

# Birmingham City Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman / Vivien Slyfield
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	17/09/2004

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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

Birmingham City Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to those whose lives have been touched by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary work; support to birth parents of children placed for adoption or who have been adopted.

Due to the size of the service, each function has a separate team, managed by at least one team manager. Thus there is a recruitment team, an assessment team, a panel team, a family finding team, a support towards adoption team, a support after adoption team, in addition to a business support team and an audit team.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Three inspectors were involved in the inspection of the service, which was carried out over a two week period. Two of the four adoption panels were observed and the two independent chairs of the panels interviewed. Other key personnel were interviewed and this included the agency decision makers, the cabinet member for children, young people and families, the nominated manager for the service, social workers and team managers from each of the teams in the adoption service and a group of placing social workers. Seven adopters and two birth parents were interviewed. Document reading included case files of adopters and children, policies and procedures, personnel and panel members' files. Surveys were received from 17 adoptive parents and four birth relatives.

The agency is very good at recruiting a diverse range of adoptive families. Their assessment process is thorough and the panel system effective. The agency is constantly monitoring and evaluating their work and developing new and improved ways of delivering the service.

The agency provides good support to adopters, both pre and post adoption order and there are good links with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

The agency provides a variable standard of child permanence reports (CPR) and life story work with children. There is evidence of a good standard of work with birth families in some instances; in others this is of a poorer quality.

The agency is extremely well managed. Birmingham is a large local authority and the adoption service has a functional split. Despite this, all teams see themselves as part of the whole service and are committed to providing high standards. The manager is committed to providing strong leadership and there is good and effective monitoring at all levels of the organisation. Staff are committed to Birmingham and receive good support and training.

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

There have been a number of developments since the last inspection three years ago which have improved the adoption service.

All the policies and procedures have been re-written to comply with the recent change in legislation and there has been good quality training for staff to update their knowledge.

The assessment team now only undertakes assessments of prospective adopters, which has facilitated the development of the preparation training and allows for concentrating on improving the assessment process.

There are now two adoption support teams, one of which provides support post adoption order, the other pre order. Again, this has allowed for the development of the services offered, particularly pre adoption order. There are good and effective links with CAMHS to provide a variety of support and training for adoptive families.

The functional split has had time to 'bed down' and good systems have been developed to ensure there is a whole service approach within each team. There are now two independent adoption panel chairs who provide a consistent, knowledgeable and skilled service.

### **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 agency has a good, effective and varied recruitment strategy in place. There are clear systems for knowing the types of children for whom families are required and processes for sharing information with enquirers and following up expressions of interest. Good monitoring systems are in place for every stage of this process. The recruitment team operates a duty system, there are clear administrative procedures to deal with telephone, email or personal enquirers, there are regular information meetings held at various times and in different locations, good written information and a DVD. The recruitment team are enthusiastic and members have a variety of

skills and experience. The initial screening visit highlights issues which may need early exploration. Children are placed in families which meet their cultural and religious needs and with their siblings where this is assessed as appropriate.

The agency has a thorough and formal assessment and preparation process. Adopters commented about the usefulness of the preparation training in helping them care for their children. The course is run professionally, takes place at different times to suit the needs of applicants and the venue is pleasant and convenient. The agency is in the process of piloting a new assessment work book which will continue after the assessment has been completed and address further training issues.

The assessments seen were thorough, analytical, clearly linked to competencies and cover issues of diversity very well. The needs of birth children are also addressed through workbooks and there are plans to run a group for younger birth children. Some chronologies are written in years only, rather than months and years. Some delays in the process have been identified but improved staffing levels could potentially address this.

Once approved, adopters are sent a pack of information which details the matching process and gives other useful information. Children for whom adoption is the plan and approved adopters are detailed on the Central Resource Exchange (CRE) held by Birmingham and this is one mechanism used for identifying appropriate matches. Once a match has been identified, there is a formal and thorough matching meeting held before the possible match is placed before the adoption panel. Adopters said they received information about the children and had the opportunity to meet foster carers and the medical adviser if this was required. Life appreciation days do not take place on a regular basis, but social workers in the family finding team try to ensure that adopters obtain the information in other ways.

There is a clear procedure for referral of adopters and children to the National Adoption Register but some adopters felt this had not been completed in a timely way.

The adoption panel is extremely well organised and well managed. Birmingham has 4 adoption panels which are chaired by two independent panel chairs, who have a wealth of knowledge, understanding, skill and expertise in the field of adoption. There are appropriate policies and procedures in place, the panels are properly constituted, they operate in a professional manner and there is good access to training. There are systems in place to ensure a consistent approach is maintained throughout all the panels. Adopters are invited to attend panel for their approval to be considered and the majority were complimentary about the welcome they received. The panel has good monitoring systems in place to feedback concerns to the agency. These include quarterly forums with the agency decision makers, the adoption manager and the panel advisers and notices of concern or appreciation about particular cases. The minutes are thorough and give a good account of the meeting. The decision is made in a considered and timely manner and there is a system to ensure that notifications to all the relevant parties are sent out within the timescales.

The agency has robust recruitment and selection procedures in place and all staff in the adoption service are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced.

The agency has appropriate child protection procedures which relate to children placed for adoption.

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

The provision is good.

The agency provides good and varied support to adopters both before and after the adoption order is made. There are two teams which provide this support, one being the support towards adoption team and the other being the support after adoption team. They are based in the same building and work closely together to ensure support is not duplicated and that it is relevant and accessible.

