

# Milton Keynes Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC058675
<b>Inspection date</b>	16/01/2009
<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Dancer / Rossella Volpi
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

---

<b>Setting address</b>	Milton Keynes Council, Saxon Court, 502 Avebury Boulevard, MILTON KEYNES, MK9 3HS
<b>Telephone number</b>	01908 253 155
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Milton Keynes Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Pat Callear
<b>Responsible individual</b>	
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	15/07/2005

---

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

## 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 is constituted as a service under current legislation that requires local authorities to provide or make provision for adoption services. The agency is a member of the Adoption 7 Consortium, which comprises of five other local authorities and one associate voluntary adoption agency. The consortium aims to provide easier access to the range of adoption services, to increase opportunities for matching children and adopters and identify potential adoptive parents at an early stage. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, provides post adoption support and places children with adoptive families. The agency also works with adults in providing birth records counselling, offers an intermediary service, a tracing service and carries out work with birth family members wanting to contact an adoptee. The agency refers people who want to adopt a child from another country to a voluntary agency which specialises in this work. The agency also has a contracts with two adoption support agencies to provide independent support to birth parents of children for whom the plan is adoption and to offer support and training to adoptive families.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

At this announced full inspection, all of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) were assessed. The agency's practice in relation to the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents is of a good quality. This means that children are placed in safe, stable and secure placements in which they can be supported to grow to reach their full potential.

The support services available to adoptive families are good, a flexible approach is taken towards the provision of support and a wide range of services are available. These services help to maintain adoptive placements throughout childhood and beyond.

The agency works with birth parents and relatives in planning for their child and an independent support service is available to them. While this service is of a very good quality, not all birth parents are informed about it at an early stage. The agency also provides a sensitive service for adoptees and birth relatives of adoptees.

The managers of the agency ensure that overall the agency is managed in an effective and efficient way. The adoption team provide a child-centred service and show a high level of competence in their respective roles. The arrangements for monitoring some of the adoption work is not as effective as it could be and the staff recruitment process has some gaps.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

At the previous inspection, there were four actions and 16 recommendations made. All of the requirements and the majority of the recommendations have been addressed. Of the 16 recommendations, one has been partially addressed, this relates to the quality assurance processes for the assessments of children. The remaining recommendation relates to the frequency of reporting to the executive.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

There are no NMS linked to this outcome area.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The agency has effective strategies to recruit adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement and takes an inclusive approach to recruitment. The agency tends to recruit from outside its area due to it being geographically small which can mean that issues around confidentiality of the placement cannot be assured. Placement choice is widened through use of the local consortium, of which this agency is a member and through the use of services such as adoption exchange days and the national adoption register. People wanting to adopt a child from overseas are referred to an agency which specialises in this work.

Permanency planning for children is satisfactory with the adoption team being alerted informally about children who potentially will have a plan of adoption. A formal system to alert the team is to be introduced. The arrangements for family finding are effective and this process is closely monitored by the group manager, who chairs the formal family finding review meetings. This helps to ensure that children are not subject to unnecessary delay.

The preparation courses run by the agency are seen by adopters as being informative and overall, adopters felt that the courses prepare them well for parenting a child from the care system. The assessment processes are child-focused and the assessment reports show that information has been analysed and conclusions reached about the capacity of the applicants to parent a child who may have complex needs arising from past histories. The formal application to adopt is not taken in a timely way. This means that applicants do not have access to the formal routes of appealing an adverse decision about their suitability from the point of the assessment commencing.

Prospective adopters are informed about the matching, introduction and placement processes verbally and in writing. Although, some felt that they had not been informed about the timescales involved at various stages of the process. Where a

link has been made, adopters are provided with written and verbal information about the child's needs in order that they can make an informed decision about whether they feel able to parent the child effectively. Where there are any medical issues, the agency medical adviser will meet with prospective adopters to discuss medical issues and any implications they may have for the future. However, not all adopters were aware of this service.

Children are referred from the support team to the children in care team, following the decision that the child should be placed for adoption. This situation means that a social worker who does not know the child or the birth family is involved in finding a family for the child and preparing the child for adoption. The assessment reports for children are of a variable quality and these two issues could impact on the family finding and matching processes. These situations need careful monitoring to ensure that outcomes for children are not adversely effected.

