

# Hertfordshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Stephen Smith
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<b>Setting address</b>	Hertfordshire County Council, Education Department, County Hall, HERTFORD, SG13 8DF
<b>Telephone number</b>	01992 588739
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Hertfordshire County Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Brenda Simmonds
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Lynn Knowles
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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, or makes arrangements for, all statutory adoption work with children and those affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters, and the family finding, matching and placement of children. The service provides support to placements both pre and post adoption order, post adoption support to adult adoptees, including intermediary work, and post adoption support to relatives and birth parents of adopted children. The agency also commissions adoption support services from registered independent agencies. For adopters who wish to adopt a child from overseas the agency refers them for training to a registered voluntary adoption agency specialising in this work and then they return for the assessment to Hertfordshire. The agency also manages a letterbox contact system.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a strong service that provides good outcomes for children that are outstanding in some respects. The service works effectively to provide individually focused work to meet the needs of children and other people affected by adoption.

The service recruits, prepares and assesses adopters who are well suited to the needs of the children who need adoptive families. Matches are made carefully and the service works hard to begin to consider adopters for children as soon as possible to reduce delay. The service is working hard to address some difficulties with delay and drift for children that arose from significant staffing shortages in the children's social work teams two years ago. This situation is now resolved and planning for children is now much more effective and well monitored. As a consequence children are now being placed for adoption in a much more timely manner.

The adoption service works well to support birth families and to help children to receive the information they need to maintain and understand their heritage both at the time of adoption and in later life.

The support provided to children and adopters throughout the adoption process is outstanding, as is support to the range of people whose lives have been affected by adoption. Support needs are well assessed and understood, and strategies used to provide support are highly individualised. Support is provided by a range of staff who work effectively together with the aim of supporting placements and improving outcomes. As a consequence, children experience well-managed transitions into adoptive placements that they are well prepared for, and support continues to promote excellent levels of placement stability.

Decision making in the authority is effective and robust, and the service is well managed and controlled. Work done by the service is well supervised but the quality assurance of some information presented to the adoption panel is not as robust as it could be. The process of seeking verbal verification of written references in respect of staff members employed by the service is not consistently well managed. This is a well-managed service that effectively monitors its work and service provision. Nevertheless, the adoption service is under increasing pressure from rising numbers of children and the increasingly complex support packages required by some children and their families. As such, its ability to continue to provide the current high quality service within its current resources is not fully assured.

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

At the last inspection eight recommendations were made. It was recommended that improvements were made to the process and robustness of adopter assessments, the information provided about, and the provision of, adoption support services, and the timeliness and quality of information about children's heritage. It was also recommended that suitability checks on people working for the agency and complaints records were improved and that arrangements for the transfer of children's cases between social workers were revised. The service has addressed all these recommendations. This means the service provides an improved service which enhances outcomes for children and others affected by adoption.

### **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.

The work of the adoption service helps keep children safe and well cared for. Assessments of adopters assure their suitability and ability to care for children, and placements are well matched and very well supported. Adopters and children receive support and advice in safety matters. For example, training and support are provided in online safety and safe care. Additionally, a great deal of work is done with regard to parenting children with emotional difficulties and behaviours that challenge. Work is done with members of adopters' support networks to help them understand and support adoptive placements. This degree of robustness is also applied to inter-country adoption work with thorough consideration being given to the suitability of people applying to adopt from overseas.

Children's health is well supported. Information about children's health is good, and excellent support and advice are provided by the authority's medical advisers. Children have access to the universal and specialist health support they need and a wide range of therapeutic support is provided where needed.

Matching of children with adopters is robust and timely. The authority faces a situation in which there are significant court delays. Positively, senior managers in the authority meet regularly with the judiciary to address any problems, and the adoption team has carried out training in adoption matters for judges, with further training planned. Despite these delays, effective working arrangements mean that children are usually placed within 12 months of the decision that they should be adopted. Social workers liaise effectively to identify potential matches between children and adopters as early as possible, and proposed matches are thoroughly explored and considered along with any support identified as necessary. Transition plans to introduce children to their new families are excellent and well thought out, and children and adopters are well prepared for and supported throughout this process. The authority is working effectively to improve early planning for children to help make adoption decisions in a timely manner and to deal with some historic delay in this area.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Hertfordshire County Council's adoption service provides adopted children with excellent support to help them enjoy and achieve. The service provides intensive, focused work to help children develop positive relationships with their adopters throughout the matching and transition process. This work continues after the child is placed. For example, preparation work with children includes life story work and therapy including play therapy. Introductions and transitions to adoptive families are managed in a structured way that helps develop attachments and reduce trauma. Information about children is good and adopters are supported to maintain any routines or activities that are important to children as well as to offer them positive new experiences.

A wide range of support services are available to children and their adoptive families on an ongoing basis. These are either provided directly by the workers from the adoption service or are commissioned by the service where necessary. For example, play therapy, sensory attachment intervention work, training on telling children about adoption and parenting training can be provided by the authority's staff. The service has access to a psychologist, play therapist and occupational therapist for support, and additional work such as psychotherapy is accessed if needed. Excellent support and training are provided to adopters to help them manage children's behaviour in a positive and safe manner. Training in therapeutic parenting and attachment is provided to adopters and foster carers. Ongoing support is provided to adopters and children to help build positive relationships that help children to manage their own behaviour.

