

# Oxfordshire County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Paul Gillespie / Marian Denny
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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 statutory local authority adoption service. It provides, or makes arrangements for all matters relating to the adoption of children and support services for anyone affected by adoption. This includes the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters, and the matching and placement of children with suitable families. Support services are provided or commissioned to support placements before and after adoption, birth parents and adopted adults; this includes birth records counselling and intermediary work.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced full inspection was carried out by Marian Denny and Carole Moore and all key national minimum standards were assessed. This is a good service that provides good outcomes for children with some outstanding features. The service works very 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. Planning for children is very effective and well monitored. As a consequence children are being placed for adoption in a 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 effective support to the range of people whose lives have been affected by adoption. Adopters comment that, 'they are prepared very well to understand the processes' and that, 'preparatory training is very good' and, 'meets their needs well'. 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. This is a well-managed service that effectively monitors its work and service provision. Work done by the service is well supervised and the quality assurance of information presented to the

adoption panel is thorough, allowing for balanced, well-considered decisions to be made.

However, recordings in Child Permanence Records (CPR's) do not always fully demonstrate how the views and wishes of younger children are ascertained. Securing this would further enhance the matching processes and the understanding of adopters of children's needs.

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

At the last inspection one good practice recommendation was made regarding the improvement of life story work and later life letters. The authority has made significant improvement in this regard and both are now of a consistently high quality and are delivered within specified timescales. 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 ensures they are well cared for. Good procedures are well established to ensure any allegations and or suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children, the person making the allegation, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation.

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. Additionally, very effective 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 physical, emotional and psychological health is well promoted and the service ensures that they access services to meet their needs. 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 effective working arrangements in place mean that children are usually placed within 12 months of the decision that they should be adopted. Social workers liaise well 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 very good and well thought out, and children and adopters are well prepared for and supported throughout this process. The authority is working very effectively to improve early planning for children to help make adoption decisions in a timely manner.

There is a strong motivation in the agency to ensure children's backgrounds and birth family histories are accurately and suitably recorded in child permanence reports. However, not all CPR's fully demonstrate how the views and wishes of younger children are ascertained. Securing this would further enhance the matching processes and the understanding of adopters of children's needs.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Oxfordshire 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 if necessary direct therapeutic work. Introductions and transitions to adoptive families are managed in a structured way that helps develop attachments and reduce trauma. Information about children is very 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 such as attending local clubs.

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.

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 very effectively with education services to ensure that adopted children receive the education they need. There is very good joint working at a strategic level, for example the Virtual School is extended to include children who are adopted. This translates into practice by adopted children receiving excellent support to get into the most appropriate schools. The partnership working between the adoption team and the education service is especially good with schools being helped to understand and work with children who have been adopted.

The adoption service provides similarly excellent levels of support for people requesting post-adoption support. There is a comprehensive range of support services such as support groups, ongoing training and buddy arrangements. Adopters confirmed that this is 'invaluable and very supportive every step of the way'. 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 arranges 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 outstanding.

The authority places a strong emphasis on consulting with children and listens to their views well. 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. This work is very well supported through for example well written and detailed life story work.

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 which provides 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 is well supported with sensitive arrangements made to provide practical and emotional support during and after contact.

The agency is committed to engaging birth families in the adoption process and encourages birth parents to contribute to the planning for their children's futures. It also takes seriously the wishes and feelings of birth parents and works with them to achieve manageable outcomes. Birth parents are encouraged, and given the opportunity, to access independent counselling services at any stage of the adoption process, or afterwards, if required.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service ensures that the promotion of equality and diversity is well reflected in their policies and practice. Prospective adopters' assessments address the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture, both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works hard to find appropriately matched placements for children, taking into account their background or specific needs and provides very effective adoption support for children with more complex needs. Respect for birth parents and their families are clearly demonstrated in their work and efforts are made to involve them in planning for their children's future.

There is very thorough scrutiny of assessments presented to panel and the panel's role in monitoring the agency's progress regarding their own recommendations is a key strength. Panel minutes are well recorded and set out clearly the reasons for recommendations reached and the views expressed by panel members. The decision making is timely with appropriate decisions made with the objective of promoting the welfare of children placed for adoption.

The adoption service has a clear Statement of Purpose which outlines its objectives and how the service will meet outcomes for children. This document is supported by a range of policies and procedures, which inform and underpin the operations and strategic direction of the agency. The service has an attractively presented children's guide which is in a user friendly format.



The agency is managed by very experienced and committed individuals who demonstrate the skills and qualifications to fulfil their roles. Responsibilities and duties, and lines of accountability are clear. Recruitment practices overall ensure that children are safe and checks such as Criminal Records Bureau disclosures and references are routinely obtained.

Children and service users receive a service from staff, panel members and decision makers who are very experienced and skilled. This helps ensure needs are fully considered and met. The social workers confirmed that, the level and frequency of formal supervision and access to either their immediate managers or to other managers in their absence means they are very well supported to fulfil their role. There are very good training opportunities provided to support continued professional development for staff that in turn helps the development of the service provided to children and adopters. There are sound induction processes in place for new staff that helps prepare and support them in their role.

The adoption service approves prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of children who are to be placed for adoption. Their recruitment strategy is based on knowledge of trends in children becoming looked after and activities are monitored and shortfalls are identified. A range of recruitment strategies are used which is beneficial in increasing the resources of the adoption team. Enquirers receive information packs in a timely manner and approved adopters said that the response from the service was 'very useful and beneficial' to them.

There are suitable policies and procedures for recording information on files. The premises are fit for purpose and a business continuity plan is in place. Facilities for safe storage protect confidential information and the building is secure.

The reporting to senior officers of the authority is very well established. There is a strong commitment evident from senior managers to the development of the service and this helps ensure the agency is effective and is overall achieving very good outcomes for children and other service users.

## **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):

- improve child permanence reports, in particular in relation to ascertaining the views and wishes of younger children. (NMS 13.4)