The work of the adoption panel is underpinned by clear policies and procedures. Adopters' attendance at the panel is well managed. Some social workers are of the view that panel members can, on occasion, lack sensitivity when raising issues about assessments. However, the panel observed was chaired appropriately and all were given an opportunity to be involved in the proceedings. The chair and its members have suitable qualities and experience in adoption matters and legal and medical advice is available to panel. The chair reported that there are no issues in relation to quoracy and confirmed that panels are convened regularly so as not to cause delay for children. Panel members undergo a recruitment process, although there are some gaps in this for some members. For example, references have not been taken up for all members and evidence of the qualifications of one of the professionals had not been seen by the agency. There is an induction process in place for new panel members and further training is provided which includes an annual training day for members and the adoption team staff. The administration of the panel is efficient and clear minutes are taken which show the panel recommendation and reasons. Decision making is undertaken in a robust manner with decisions being made promptly. All relevant people are informed of the decision in a timely way.

The manager and staff working for the agency are all appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about adoption matters. Staff recruitment practices are overall satisfactory but referees are not always contacted to verify the reference. The recruitment policy and procedure, which are corporate documents, do not follow good practice in recruitment. For example, they do not include the need to take up Criminal Records Bureau checks (CRB) nor do they advise the verification of references.

There are safeguarding policies and procedures in place but these do not include procedures where a support service is being provided.

## Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The good preparation provided to applicants as well as further work and training provided to them, ensures that prospective adopters are well prepared to parent a child who may have complex needs arising from past histories. The agency takes a flexible approach to supporting families and shows a strong commitment to ensuring that children are in safe, stable and secure placements. The agency has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency, pays for membership of a second support agency and through these, a wide range of services can be provided. For example, training relating to identity, telling children about adoption and the adopted child and education, has recently been delivered and adopters have access to a telephone helpline, a counselling surgery, consultation sessions and access to support from other adopters via groups and an online forum.

In house support starts with a support plan which is scrutinized by the panel and is subject to review over time. The agency has dedicated workers within the adoption team who deal with the support work. A worker attends the first review following a placement for adoption to ensure that support needs are being met and will undertake initial and core assessments of adoption support, pre- and post-adoption order. When adopters who have adopted from overseas have brought their child home, the agency offers them access to the universal services available to other adoptive families. Adopters feel confident in contacting the agency for support and most were confident that support would be forthcoming should they ask for it.

Generous financial packages have been provided where there is a need to ensure a placement can go ahead and finances have been provided to ensure a child has their own bedroom (a loan). Other support includes means tested monthly allowances to allow an adopter to stay at home to care for a child where the child's needs dictate and respite care to support and maintain placements again where the child's needs dictate.

The disruption rate in this agency is very low, this is a good indication that the support provided helps to maintain placements. In the sad event of a disruption occurring, all parties are supported to end the placement as positively as is possible. A disruption meeting is held to identify the reasons for the placement ending and to consider plans for the child's future. The findings from these meetings are used to inform future practice.

The agency has access to a range of specialist advice. The medical and legal adviser sit on the panel and make themselves available for adopters who want to discuss any worries they have about a child's medical history. However, not all adopters were aware that they could have met with her. There is a recently formed team of education specialists although the impact of this team is yet to be felt. There is a local Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) but a number of staff and adopters state that this service does not meet the needs of children who have been through the care system. The impact of this on children placed for adoption is

mitigated as the agency commissions work with other specialists or use their in-house social workers who are trained in play therapy and theraplay to meet these needs. Therefore, the agency ensures that children receive therapeutic input which meets their emotional and mental health needs.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency recognises the life-long implications adoption has on all parties concerned. The agency has a service level agreement with a voluntary adoption agency to provide support to birth parents. While the quality of this work is very good, not all birth parents are referred in a timely way. There is a lack of clarity among children's social workers about the stage that parents should be referred. Generally, birth parents are supported in contributing to their child's heritage. Their wishes and feelings are recorded in the child's assessment reports or where they do not wish to share their views, this is recorded in the report. It was clear that life story work, books and later in life letters are seen by the agency as being very important. However, the quality and timeliness of this work is variable.

There is a well-managed letterbox system which supports birth families in maintaining the child's heritage. The contact arrangements are subject to written agreement. The system is efficiently administered but there is no social work oversight of the content of letters sent to ensure it is suitable. During the course of this work, support is provided to birth parents, not only in relation to the letterbox arrangements but in any area needed. The workers have carried out some very sensitive work with birth parents and two parents commended these workers.

