

# East Sussex County Council Adoption Service

Inspection report for local authority adoption agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC050780
<b>Inspection date</b>	24/02/2012
<b>Inspector</b>	Mike Stapley
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Social Care Inspection

---

<b>Setting address</b>	East Sussex County Council, St Marks House. 14 Upperton Road, EASTBOURNE, BN21 1EP
<b>Telephone number</b>	01323 747 154
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	East Sussex County Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Carole Sykes
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Liz Rugg
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	17/11/2008

---

© Crown copyright 2012

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: [www.tso.co.uk/bookshop](http://www.tso.co.uk/bookshop)

## 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

East Sussex County Council's adoption service undertakes all statutory responsibilities associated with current legislation and regulations. These include: the recruitment, preparation and assessment of domestic adopters; family finding and the matching and placement of children; support to placements both pre and post adoption order; post adoption support to adult adoptees and others; and support to birth parents whose children will be or have been placed for adoption. Some of the support work to birth parents, adopters and adult adoptees is carried out through contract arrangements with external agencies. Inter-country assessments are usually carried out by a voluntary adoption agency on their behalf.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a full, announced inspection of the service, in which all the relevant national minimum standards were inspected. The service has particular strengths in terms of the quality and availability of specialised adoption support that are available for both children and families alike.

The service also provides an excellent service in preparing families and children for adoption. Although East Sussex is predominantly a white area of the country, children from minority ethnic communities have been successfully matched with families who can best meet their needs. Inter-country adopters are welcomed without prejudice and receive the same high standard of service as domestic adopters. Services to birth family members and adults affected by adoption are also of a very high standard. All adopters, those that have been affected by adoption and young people spoken to during the course of this inspection praised the high quality of the service they received.

Social work and administrative staff are skilled, experienced and passionate about providing an excellent service for children and families. The agency has continued to develop its resources despite the financial restraints within local government. The agency has recently expanded the capacity of the adoption service to improve the efficiency of the family finding and recruitment process and stream lined the recruitment process to ensure adopters are recruited in a timely manner and ensure children are placed without delay. The service is managed by a strong, effective and reflective leadership. Staff within the adoption team are valued and supported, whilst the service continues to strive for further improvement.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

One requirement and five recommendations were made at the last inspection in November 2008; these related to ensuring that the danger of water damage to the archived files is addressed; some documentary deficiencies and ensuring that the agency's health and safety checklist of adopter's households follows guidance from British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). These have now all been addressed, thus improving the quality of the service for all service users.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has developed a comprehensive programme of preparation and training for all adopters to ensure they have the appropriate parenting skills and resilience to meet the challenges of the adoption task. Adopters commented that the 'Adoption preparation training course was extremely useful' and 'provided us with a great deal of information that was thought provoking.' All prospective adopters receive on-going, advice and guidance in safeguarding which ensures they have the knowledge and skills to keep children safe from any sort of harm. All adopters spoken to are aware of what to do if a child discloses possible abuse. The preparation training for adopters includes information on how to keep children safe from inappropriate use of the internet and social networking sites. Excellent communication and high levels of trust with their social workers, help to ensure that adopters would seek advice promptly in the event of any difficulty.

Young People seen and spoken to during the inspection appear to be confident, secure and happy. The agency ensures that the views of children and young people are actively sought in the development of the service through a variety of different methods. The agency piloted a group for adopted teenagers known as 'TAG' which was very successful in ensuring that the views of young people are sought frequently and acted upon whenever possible.

Assessing social workers carry out health and safety checks on proposed adopters' households. The agency has a comprehensive health and safety checklist which is reviewed annually. Adopters confirmed that they had been asked to make safety adaptations to their homes as required and that all pets in the home had been risk assessed. Children and Young People are encouraged to take appropriately managed risks in order to further their confidence and development. The agency are planning to develop a group for adopted children aged 11 – 14 later in the year that will focus on the internet, safety and social networking. Children are invited to attend the agency's adoption panel where appropriate to present their views and are also

invited to give feedback on their experience. In addition the Children in Care Council have presented their views to the local judiciary regarding the court process.

