

# Peterborough City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for la adoption agency

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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 outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## 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 adoption agency of Peterborough City Council undertakes all statutory work associated with adoption services. The adoption team is based in central premises in the city. The team recruits, trains, assesses and supports adoptive parents. It provides counselling for parents wishing to place their child for adoption, for birth families who are not voluntarily relinquishing their children and for adopted adults. The agency is a member of the East Anglia Adoption Consortium. The agency has a service level agreement with a registered Voluntary adoption agency in respect to inter-country adoption work.

### **Summary**

While there are some satisfactory and even good pieces of work carried by the adoption team the interim management arrangements, a lack of clear strategic planning and general understaffing of the adoption and other teams have impacted on the effectiveness of this service. Some improvements have been made which include a much-needed increase in staffing for the adoption team and the very recent permanent appointment to the service manager post. It is hoped by the agency that the stability of the management team can now be secured and will form the basis for a solid framework from which to develop.

The overall quality rating is inadequate.

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

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

Following the last inspection there were five actions and twenty recommendations made in the report. Some of these issues have been satisfactorily addressed such as the successful development and implementation of a plan for recruiting adopters to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement. However, there are still matters that have not been addressed. These include: the safeguarding policy and procedures; the support services to adoptive and birth families; aspects of the staff and panel member recruitment policy and practice; a number of policy and procedure documents and the adequacy of the security arrangements for current and archived case files. There has been poor progress in addressing actions and recommendations previously made, especially those relating to 'staying safe'. A number of actions and recommendations have been restated as a result of this inspection and new actions and recommendations have also been made.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

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

The provision is inadequate.

There is a written recruitment strategy in place and the agency takes a proactive approach to the recruitment of adopters. The agency employs a dedicated adoption recruitment officer. Part of her role is to develop, implement and revise the written strategy in line with the needs of local children needing an adoptive placement. The officer also refers children to the national adoption register to further widen the choice of placements. The agency is a member of the

East Anglia adoption consortium and four exchange days are held each year whereby links for children can be made to other members adopters. The majority of applicants are white British. To expand the choice of placement for children from different ethnic backgrounds the agency plans to carry out some targeted recruitment activity within local ethnic communities. The agency targets recruitment activity towards people living away from the city as it is often not appropriate for children to be placed in or near the city. For these children the agency purchases placements from other local authorities to ensure this need is met. Information evenings are held on an eight-weekly basis and attendees are contacted afterwards to establish if they are interested in finding out more about adoption. An initial interview can then be arranged during which the interested parties can find out more about adoption and the agency can begin to explore the potential applicants strengths and areas for development. A decision is made by the manager as to whether to progress the case on to the preparation stage. The practice of the agency is to have prospective adopters attend preparation groups prior to their application being made. This is contrary to regulations and government guidance. The agency runs three preparation courses a year. The preparation training is delivered by one social worker and this provides a consistent approach to preparation of adopters. Other social workers attend specific sessions to deliver some of the training and this means that prospective adopters have usually met the worker who is subsequently allocated to carry out their assessment. An observer attends each session to carry out a provisional assessment of the applicants' suitability. At the end of each course written reports are made and presented to the team manager who decides if the applicants are suitable to progress to the assessment stage. This information then feeds into their assessment process. Adopters' views are sought about the quality of the course and the manager plans to become involved in the review of these sessions. One adopter commented, 'the prepare to adopt course was very good....good balance between positive and negative aspects of adoption'. The assessments of prospective adopters are thorough and of a good quality. All appropriate checks are made and a number of references are sought. A health and safety questionnaire is completed in respect to the adopters' home but this does not include the safe storage of guns and dangerous or ceremonial weapons, poisonous plants or hanging cords on window blinds. Adopters are provided with adequate information about the matching process. The agency works hard to find a placement where all of the child's needs can be met such as those arising from ethnicity. In cases where an exact match is not possible the agency works creatively with adopters to ensure the need can be met. Some adopters do not feel well informed about all of their child's needs which can mean for some children some needs are left unmet. The assessment and decision making process around the placement of siblings and in respect to the assessment of future contact needs with siblings and other birth family members is not well evidenced. After the decision maker has decided a match can be made an introduction planning meeting is arranged and an introduction plan developed. The plan is reviewed half way through to make sure that things are progressing well. The adoption panel does follow general procedures but does not have agency-specific policies and procedures to govern its function and operation. The constitution of panel meets regulation but the ethnic mix of the membership is limited and the social work membership of the panel is not practice based. One of the social work representatives is the manager of one of the children's teams and the adviser to panel is the adoption team manager. In both of these cases there are issues around conflicts of interest. While panel members are conscientious in their respective roles there are inadequate quality assurance processes in respect to assessments presented to panel. Additional information and papers are sometimes presented to panel members on the day of panel. This means that members are not always able to fully consider important new information. On occasion the paper work is very poor and panel members have to make a decision about if

