in place prior to starting work, in practice, staff may not start work in the adoption service unless their CRB certificate has been received.

All social workers hold the relevant qualifications, and 43% of social workers hold the Post Qualifying Award in Child Care. Birth records counselling is done by specialist staff from a designated external agency. All staff, both within and external to the agency, have a high degree of knowledge and the appropriate skills to work in the field of adoption.

Adequate measures are in place to safeguard children and vulnerable adults from exploitation and abuse through strong systems of supervision, monitoring and management of all work and service level agreements with other agencies.

The Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) procedures are available online and were seen during the inspection. One file was case tracked where there had been two safeguarding issues, one of a child protection nature where there was no further action after initial enquiry, and the other involved a dog bite to a child. This triggered a full veterinary behavioural assessment of the dog and appropriate advice given to the owners. Allegations of historical abuse are covered by the County Council's Protection of Vulnerable Adult Procedures.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adopters are prepared very thoroughly for the placement of a child and are well supported right through to the Adoption Order being made. Prospective adopters undergo a ten-week training course comprising two hours per week to prepare for parenting. This training, which is run by the Adoption Team, covers child development, child protection and parenting strategies, as well as the legal framework, the home study, matching, placement issues and links with the child's birth family. Adopters say that they find the course very useful to them.

Evaluations are completed after each course and the content can change as a result, showing that the service is able to learn and reflect. Positive feedback about the groups included one comment, that 'the attendance was good, the hospitality good, good food and an enjoyable facility'. Existing adopters and birth family members are included on the courses to bring their perspective.

Adopters are encouraged to prepare 'welcome books' for any children with whom they have been linked. The examples seen were beautifully made, with lots of

information that would be important to a child, and with full regard to children's special needs.

The service experiences very few disrupted placements of Oxfordshire-placed children, for example, just two in the year sampled to March 2008. Disruptions are often placements made elsewhere. The low disruption rate is considered to be one of the positive consequences of encouraging a realistic approach to adoption at an early stage.

Adopters confirm that they can access specialised help when necessary, through the services described above and also where appropriate through the agency's medical advisor. Some parents who took up this offer were advised about medical conditions, for example, where birth parents have mental health difficulties or a child has an uncertain medical history. For a family who are moving home, the agency has ensured a smooth transfer from the local hospital to one in the new home area in relation to the child's medical needs. The agency was praised for the high level of support offered in relation to speech and language needs. The adoption panel also has a legal advisor, and access to a health visitor who is not a panel member, but supports the training programme for adopters.

The agency uses the services of a Clinical Psychologist, through the Attach Service. He and colleagues are involved in the preparation groups and also provides post adoption support where there is a specific need. The annual service audit for the Attach team for 2007 showed an increase in numbers of adoptive parents seeking a service.

There are two Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (CAMHS) services, one of which is an early intervention service that has been widely praised. This service offers six sessions, followed by referral to the main CAMHS service if necessary. This ensures a rapid intervention with an appointment usually within four weeks. This helps to reduce placement disruption and promote permanence for children.

The agency would like to develop post adoption services further and to have more clinical psychological time available, and all staff spoken to are committed to further improvement of an already very good service.

Service users receive a sensitive service suited to their needs. They are given clear written information at each stage of the adoption process. Agency policy documents state that prospective service users are welcomed without prejudice and are given clear information on the services provided by the agency. The service listens to all service users including adults and young people, and gears its services appropriately to their needs. Commissioned services are regularly reviewed.

Young people are widely consulted at a strategic level. The needs of children and young people have the highest priority. Where an adopted adult or birth relatives apply for information or support, there is a service level agreement with AAA-NORCAP, a registered charity and Adoption Support Agency, to provide these services to adults.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency works proactively with birth parents to ensure that their views are obtained and recorded throughout the process of adoption. During contested Care Proceedings this is not always easy. A member of staff within the county offers independent support to birth relatives during contested proceedings where adoption is the plan, and also offers support to birth relatives after adoption. This member of staff is also the letterbox coordinator, and in that capacity works with birth relatives and adoptive families.

AAA-NORCAP provide specialised support and intermediary services to birth relatives.

Two adopters said that life story books and later life letters had not yet been received, some time after the Adoption Orders were made. In some instances, the Independent Reviewing Officer has been proactive in following this up with the social worker. All adopters interviewed had had at least a one-off meeting with the birth mother, birth father or both, and had felt well supported through this.