The support includes both social and training events. There is a regular "stay and play" session for adopters with pre-school children, based centrally, which enables adoptive families to share some social time and for their children to meet and interact with other adoptive children. There are coffee mornings, supper and social events, a Christmas and summer fun event and a rolling programme of training. Adopters commented that this is of a high quality and the 'support since placement has been the best part'. The training and development worker works with the assessment team to ensure that relevant training is provided on an on-going basis at appropriate times. The first year's membership to Adoption UK is also funded by Birmingham, as is a subscription to Pink Parenting if requested.

There is a good working relationship with the CAMHS and a partnership agreement is in place for the provision of training, consultation and direct work with families. This is a quick, effective and responsive service which is valued by the social work staff.

Adopters were clear about the support available and felt confident that it would be provided when required. A family who had been in receipt of post adoption support commented that the support they received had been appropriate and they had a swift response: 'they couldn't have been more helpful'. Other files seen indicated that a variety of techniques and services are used to provide a prompt and appropriate response. Written adoption support plans however, vary in quality and consistency. This has been recognised by the agency and an independent worker commissioned to address a specific shortfall.

There is access to medical and legal advice, which social workers said was helpful, and protocols in place for this.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has systems in place to work with birth families and involve them in the plans for their children but the effectiveness of these systems is variable. Some child permanence reports (CPR) give good evidence that birth parents have been involved and contributed their wishes and feelings, whilst others give no such indication. Surveys from birth parents give a varied response, some indicating that they felt supported, whilst others commented that they had no support or information. Two birth mothers were interviewed as part of the inspection and both said they felt supported and involved in plans and reviews for their children and made contributions to the memory box. One social worker was described as 'a ray of sunshine' and her contribution was said to have made an enormous difference and included support to the extended birth family. CPRs are of a variable quality and do not always give due consideration to the needs of each sibling. Training and support has been given to staff to try to improve the quality of this record.

The agency has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency to offer independent support and counselling to birth families. Families are referred once the child has an adoption plan recommended by the adoption panel. Once adoption has been identified as the plan at the review stage, the referral does not always take place in a timely manner.

Social workers interviewed demonstrated a good awareness of the importance of life story work but there was little evidence that this is completed in a timely way or of a good quality. Life story books seen were basic, other professionals indicated that there was a delay in providing life story books and minutes of some disruption meetings made comment on the lack of life story work. However, some adopters said they had received life story books of a good quality and some had memory boxes. Adopters seen also demonstrated a commitment to using information about the birth family in a positive way for example, by having photographs of siblings on display and by having memory boxes accessible. All adopters spoken with had a clear understanding about why the child's heritage is important and the importance of contact.

There is a letterbox system in place and written guidance on how the system works and what to write. Birth parents indicated that they are clear about the exchanges and aware that they can ask for help. Support is also given to direct contacts. The support after adoption team can provide support to birth families once an adoption order is made and they work with the assessment team to ensure the information they gather feeds back into the assessment process.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Birmingham's adoption service is extremely well managed.

The statement of purpose has recently been reviewed and approved and is readily available to staff and service users. The agency has a user friendly children's guide to adoption and there is access to a translation service for any documents which need to be available in other formats.

There is clear written information for prospective adopters, which includes the eligibility criteria and a useful DVD has been produced to provide further, meaningful information. There is a book detailing profiles of some of the children who need adoptive families and adopters are available to speak to enquirers at the information meetings. The skills of the promotions staff are used to ensure that all materials are well presented.

The manager is very skilled, knowledgeable, experienced and committed to the adoption service and is spoken of very highly by all the staff. She provides strong and effective leadership and is a good role model. Other managers in the service demonstrate similar enthusiasm and commitment. The functional split of the adoption service could be problematic. However, it is very clear that this works extremely effectively due to good communication and planning. This includes joint team training, an adoption service event, secondments to other teams, team lunches to discuss issues and share information and handover visits. This ensures a strong and effective adoption service.

There is good monitoring at all levels. The lead Councillor demonstrates a sound knowledge of the issues for the service and receives regular information including written reports. There is regular reporting of performance management information to all levels of management, staff supervision, an audit team and team meetings.

Staff interviewed said they received regular and effective supervision and had performance development reviews. There is a high emphasis placed on training, which staff value, and this includes two days a year for their own personal development. The training is of a high quality and relevant to the work of the agency. Staff are enthusiastic about the training and keen to use it to improve their practice.

The level of administrative support is sufficient and said to be very good in the adoption service and this includes equipment. Likewise, once vacancies are filled, there is sufficient staff within the adoption teams to undertake the work in a timely and effective manner. There are a number of independent social workers who are used when required and these are well managed by the adoption service, receiving regular supervision and training to ensure they work at the standard expected by Birmingham.

There is a good standard of record keeping. Adopters' files are well organised and information is accessible. There is evidence that case decisions discussed in supervision are maintained on the file and there is a regular file audit system. The organisation of children's adoption files has been given a lot of thought and consideration to ensure they meet the legislative requirements and provide information for adult adoptees in an easily accessible manner. This is work in progress. The files on panel members and staff are very well organised and contain all the required information.

The service has a number of premises, which provide alternative venues if required. File storage is good and appropriate security measures are in place at all sites.

## 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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
7	ensure that the wishes and feelings of birth parents are recorded on all Child Permanence Reports (CPR) or a reason given why this is not done (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 17(1)(d).	18/01/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that chronologies are consistent in detailing the month as well as the year (National Minimum Standard 4)
- develop systems to inform adopters of their referral to the National Adoption Register (National Minimum Standard 5)
- develop adoption support plans to ensure they are of a consistently high quality (National Minimum Standard 33)
- ensure CPRs address the different needs of siblings appropriately and consistently (National Minimum Standard 7)
- consider referring birth parents to the independent support service at an earlier stage (National Minimum Standard 7)
- continue to develop ways of improving the standard of life story work so that all children have this of a consistently good quality and in a timely manner (National

Minimum Standard 8).