All this support is provided on an individually assessed basis and is clearly focused on providing positive outcomes for each individual child and family. Social workers within the adoption team responsible for assessment, family finding and adoption support all have responsibility for elements of this support at different stages of the

adoption process. Communication between these workers is effective so that adopters and children receive a service that is seamless, individualised and focused on their needs.

The agency works effectively with education services to ensure that adopted children receive the education they need. There is good joint working at a strategic level and this translates in practice to excellent support for children. For example, adopted children receive excellent support to get into the most appropriate schools, and the adoption team works with the education service and schools to help them understand and work with children who have been adopted.

The adoption service provides similarly excellent levels of support for people requesting post adoption support. Work is undertaken in line with effective assessment and is regularly reviewed. Intermediary services are very well managed. The service is able to respond promptly to requests for birth records and provides good counselling and tracing services to help the increasing number of people who request this service.

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

The provision is good.

The authority consults with children and listens to their views. It provides events and activities for adopted children and their families at which their views can be sought. Information provided to children about adoption is good. The adoption pack for children is particularly good, providing a lot of information that will be of use to children as they grow up, including how to express concerns and consult advocacy services.

Social workers spend a lot of time working with children to help them to prepare for their adoption so that their views can be reflected in plans made. Young people's views are taken into account in the matching and transition processes and reviews effectively capture children's opinions. Children's care plans are produced for them in child-friendly formats so that they can be helped to understand what is happening to them. Children receive very good support to help them develop the emotional resilience to understand their background and the reasons why they were adopted. Work to help children develop positive attachments, play therapy and life story work play a major role in this work, and additional support is provided where needed.

Children receive good information about their backgrounds and birth families. Child permanence reports are generally well written and contain appropriate information in an accessible form, and efforts to gain information for children from their birth families are appropriate. Child permanence reports are supported by a range of information including parenting assessments, psychologist reports and viability assessments of other birth family members which provide additional information for later life reference. Life story books are produced in a timely manner in two parts which provide children with a way to understand their heritage.

The service provides very good support to enable children to maintain contact with people important to them where this is agreed. Letterbox contact is well managed with appropriate support provided where necessary. The authority provides well planned and managed packages of support to allow direct contact where this is appropriate. For example, direct contact between adopted children and their birth relatives can be supported and complex arrangements are made to provide practical and emotional supervision and support when contact between adopted siblings takes place.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The adoption service places an individual value on all people it deals with who are affected by adoption. It recruits a range of adopters to meet the diverse needs of children needing families. Assessments consider applicants' ability to care for children in a non-discriminatory manner and to promote equality and diversity. Matches are made carefully taking into account detailed information about the backgrounds of both parties. Outstanding individualised support is provided to adopted children and their families with support also provided to birth parents. This support helps ensure that adoption meets children's needs and increases their opportunities and life chances.

The adoption service has a clear Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service and its operation. This is underpinned by appropriate policies and procedures which guide practice.

The recruitment of prospective adopters is undertaken on the basis of a sound understanding of the needs of children needing families. Assessments of prospective adopters are rigorous and careful. As a result approved adopters are well suited to children's needs and well prepared to care for children. Arrangements for the assessment of applicants for adoption with an overseas element are similarly robust.

The adoption service's decision-making process is equally rigorous and takes place in a timely manner. Adoption panels benefit from a committed membership with a broad experience of adoption and are well chaired. Clear recommendations are made to the agency decision maker who makes prompt decisions, taking the views of panel into consideration. The decision-making process includes a process for feeding back to the service on the quality of information produced and presented to panel. However, the quality assurance of paperwork presented to panel is not as robust as it could be. This is particularly evident in terms of children's information. At times, this results in panel having to consider, then defer cases while further work is done,



which represents additional and unnecessary work.

The adoption service is well managed both strategically and operationally. Adoption workers receive good training in the specialist areas that they need and are well supported and managed. This supports and enhances the strong practice and focus on meeting children's needs through adoption. This is a busy adoption team which is experiencing increasing levels of demand for its service. At the same time the service is continuing to strive to improve the quality of its work further. Against this context, the service has a significant waiting list for non-agency adoption work because of demands elsewhere, and has identified vulnerabilities in its ability to continue to provide some services at their current level. This represents a concern if current service levels are to be maintained.

Recruitment arrangements for staff and members of the adoption panel are generally sound. However, the process of undertaking telephone verification of written references for staff members and the recording of this is not consistently followed. It is not clear in some situations whether these checks have been carried out. This means that the suitability of staff is not as fully assured as it could be in every situation.

Records held by the service in relation to adopted children and adults are good and records of key decisions are clearly retained on files. Records are securely maintained to protect their confidentiality and appropriate administrative systems are in place. As a consequence records underpin, support and record the adoption work of the service effectively.

## **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, in relation to staff employed, telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written reference (NMS 21.1)
- ensure there are effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency. Specifically, that the quality assurance of papers to be presented to panel is sufficiently robust (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that the adoption agency is able to meet the aims and objectives in the Statement of Purpose. Specifically, that it has sufficient resources and capacity to continue to undertake its responsibilities. (NMS 18)