Some very nice examples were seen of 'welcome books' prepared by adopters and by birth parents for children. One of these was for a child with disabilities, and was a super quality fabric book complete with photos.

Two files were seen where no life story work had been done at all, indeed one case had remained open much longer than normally necessary because of this deficit. Both files also lacked a Later Life Letter. On another file the work had been done very late, but was of excellent quality. Staff in the adoption team report that life story work is variable in timeliness. The service has recruited a social worker to address the backlog of work. Adopters confirmed in their interviews that life story work and later life letters are an issue. A recommendation has been made.

Three adopters say that they are or will be involved in letter-box contact arrangements and are clear about the benefits to the child in these contacts. Since the last inspection, the agency has developed a post specifically to support birth relatives in contact through the letterbox. Birth parents are contacted at the point at which adoption becomes the plan or the likely outcome.

Letterbox contact is managed effectively across the county from one office base. This is an improvement on the previous system where social workers, with all the conflicting demands on their time, had to manage letterbox contact. An administrator deals with straight forward arrangements, and a social worker follows up arrangements that have become inactive. The social worker visits birth parents to support agreements, and helps them to keep up their side of the contact and to contribute to later life letters. There is evidence from files that letterbox agreements are set up in a timely way and are monitored.

Information about the letter box system is available in other languages if required, through an in-house translation service. Referrals from adults affected by adoption are initially received by one of the recruitment officers, who prepares the information to be sent to AAA-NORCAP.

The agency has written policies and procedures for each aspect of service provision, and this includes whether service users are entitled to an adoption support service. Services provided reflect the written policies. Prospective service users are made aware of their right to request an assessment of their needs for adoption support services. The service communicates well with those receiving the service, and evaluates routinely to enable improvements to be made.

Adoption Support work is a growing area for the team, and is managed by one of the Adoption Unit Managers. Post-adoption support files inspected show that the agency has clear plans for supporting adoptive families. There have historically been some delays in assessment and provision of an adoption support plan, due to staffing issues, but this is being addressed. An adoption support plan is always provided for panel at the time that a child is linked with a family.

Families can access a range of services including a twice-yearly parenting course, which takes place in the evenings for two hours over a ten week period, and short-term focused outreach work. Parents may also be referred for further help to an outside agency, and there is an established buddy scheme.

Parentline run a course on parenting teens each year. Two of the three adopters interviewed confirm that they attended the Parentline course, and say that this had been very useful.

There is an annual programme of events ranging from training courses to social occasions, including a performing arts event, football team for children who are adopted or looked after, and an annual picnic where adopters and their children have the chance to meet each other and establish networks.

Adoptive parents confirm that they are helped and supported to provide stable and permanent homes for the children placed with them. Three adoptive families interviewed attended the most recent annual picnic. They all found this to be a well organised event and commented on the fact that the social workers in attendance really enjoyed the time spent with the adopters and children. One adopter said 'they (the social workers) really care, it is not just a job for them'.

One of the managers said 'we want to put an umbrella over adopters; we want to convey our passion for children and achieving good outcomes for them.' The service works at this by encouraging adopters to believe that they can do what can be a very demanding job, but not to be afraid to seek help when necessary.

Adopters can attend any course run for foster carers too, such as child protection and first aid, and some adopters who have a child with foetal alcohol syndrome were

able to attend a conference on the subject. Preparation groups are now beginning to form into support groups, which is being encouraged.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose contains all the information necessary to comply with Schedule 1 of the Local Authority Adoption Service Regulations 2003, including the systems in place to monitor and evaluate the service.

The Statement of Purpose is updated annually and presented for approval to the Council's Corporate Parenting Group. It is available on the intranet for staff to see, and all staff also receive a paper copy.

The Children's Guide is a story book suitable for many children from approximately seven years of age upwards, and it contains contact details of agencies who can help and support the child if necessary, for example, the Office of the Children's Rights Director. If the child is younger or has special communication needs, a guide is tailor-made for the individual child.

Adopters say that they receive clear written information about the service, and this is borne out by observation. The Statement of Purpose states that there are certain priorities in recruitment of adopters, for example, children of dual heritage, children with disabilities and those who have complex health needs, sibling groups and children aged five years and over. The agency is committed to openness and transparency about its recruitment policies: 'prospective adopters will be welcomed without prejudice, given clear information and will be treated fairly, openly and with respect.'

