

# Stoke on Trent Adoption Service

Inspection report for LA Adoption Agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC059591
<b>Inspection date</b>	09/07/2008
<b>Inspector</b>	Vivien Slyfield / Rosemary Chapman
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Key

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	30/06/2006

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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

Children's Services in Stoke-on-Trent are under the management of the Service Manager for Family Placements with a Principal Manager and a Practice Manager having direct line management of the adoption team. Planning for children takes place in the child care area teams. The agency undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These duties include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; the matching, introduction and placement of children with adopters; the support of adoption placements; post adoption support to adopters and their children. Independent support to birth parents of children placed for adoption is provided through a service level agreement with After Adoption. The service also undertakes assessments of applicants who wish to adopt from overseas and step parent adoptions.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This was an announced inspection during which all the key standards were considered. The inspection was undertaken by two inspectors over four days during which adopters and two birth families were seen, staff, managers, a councillor and the panel chair were interviewed. A selection of records were seen of adopters, children, adoption support assessments, adopters who had withdrawn or been counselled out, panel member's files and personnel files. Panel was observed on an additional day. Surveys were received from three birth families and from seven adopters.

The new management teams have established a clear direction for children's services and changes are becoming evident within the adoption service. The current systems for undertaking appropriate references and providing information for all prospective adopters are not consistent and have led to some delays. Information required by regulation is not consistently recorded on adopters and children's files. There are now more staff, including managers, in place to address the needs of the service. Adoption support is not yet fully staffed within the service, which impacts on the range and flexibility of the support available. The use of psychologists within the adoption service and by children's social workers is effective and assists in the providing and maintaining effective placements for children. There is progress in a number of areas throughout the service.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

There are improvements in most areas of the adoption service. Of the 11 previous requirements only two remain outstanding and of the 11 recommendations two are not met. The structures, management and systems for monitoring are more robust giving greater confidence in effectiveness of assessment of adopters and of the placement of children.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

Stoke-on-Trent City Council has a strategy for the recruitment of adopters to meet the needs of their children with a plan for adoption. The overall drive of recruitment has been for foster carers. There is an expectation that this will change. The recruitment is not currently directly linked to the needs of the children waiting but placement outside the authority is agreed on the basis of the child's needs. There is confusion between the recruitment policy and its implementation in relation to the need for a child to have their own bedroom as opposed to appropriate space for an adopted child.

There are bi-monthly information evenings, which provide information for prospective adopters. These are followed by a recently changed preparation course. The application is not consistently taken prior to the preparation course, although staff were very clear that the course is part of the assessment process. Adopters found the group useful and informative. Those who had been to the previous course and the new one were positive about the changes. An adopter said it was a 'Steep learning curve but (we) feel the preparation has been very thorough'. Another adopter said it was 'very substantial and really well led.' The preparation courses are recorded and there is a three-way meeting between prospective adopters, their assessing social worker and one of the course leaders, which is noted as good practice.

Assessments are undertaken within the timescales, unless there are valid reasons for delay. Checks are now undertaken routinely with employers, schools, previous partners, a family member, the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and with police authorities if applicants have lived abroad. The latter is part of procedures but failed to take place until the day of panel in one of the cases sampled, which caused unnecessary delay. There is a health and safety check undertaken, but it does not include guns, weapons or poisonous plants. Full medicals are undertaken on applicants, which can be sought at an early stage if required. Effective use is made of the psychologists based with the team to consult about specific applicants. The

quality of assessments is adequate. Use is made of competencies and analysis is evident in reports. Diversity does not consistently include gender, sexuality and religion. Adopters valued the approach taken by their assessing social worker, one commented their worker was 'fantastic, very professional'. Second opinion visits are still in place and undertaken by one of the managers, which continues to be good practice.

Panel is appropriately constituted and its operation is supported by appropriate policies and procedures. The lack of a councillor, adopter or adoptee panel members is being addressed. The panel operates effectively with an experienced and efficient chair, whose style enables contributions from both members and attendees. Adopters felt that although attending the panel is a 'daunting' experience, panel members are welcoming and asked appropriate questions. Social workers have a slightly more varied view of the panel. Placing social workers again found it daunting but also very helpful and constructive. Their experience of attending is seen as encouraging and supportive. The adoption team see panel as sometimes revisiting the approval of adopters at the time a match is being considered.

The panel minutes are well structured and convey a clear understanding of the matters considered. The recording of conflicts of interest does not clearly state the conflict nor the action taken in relation to the issue.