they will hear the case. This has the potential to cause delay to the care planning process. There also are occasional delays in cases being heard due to panel agendas being full or on one occasion due to the panel not being quorate. There are significant difficulties in respect to the role of medical adviser. Time allocated to carry out the role is inadequate as are the systems for referral of cases to the adviser, in particular children. Although there are significant restraints on the time allocated to this role the medical adviser makes himself available for adopters to discuss the health needs of a child they are considering and works tirelessly to ensure that medical information is presented to panel at the earliest opportunity. The administration of the panel is good. The minutes of the proceedings are well written. However, the minutes do not detail the role of each panel member. The decision making process is thorough and carried out in a timely way. The manager has an in date criminal records bureau check (CRB) check. However, the recruitment process is not always robust. The need to make telephone enquiries to verify written references is not stated in the recruitment procedure and is not evidenced as having taken place. The recruitment process for panel members is inadequate with a number of gaps on their personnel files. For example, in one case it is not evidenced that an up to date (CRB) has been obtained. The agency uses local safeguarding procedures which have been developed in collaboration with three other neighbouring local authorities. However, these do not specifically refer to children placed for adoption or receiving adoption support services, give details of how referrers can contact Ofsted if they wish to do so or what action to take if children are placed in another local authority. There are no written procedures for dealing with historical abuse.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The support service is not underpinned by a clear strategic plan and is not subject to a formal monitoring arrangement. There is a waiting list for a service which means that some families are not provided with support at the point they feel they need it. However, an assessment is carried out in respect to each referral and the adoption team manager has oversight of this work. Adopters are well prepared and informed about the likely needs of the children waiting for a placement and adopters with placements are committed to helping their child develop a positive self-identity. There are workers dedicated to carrying out the adoption support work and an additional post is to be appointed to. Workers are skilled and dedicated in providing a range of support services. These include a bi-annual newsletter, social events and an adoption forum. The adoption forum is seen by many adopters as an excellent source of support and advice. Adoption support plans are in place. However, not all contain clear information about such issues as how and when services will be accessed and who is responsible for this. The medical adviser is conscientious in his role and strives to provide a good service to the agency. The agency has access to legal advice and an educational psychologist who makes himself available to meet with adopters, schools and young people. The Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) can be difficult to access in a timely way as can psychological input to provide support to placements at risk of experiencing difficulties. There are no protocols in place in respect to advisers resulting in a lack of clarity of roles. There is a procedure in place in the event of a placement disrupting.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The support service to birth parents is not underpinned by a clear strategic plan and is not subject to a formal monitoring arrangement. Birth parents are encouraged to be as involved as they wish to be in planning for the future of their children and are given opportunities to express their views and wishes. Birth parents are referred for counselling to the adoption support worker who refers them on to a counsellor employed within the Family Assessment and Support Team. However, the late stage of this referral, following the agency's decision that adoption will be the plan, does not provide support in a timely way. A range of information is provided to birth parents about local and national support groups. Children who are adopted do not always have clear and appropriate information about their life before adoption. Some social workers have limited time capacity and others lack confidence and training in complex areas of their work. Consequently, some assessment reports are of poor quality and life story work, books and later life letters are not always completed. This poor practice has the potential to impact negatively in the future on adopted people's understanding of their situation. There are arrangements in place for indirect and direct contact. Birth family members have positive experiences of the current service, for example, one birth family member praised her worker stating they were 'exceptional and brilliant'. The adoption support workers plan to provide advice and support to children's social workers when considering issues around contact. There is a draft contact policy and procedure in place to inform contact planning. Birth records counselling is a part of the remit of the support workers and this work is carried out in a sensitive and very professional way by a social worker who is suitably trained and experienced in this area of work.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

There are no standards mapped to this outcome area.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is inadequate.