Prospective adopters are actively encouraged to ensure that children's health is promoted by a well balanced diet and healthy lifestyle. The agency's post order support plans carefully document all the information that has been shared with adopters regarding health and what needs are known or anticipated. These plans also make clear the responsibilities of the adoptive parent including parental responsibility pending adoption.

An extensive training programme for staff and adopters is tailored to meet individual needs. Adopters are funded to attend appropriate courses such as those organised by BAAF on social networking. The service is guided by strong, effective and reflective leadership. Staff in this resourceful team are valued and supported, whilst the service continues to strive for further improvement.

Adopters and the agency medical advisor are all sensitive to the children's wishes and feelings about medical and dental issues. The service provides excellent support from the medical advisor, who is a community paediatrician. She speaks to all prospective adopters to advise them about medical conditions and also sees any adopted children who has on-going medical issues. The agency promotes children's emotional and psychological health through a wide range of services. Children and their families may be referred to the local child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) team, which offers a specialist service to adoptive families. The agency works in close partnership with a number of Independent Adoption Support Agencies as well as NORCAP and Adoption UK. In addition the agency offers individually tailored packages including therapy to children and their adoptive families. This support helps to maintain the stability of placement and is valued by adopters.

The operations manager attends meetings at all levels which help to ensure that children do not 'drift' in the care system. Every effort is being made to find a placement that will meet each child's needs. The adoption team work hard to support their colleagues in other teams to ensure that they produce high quality reports and that the needs of the child are kept paramount throughout the process. There is close liaison between the adoption team and all other agencies involved, to provide a 'joined up' approach.

The service is dedicated to ensuring that children and adopters are appropriately matched. The agency uses a matching tool which helps identify the family which meets the needs of the child most closely. This helps to increase the chances that placements will be stable and secure for children. Once matched, children receive information about the proposed adoption household in well-formatted written material. Introductions take place in a carefully planned manner. There are several meetings with adopters and visits to their home. Adopters praised the degree of support they received from their social workers at this sensitive time.

The safeguarding procedures are well understood and make specific reference to children placed for adoption and staff are trained in these procedures on an annual

basis. This promotes a workforce that is safe and suitable to provide a strong adoption service to children and families.

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

The provision is outstanding.

The service achieves excellent standards of support for adopters and adults affected by adoption. Adopters receive good training during and after their preparation period and this is further supplemented by post approval training. This addresses a variety of issues such as promoting attachment, trauma, talking about adoption, E-safety for adults and managing difficult and complex behaviour. Adopters are able to access a variety of support services including a fast track referral system to the local CAMHS team. Consultation is carried out with the carer and strategies provided to deal with any difficulties. This helps the adopters to promote the child's social and emotional development. In addition the CAMHS service offers a monthly consultation service to the adoption team and other social work staff. This consultation service is highly valued by the agency and offers social workers advice on attachment, sibling issues, matching and introductions. In addition the service can offer individual psychotherapy to children and young people in need of post adoption support. In addition to 'in house' training and support, the agency has commissioned a number of adoption support agencies including PAC and Adoption Concerns to work with children and families alike. One independent social worker said that, 'The Adoption Team are extremely good at identifying the support needs of adoptive families and of children who are placed for adoption. They undertake comprehensive adoption support assessments and, where appropriate, endeavour to source therapeutic support for the children and their families.'

Adopters are very well prepared and well supported to help the child develop positive relationships and behaviour while assisting the child to understand and manage their own behaviour. Adopters are highly complimentary about the support they receive. One adopter said 'that they have been very well supported when they ran into difficulties,' while another was full of praise for the agency's rapid and appropriate response. Adopters can receive a setting-up grant to enable them to purchase essential household items. Adopted children and their adopted parents are invited to attend two annual social events organised for adoptive families. There is also a wide range of workshops for adopters to enable them to meet with other adopters and to access a range of services which help support the adoptive placement.