The agency decision is taken seriously and is child focused. A clear process is in place for the decision maker to obtain all the relevant information. This process has recently been changed to allow the decision maker sight of the draft panel minutes. The decision is made within seven days of the panel. There are, however, four examples in the data seen of the child being introduced to their adopters after the panel recommendation but before the agency decision was made. The staff and documents used by the service refer to the decision being 'ratified'. This allows confusion about when the decision is made. The letters of notification to the birth parents and prospective adopters about the match are not present on any of the files seen. They are present on adopter's files notifying them of decisions about approval. In practice there is a procedure for the decision maker to consult with a senior manager if they disagree with the panel's recommendation and for deputising in the absence of the decision maker. This practice is not yet formalised in written procedure.

The matching process is well supported by a matrix that draws together the needs of the child and the abilities of the adopters. All the adopters contacted said they had full information about their children to enable them to make informed decisions. One adopter said 'we were given lots of information and any outstanding questions were answered'. Adopters meet with the medical adviser and this meeting is fully minuted. An adopter commented that they found the medical information 'very in depth'. Social workers consult with the psychologists about matching and make particular use of this service when matching siblings. Life appreciation days are not part of the matching process in Stoke, but prospective adopters do meet foster carers, nursery and school staff.

All the staff and the nominated manager have up to date CRB checks and are appropriately qualified and experienced. They have access to a range of relevant training and are suitable to work with children and families.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

Adopters approved by Stoke-on-Trent City Council are usually supported by their assessing worker. Adopters are confident that they will receive support in the future should their needs change or those of their children. One adopter commented that the support they had received from the service was influential in them applying to Stoke-on-Trent City Council for approval for a second child, they said 'their support was excellent'. Adoption support assessments are on files but not followed by adoption support plans to implement the services needed. There are bi-monthly support groups for adopters and post approval training, including training on attachment, which is provided by the psychologists linked to the service. The service is still developing a wider range of adoption support. Currently the service is reactive, there is no sense of a strategic or systematic support service. In part this is due to the lack of staff for adoption support. There are two assistant social workers in post who are committed and enthusiastic. There are two social work vacancies, which focus on adoption support. Managers were short-listing for these posts at the time of the inspection.

Adopters spoken to are clear about the significance of each child's heritage and of the need to provide safe keeping for memorabilia passed on by birth families and foster carers.

The service undertakes reviews of any disruptions that take place. Managers look at the information from these for lessons to be learned, which can inform practice with the aim of preventing disruption. There was one disruption in the preceding 12 months.

The service makes use of a range of specialist advisers. The medical adviser is accessible to both social workers and adopters, who value her expertise. Similarly the legal advice available is seen as accessible and useful by staff. Both these advisers make a full contribution to the adoption panel. The psychologists available to the service have a close and effective role in working with staff and with adopters. The contribution from the psychologists is valued and used effectively throughout the adoption process.

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

The provision is satisfactory.

The service provided for birth families is variable. Some birth parents said they were not aware of support available and had not been consulted about adoption plans for their children. There are also examples of close work with birth parents including

counselling, discussion and the recording of their views and wishes on the Child's Permanence Report (CPR). Not all CPRs reflected the views and wishes of birth parents. There is a policy relating to work with birth parents and to their referral to After Adoption, with whom there is a service level agreement. Not all referrals to After Adoption were made early in the planning process. One child's social worker spoke positively about the effect of early referral to After Adoption, which had allowed the birth parent to engage more with the plans and to give her views more easily. The process of referral is initiated by the child's social worker and is not dependent on self-referral by the birth parent, which is more effective in providing support.

Social workers have an understanding of the life-long implications of adoption. There is structural recognition of this in the development of the role of social work assistants to undertake life story work with children. This includes life story books. Progress on life story books and the preparation of children for adoption is routinely checked at the adoption panel. Advice and support is available for social workers in writing the later in life letters. Examples of both the letters and the books are on the files seen.

A post box system for indirect contact is in place. There is now specific social work assistant time allotted to this task. There are 110 active files some of which involve multiple exchanges. The system has reminders for exchanges, copies all the exchanges and offers help with writing the letters if needed. There is currently no specific administrative support for the system.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The statement of purpose is compliant and has been approved by the council. There is a very much improved children's guide, which has recently been finalised. It is fully compliant and is an accessible tool for direct work with children. If needed it is available in languages other than English. The information for prospective adopters is well presented and easy to use. It does not include information about 'children who need families locally' (National Minimum Standards 3.6). There is information on the web page that conveys this information in statistical data. Feedback from some foster carers who are prospective adopters indicated that they do not consistently receive the information provided for prospective adopters.