The work carried out with adults, birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, intermediary and tracing services are sensitively handled by skilled workers. People are treated with respect whatever their circumstances. This work ensures that people affected by adoption, be they a birth family member or an adoptee of any age, are supported in understanding their situation.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

There are no NMS linked to this outcome area.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency's policies and procedures underpin the Statement of Purpose and the work of the agency. Children are informed about the adoption process via a book and through direct work carried out with them. Prospective adopters are informed about the adoption process via written and verbal information and through the



recently updated website. This helps to ensure that adopters and children are informed about adoption and prepared for becoming an adoptive family.

The managers are skilled and experienced in adoption work, there is an interim arrangement in place in respect to the nominated manager but this has not had an adverse impact on the work of the agency. Managers are described as being supportive and helpful. There are good lines of communication between staff, managers and across the teams.

Supervision is seen as a priority in the adoption team, staff meetings are held and managers encourage staff to access training. There are systems in place to determine and monitor caseloads and the adoption team feel their caseloads are manageable. Some adopters indicated there had been some delays in the process in their view although it was not possible to explore this further. Overall, the timescales seem acceptable although the stage at which the agency is taking the application to adopt will have impacted on this data. The children's teams were not so positive about supervision and caseload management. For one team, there was a period of time where there was no manager in post so these issues slipped. More generally workers find it difficult sometimes to prioritise the adoption work over their other duties and this needs to be monitored. The arrangements for the administration of the agency is adequate, the adoption team has retained two workers dedicated to adoption work.

Children, adopters, children's social workers and others benefit from the experience and skills of the adoption managers and team and provide a child-focused service to children and adopters. Comments from adopters about individual social workers are very positive and one stated of the team, 'Service is superb'. 'Came across as a very strong and cohesive team, professional and accessible'. Another stated, 'I do not know that we would have gone through this process emotionally the way we did without their support, excellent'. Children's social workers also felt that the team support them and offer them advice.

There are arrangements for monitoring and controlling the work of the agency but some of these need some attention. The areas needing attention include ensuring that reports to the corporate parenting group are presented on at least a six monthly basis; establish if there is any impact on outcomes for children due to cases being referred from the support team to the in care team following decision that adoption should be the plan; establish if the staffing of the children's teams is adequate to meet the needs of adoption work; continue to closely monitor the quality of CPR's and the quality and timeliness of life story work. The agency evidences that where monitoring takes place, when shortfalls are identified, prompt action is taken to address these and there is a culture of reflective practice across the agency.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. For example, the agency takes an inclusive approach to the recruitment of adopters and is very aware of the diverse needs of children waiting for a placement, locally and nationally. Through the preparation and assessment processes any prejudice attitudes displayed by applicants are challenged and applicants are supported in understanding the issues.

The agency's approach to matching shows that needs relating to diversity are identified and strategies are developed to ensure all these needs are met. On a day to day practice level workers work in a sensitive way with all whatever their background and needs.

The agency maintains comprehensive case files for children and adopters. There is a file audit system in place and decisions made on cases by supervisors are clearly recorded. Written policies and procedures are in place in respect to case recording and there are clear policies in place in respect to access to records. There are personnel files kept in respect to staff employed and gaps in these have been discussed in the staying safe section of this report.

The agency operates from secure and well-equipped premises to which entry is restricted. The arrangements for the security of information technology systems are satisfactory and data is backed up on a daily basis. The archives arrangements are managed by a private company. There is a disaster recovery plan in place in respect to records and premises.

## **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 the application to adopt is taken prior to any preparation or assessment work is undertaken (Regulation 21.1 The Adoption Agency Regulations 2005)
- ensure that the staff recruitment documents follow good practice and ensure that evidence is maintained to show that all staff and panel members have undergone all required checks before they commence work (NMS 19.1)
- include in the safeguarding procedure the arrangements for people receiving an adoption support service (NMS 32)
- ensure that access to other specialisms according to the children's needs is available (specifically CAMHS)(NMS 18.4)
- ensure that a more targeted approach is taken in a timely way in promoting the services available to birth parents and other people significant to the child and (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that there is social work oversight of all of the letterbox contact exchanges (NMS 8.2)
- develop effective monitoring systems in respect to the issues detailed in the main body of the report. (NMS 17.1 and 17.3)