Adopted children's educational progress is very well supported by the service. The council has a corporate parenting team who promote the educational support of looked after children and who will support those children making the transition to being adopted. There is a virtual school which is committed to raising the educational attainment and aspirations of its pupils. Young People interviewed during the course of the inspection said they had all had difficulties at school. They added that the social workers working with them had done a great deal to support them and the school. There are low levels of exclusion from school of adopted children due to the support from the adoption support team and the 'virtual head' will challenge

exclusions were necessary.

The agency ensures during the assessment of the prospective adopters' suitability to adopt, that the home can comfortably accommodate all who live there. Homes are attractive, comfortable and vary in location and style to help meet a range of needs. The agency has clear written policies concerning the safety of the children in adopters' homes and in vehicles used to transport children.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and Young People's wishes and feelings are taken into account throughout the adoption journey and they know how to obtain support and make a complaint. Children are also helped to express their views through a variety of other methods including play therapy and individual one to one work with their social worker. Where appropriate the Adoption Service links with the Children's Disability Service to use a variety of tools to enable children to express their views such as Picture Exchange and the Widget Symbol system. They also use 'switch' which utilises voice recording of, for example, teachers, children, carers and birth parents that are recognised by children and provide an emotional response. There is a service wide commitment to listening to children, and looked after and adopted children have a voice as a result of positive participation and inclusion mechanisms. Children and Young People are encouraged to attend the adoption panel where appropriate and give feedback when using any of the agencies services. Their social workers, foster carers and adopters advocate on their behalf to ensure they receive the services they need, and independent reviewing officers encourage them to express their views and engage in their reviews. At the time of the inspection there was no clear recorded mechanism in place to ensure that views of children and young people are taken into account by the agency in the monitoring and development of the service. However throughout the inspection it was evident that the views of children and young people are sought at all levels although this does need to be formalised. Children are also helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases and what to do if they are unhappy with their care. This is achieved by the provision of excellent child-friendly guides which give them information about how and to whom they can make a complaint about their care. This includes the contact details of the Children's Rights Director at Ofsted. The agency has also commissioned NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) to give a voice to children in care and they also have the facility to work with children and young people on an individual basis. This service is accessed by children who have a plan for adoption.

Social workers produce excellent life story work and later life letters which ensure that children are provided with a clear knowledge and understanding of their background. The agency has also commissioned a very experienced independent social worker to undertake this work to ensure that all life story work is completed within ten working days of the adoption ceremony. Life story books are of a high quality and are used as tools to help children understand their history. Later life letters are also well written and are sufficiently detailed so that the young adult fully

understands their life before adoption, why they could not remain with their birth parents and why they were adopted. There is a clear understanding and commitment by adopters to maintain each child's heritage. Memory boxes are used to collect and store information from a child's birth family and early life. Adopters value this information and ensure it is available and shared with their children.

The service ensures that agreements for the contact arrangements between children and their families are in place and supported by adopters before the adoption order is made. Contact arrangements may be face to face, or via the letter box system. The service will facilitate supervised contact between birth parents and adopted children where necessary. The agency has a specialist contact team which not only provides a very good service but provides continuity which is valued by all parties. An effective letterbox system to facilitate and monitor written communication between children and their birth families is well administered and managed. There are robust systems in place to ensure that effective and comprehensive agreements are administered precisely. These arrangements contribute to the effectiveness of maintaining contact agreements for the benefit of the child's understanding in the future.

The agency is committed to involving birth parents in the plans for their child and maintaining a child's heritage. The child's permanence reports clearly show that birth parents are involved in care planning and their wishes and views are consistently recorded. The child's permanence reports are comprehensive and are of a very high quality. Feedback from birth family members was exceptionally good and the agency is in the process of setting up a group for birth mothers. Adopters demonstrate an empathic attitude towards the birth family and are encouraged to meet with the birth parents and then share information about the family of origin with their adoptive child. Adopters have commented that the preparation training plays a crucial part in helping them understand and accept this important aspect of adoption and adoptive parenting.