The nominated manager for the service has the knowledge, skills and experience for the role. There have been significant changes in the senior management team for Stoke-On-Trent City Council and restructuring took place earlier this year. The

restructuring has established Children In Care teams and Children In Need teams. Staff talked positively about these changes, identifying the effective refocusing of their roles. They state that allowing them to focus on specific aspects of child care allows them to develop greater understanding, expertise and confidence. The role of practice managers is identified by staff as assisting this increase in knowledge and confidence. The creation of a number of social work assistant posts within the child care teams is directly related to the ability to undertake life story work, which helps children make sense of where they are and prepares them for the future. Most staff felt communication has improved, though some identified remaining weaknesses. Staff said things were beginning to change, but were still at an early stage of having an effect. In relation to senior management one said 'we feel we now have a firm hand on the wheel'.

All social work staff receive regular monthly supervision. They value this and find it useful. Administrative staff did not have the same experience and some had not received supervision since the end of last year. Staff said work is prioritised and managed. A range of training is available internally. The programme includes more courses linked to adoption and permanence than at the last inspection. The Personal Development Reviews are used by the authority's trainers to identify areas where training is needed and this is reflected in the training programme. Refresher child protection training is now mandatory for all staff. External specialist training has also been provided for the adoption team with courses including assessment of adopters and preparation training.

The adoption service has staff with a good range of skills, experience and knowledge. There have been staffing difficulties over the past two years but the adoption team is near to being fully staffed, with only two adoption support social work vacancies currently. Adopters spoke of their social workers as 'professional', 'thorough' and 'well-organised'. Social workers valued the response from individual administrative staff finding them a 'real treasure', but said the reliance on agency staff diminishes the level of support available.

The majority of staff had a positive view of Stoke-on-Trent City Council as an employer. More than one had remained loyal to Stoke-on-Trent City Council for over 20 years. Some administrative staff found the authority 'rewarding and welcoming'. One of the social workers said, 'I've never met and worked with a nicer bunch of people'. There is an acknowledgment that there has been a great deal of change, some of which staff have found difficult and some feel isolated. The council members have quarterly reports about the service and a full annual report, which keeps them updated about the service and its developments.

The case records seen are of varying quality. The adoption records for the children are not compliant with regulations. Some did not have copies of the court orders and none of them had the letters of notification to the birth parents of the agency's decision about suitability for adoption or matching. The CPRs are variable. One example had full information, the views and wishes of birth parents and photographs. Others did not include parental views or full information about siblings. The adopters files held most of the required information but did not have letters of

notification about matching. The record of complaints is compliant with regulation 17 (LAA Regs 2003) and information about allegations is collated recorded. There is a system for file audit in place.

Personnel files are compliant with regulation but need to ensure consistency in recording telephone verification of both references taken at appointment of new staff. The panel members' files are not in the same condition and lack much of the information specified in schedules 3 and 4 (LAA Regs 2003).

The premises are accessible and provide a range of rooms suitable for the service. However, the files are not stored in lockable rooms. There is a disaster recovery plan in place that recognises the significance and sensitivity of the records held by the adoption service.

## 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
13	ensure that all agency decisions about proposed matches must be made prior to the introduction of the child to the prospective adopters. The agency must place on the child's case record the notification of the agency's decision (AA Regulations 2005 Reg 33)	29/08/2008
25	must set up a case record in respect of the child and include all the documents specified in regulation 12, including the notification of the agency's decision (AA Regs 2005 12)	29/09/2008
28	must ensure that all those working for the purposes of the adoption service are suitable having undertaken and recorded the checks specified in Schedules 3 and 4 of LAA Regs (LAA Regs 2003)	29/09/2008

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that applications are taken before the preparation course (National Minimum Standard 4)
- ensure all appropriate checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken

about prospective adopters in a timely way to prevent delay and a comprehensive health and safety check is in place (National Minimum Standard 4)

- develop a clear strategy for working with and supporting adopters (National Minimum Standard 6)
- ensure birth parents have consistent access to a support worker independent of the child's social worker (National Minimum Standard 7)
- ensure that all applicants to become prospective adopters, including foster carers, are given information about the preparation and support services available to adopters (National Minimum Standard 3)
- ensure records are retained in lockable rooms (National Minimum Standard 29)