Oxfordshire hosts the Adoption Consortium Exchange, an all day event with other Consortium members profiling the needs of children. Adopters confirm that they receive information about the Adoption Register and other sources of information about children in need of adoptive families. They are also kept informed of the process and of the various support services available.

The service manager and all staff are highly experienced and well qualified to achieve high standards of service provision. All social work qualified staff are registered with the General Social Care Council and receive the necessary professional training to maintain registration.

The Service Manager is also a practice teacher, and holds a postgraduate Diploma in

Child Care and a Diploma in Management. She demonstrates strong and effective leadership of the service, to ensure that the agency is operated in line with the Statement of Purpose. There are clear lines of accountability, and arrangements are in place for cover for the Service Manager in the event of her absence.

Any potential conflicts of interest are identified and addressed. All staff and managers spoken to are well aware of the need for equality in practice and have researched the impact of ethnic and religious diversity on their practice in recruitment, assessment and support of adopters.

There are robust systems in place for staff recruitment, monitoring and evaluating the service, including tracking systems, the Family Finding Forum, line manager monitoring, the adoption panels who feed back information regarding the quality of Child Permanency Reports, the twice yearly Annual Performance Assessment and the annual report on the Adoption and Permanency Panel.

The Authority takes its corporate parenting role very seriously and the service is very well monitored to the highest levels. Steps have been taken to include Care Leavers on the Children in Care Council, and the Corporate Parenting Group meets every two months and receives reports every six months from the adoption service. The group also monitors the agency's Statement of Purpose, and its role is to question and challenge. Members are described as 'having knowledge and passion'.

Staff commented that Councillors are very approachable and apart from attending panel meetings, they come to social functions such as the annual picnic.

There are clearly defined expectations of workload management and performance, for example, staff all have contracts of employment, and access online to the Statement of Purpose as it changes and develops. They are encouraged not to carry out more than three assessments at any one time.

Social workers confirm that they receive regular supervision and support. Supervision notes are on files and in most instances these have been signed by both parties, so generally there is a clear audit trail of decision making. Staff spoke about their passion for achieving good outcomes for children and this was evident throughout the inspection.

There have been some historical issues with the length of time taken to complete assessments, and this was commented on in interview and in questionnaires, but these have largely been resolved through a dedicated adoption service team. Steps are currently being taken to address some delays due to staff sickness. The senior managers of the service have worked to increase staff numbers, and say that post adoption support is a growing need, often involving families who have moved into Oxfordshire from other areas. The day to day work is achieved, but there is more that the team would like to do if they had more staff, for example, development work.

All staff spoken to say that Oxfordshire is a fair and competent employer which

provides good quality training opportunities for all staff and managers. Visiting speakers attend some team meetings, and in addition to the county's own programme, external courses are on offer subject to the usual budgetary considerations.

The county has a service user access to records policy in place. Administrative processes are robust and well managed. The panel is very well supported and although administration staff are sometimes under pressure, they support the social work service very efficiently.

File records are well kept, with supervisors' decisions recorded to provide a clear audit trail. Records are kept securely in heavy metal cabinets in the offices, and there is an archive facility in Abingdon which provides safe and secure long term storage.

Archived adoption records are identified on a computerised record tracking system. Each shelf of adoption records is locked within a locked room and locked building, which is safe and secure, although there has been some previous damage to a roller gate which is the vehicle access to the building. This is already being addressed. There is close circuit TV in place and the building is alarmed. There are sound fire safety procedures and fire precautions in place.

The county does have a very thorough Business Continuity Plan relating to staffing, continuation of panel meetings and restoring office premises, and a Business Continuity Plan relating to the archived information including adoption records was also seen. This plan makes provision for the restoration of any damaged records and contains plans for evacuation of records if it should become necessary.

The two main office premises seen during the inspection in Abingdon and Cowley are both modern and suitable buildings with good public access. The adoption panel is currently based in Cowley, but will move into County Hall in due course. The adoption service was in the process of moving out of the offices at Yarnton during the inspection.

The complaints procedure is made available to prospective adopters and to children. It is a clear three stage process and includes Ofsted in the list of agencies who may receive a complaint. Responses and the process of investigation are well recorded.

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 the life story work and Later Life Letters are of consistently high quality and delivered within specified timescales (NMS 8).