The agency has a statement of purpose (SOP) in place although this lacks some of the required information. The agency has developed a guide for children about adoption. This is geared to the older and more able age range but would not be accessible to a younger or less able child. The agency has recently developed adoption policy and procedures and has developed an information pack about adoption which the majority of adopters find informative. The manager has the skills to carry out the role of manager and she has a social work qualification. However, she does not have a management qualification. The manager has an excessive workload and a large number of staff to supervise. Consequently, little developmental work has been carried out since the last inspection and the action plan agreed has not been fully met. The agency recognises that the manager has been overstretched and as a result developed plans to make her caseload more manageable. Adopters and staff offered praise for the manager one adopter stated that she had 'pulled all the stops out' for them and another said that she had provided consistency when their own worker was off on long term sick leave. A succession of interim senior management arrangements has impacted adversely on the effectiveness of the running of the agency. Consequently there has been a lack of development of the support services and poor quality assurance arrangements especially in relation to permanence reports for children. The recent permanent appointment of a service manager, the recruitment activity to recruit to additional social work posts and an imminent reorganisation of how the adoption work is managed are positive developments. The executive are provided with a report about the work

of the agency. The frequency of these has just been increased to two a year. The arrangements for accessing services for children are underdeveloped such as the access to CAMHS and psychological input and the agency has yet to secure effective arrangements for the medical adviser role. The adoption team feel well supported within the team and by the manager. Individual staff members were praised by a number of adopters who commented on their approachability, support and professionalism. While there is no formal system for caseload management staff confirmed that the system works well as the manager ensures that they are not overloaded. However, some prescribed social work tasks are carried out by unqualified workers. The links between the children's and adoption teams are not especially strong but staff and managers are hopeful that a planned move to a shared building will help to forge good working relationships. Overall, staff feel that Peterborough is a reasonable employer to work for. Immediate managers are accessible and supportive. Peterborough has a recruitment and retention strategy which includes trainee/secondment posts and a career progression scheme. Training opportunities in Peterborough are regarded by staff as reasonable although the external training budget is limited. There is an appraisal system in place but this is not being implemented and post qualifying training is limited. The case files for adopters and children are reasonably well ordered but there are some gaps such as the minutes of panel not on file in every case and not all documents are signed. While the case recording notes are generally of a reasonable quality there is no case recording policy in place and there is no file audit system in operation. While the current files are stored in secure storage facility this has not been risk assessed in respect to fire and water damage. The archived files are kept in a private storage facility. However, the service level agreement with the facility and the access to records policy are not available and the manager is not clear about the arrangements. The manager does not record and monitor the progress and the outcomes of complaints and some complaints are not logged as a complaint. Staff recruitment files do not demonstrate that a robust recruitment process takes place for all people working for the purposes of the agency. The current premises used by the adoption service are suitable and accessible to the general public. There are appropriate security arrangements in place. The IT system is safeguarded, password protected and backed up on a daily basis. However, there is no disaster recovery plan available.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
4	Ensure that the application to adoption is made before the formal preparation and assessment process commences (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulations (22) & (24))	1 January 2008
12	ensure the quality and content of the assessment reports for children meet regulations before they are submitted to panel members for consideration (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 17)	1 January 2008

19	ensure that a thorough and complete recruitment process takes place and is evidenced on all staff and panel members files (Local Authority Adoption Regulations 2003 Regulation 15 Schedules 3 and 4)	1 January 2008
13	ensure that notifications of the agency decision in relation to the proposed placement for adoption and of the match are placed on the child's adoption file (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 12 (1)(d), Regulation 19(3) Regulation 33 (3)(b))	1 January 2008
2	ensure the child protection procedures comply with Regulation 9 and include historical abuse (Local Authority Adoption Service (England)(Amendment) Regulations 2005)	1 January 2008
1	include all the information required by Schedule 1 in the statement of purpose (Local Authority Adoption Regulations 2003 Regulation 2 Schedule 1)	1 January 2008
20	ensure that the arrangements for access to medical and other specialist advice meet the regulations and the needs of the agency (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 17)	1 January 2008
20	ensure that prescribed social work tasks are only carried out by qualified social work staff (Restriction on the Preparation of Reports Regulations 2005 Regulation 4 (d))	1 January 2008
23	ensure that staff are enabled to receive appropriate training through identification of training needs via the formal appraisal system (Local Authority Adoption Regulations 2003 Regulation 12 (2))	1 January 2008
27	ensure that section 56 information in relation to a person's adoption is at all times kept in secure conditions and in particular that all appropriate measures are taken to prevent theft, unauthorised disclosure, damage, loss or destruction (The Disclosure of Adoption Information (Post-Commencement Adoptions) Regulations 2005 Regulation 5)	1 January 2008

## Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- Ensure the assessment and decision making processes in respect to the placement of siblings and future contact arrangements with birth family are clearly evidenced (National Minimum Standard 2)
- develop the health and safety questionnaire to include the missing areas detailed in the report (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop panel policies and procedures in line with standard 10 (National Minimum Standard 10)

- ensure that the constitution of the panel is both representative of the community and has the benefit of social work representatives at a practitioner level (National Minimum Standard 11)
- review the current arrangements for the adviser to panel to be the nominated manager of the adoption team (National Minimum Standard 11)
- monitor the arrangements in respect to the frequency of panel meetings to ensure that all cases can be heard in a timely way (National Minimum Standard 12)
- include the role of each panel member in the minutes of each panel (National Minimum Standard 12)
- update the recruitment and selection procedure to include the making of telephone enquiries to verify written references (National Minimum Standard 19)
- ensure that at senior management level a clear plan for a full range of support services which are in line with local need is developed (National Minimum Standard 6)
- improve the quality of adoption support plans (National Minimum Standard 6)
- develop written protocols which govern the role of all specialist advisers (National Minimum Standard 18)
- ensure that at senior management level a clear plan for providing counselling to birth parents in a timely way is developed and that all involved in adoption work are aware of these arrangements (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that life story work is carried out in a timely way (National Minimum Standard 8)
- develop a guide for younger and less able children (National Minimum Standard 1)
- ensure the manager undertakes a relevant management qualification. (National Minimum Standard 14)
- produce an access to records policy and procedure document that meets legislation (National Minimum Standard 26)
- produce a case recording policy (National Minimum Standard 27)
- implement a file audit system for all files (National Minimum Standard 27)
- ensure complaints are identified as such and are closely monitored (National Minimum Standard 27)
- ensure that all complaints are recorded as such and that the progress of all complaints is monitored (National Minimum Standard 27)
- assess the storage arrangements for current files in respect to any risk of damage (National Minimum Standard 29)
- develop a disaster recovery plan which can be easily accessed by all interested parties (National Minimum Standard 29).

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for la adoption agency

#### Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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**Ofsted considers the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the agency matches children with adopters (NMS 2)
- the agency assesses and prepares adopters (NMS 4)
- adopters are given information about matching (NMS 5)
- the functions of the adoption panel are as specified (NMS 10)
- the constitution and membership of adoption panels are as specified (NMS 11)
- adoption panels are timely (NMS 12)
- adoption agency decision is made without delay and appropriately (NMS 13)
- the manager is suitable to carry on or manage an adoption agency (NMS 15)
- staff are suitable to work with children (NMS 19)
- the agency has a robust complaints procedure (NMS 24 voluntary adoption agency only)
- the agency safeguards and promotes the welfare of its service users (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 19, 24 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the adoption agency provides support for adoptive parents (NMS 6)
- the agency has access to specialist advisers as appropriate (NMS 18)
- services are tailored to meet the needs of people affected by adoption (NMS 33)

**Ofsted considers 6 and 33 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- birth parents and birth families are involved in adoption plans (NMS 7)
- birth parents and birth families are involved in maintaining the child's heritage (NMS 8)
- the adoption agency supports birth parents and families (NMS 9)
- Service users receive good quality services based on their needs (NMS 34)

**Ofsted considers 7, 8, 9 and 34 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear written statement of the aims and objectives of the adoption agency and the adoption agency ensures that it meets those aims and objectives (NMS 1)

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- Annex A**
- the agency provides clear written information for prospective adopters (NMS 3)
  - the manager has skills to carry on or manage the adoption agency (NMS 14)
  - the adoption agency is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 16)
  - the agency is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 17)
  - the staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 20)
  - the agency has sufficient staff with the right skills/experience (NMS 21)
  - the agency is a fair and competent employer (NMS 22)
  - the agency provides training for staff (NMS 23)
  - case records for children and prospective / approved adopters are comprehensive and accurate (NMS 25)
  - the agency provides access to records as appropriate (NMS 26)
  - the agency's administrative records processes are appropriate (NMS 27)
  - the agency maintains personnel files for members of staff and members of adoption panels (NMS 28)
  - the premises used by the adoption agency are suitable for purpose (NMS 29)
  - the adoption agency is financially viable (NMS 30 voluntary adoption agency only)
  - the adoption agency has robust financial processes (NMS 31)
- Ofsted considers 1, 3, 16, 21, 25 and 27 the key standards to be inspected.**