The agency has a service level agreement with an adoption support agency to provide support and counselling for birth families whose children have been adopted. There has been a good take up of this service and feedback from birth mothers is that this is a very flexible and good service, based on the needs of the individual and fully independent of the adoption agency.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

## Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

All adopters are treated fairly with respect and enquiries are welcomed without prejudice. The agency welcomes applicants from people from all walks of life and from all racial and cultural backgrounds. One adopter said that she and her female partner received a very positive response and had no issues at all with the assessment and approval process. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff. The agency takes a sensitive approach in counselling and supporting people in making the decision about whether applying to adopt is the right course for them.

The adoption service works extremely hard to ensure that children from minority ethnic backgrounds are placed with families whose culture reflects that of the child. Social workers make use of the local consortium and will also advertise outside the area to seek a suitable family where appropriate. If no exact match is possible, plans are revisited regularly in order to avoid delays and ensure that every child has the opportunity to find a family. The agency actively recruits applicants from a variety of backgrounds to provide high quality placements to enable it to meet a wide range of children's needs. Information packs are sent out promptly to ensure that prospective applicants feel valued and well informed. Clear information about the adoption processes and why they are in place is provided both verbally at information sessions and in writing starting with the initial enquiry and culminating in a preparation for applicants who progress to a formal application.

The agency's preparation of prospective adopters is thorough and of an exceptionally high standard. Preparation courses are offered every two months throughout the year and this ensures that prospective adopters do not have to wait long to attend such a course. Adopters reported that they found the preparation course to be thorough, well planned and organised and that it helped them to gain a better understanding of all aspects of adoption. Adopters commented favourably about the preparation courses. One commented that the training course was 'thought provoking and gave us a great deal to think about,' while another commented that the preparation was 'extremely thorough.' Adopters are asked to give feedback and evaluate the preparation course which helps with the development of future training programmes.

The agency has an effective and appropriately constituted adoption and permanence panel which meets every week to provide a carefully considered service to children and prospective adopters. The panel is drawn from a central list of approved and properly inducted persons, all of whom have received appropriate recruitment checks. Good quality panel papers are sent to panel members at least one week in advance of the panel which enables members to give each case due consideration. All of the adopters spoken to confirmed that they had been very well prepared by their assessing social workers for attending the panel and were able to present their views. Applicants who attend panel are asked to complete a feedback and evaluation

form which is used to improve and develop the panel process.

The panel is very aware of the recent changes to the national minimum standards and the obligation to approve minutes promptly. Panel minutes are of a very high quality and are presented to the agency decision maker in time to make the decision within seven working days of their receipt. Adopters confirm that they receive decisions promptly, both orally and in writing. This helps to reduce anxieties and avoid undue delays in the process. The adoption panel also performs a very useful service in terms of quality assurance of reports and feedback any issues of concern to the team manager. Social workers are also encouraged to feedback their experience of the panel which ensures transparency at all levels.

The agency has a clear Statement of Purpose which sets out what can be expected of the service. It contains contact details for Ofsted to enable service users to report any concerns if they wish to do so. Children's guides to adoption and adoption support are available in formats appropriate to children's ages and needs. The guides contain contact information which enables children to seek independent advocacy and also contact the office of the Children's Rights Director. This helps to ensure that children can access independent support.

The adoption team is well managed by a highly qualified, experienced and skilled manager who is fully committed to ensuring safe, stable and secure placements for children are made and maintained. Staff are suitable to work with children and adoptive families, this being ensured by a robust recruitment and selection procedure. Staff are well supported to carry out their respective roles through regular supervision and appraisal, and there is a high level of peer support.

The agency has an excellent programme of training that encourages the development of professional skills, knowledge and professional competence to ensure that all social workers have the requisite and necessary skills to provide placements for children that are both stable and secure. Social workers from the adoption team provide support and advice to placing social workers and this support is highly valued. Social workers from both the adoption and children's teams view senior managers as very supportive. There are regular meetings at senior management level to ensure that children are placed appropriately and without delay. Social workers, psychologists, the medical and legal advisors and other professionals are appropriately qualified for the work they undertake. All have many years of relevant experience to help them meet children's needs. Approved adopters and social workers identify their training needs regularly and have equal access to an excellent programme of training and development.

Staff confirmed that they are very well supported through in-depth regular supervision from their line manager. Supervision sessions are recorded and team meetings are held regularly to provide peer support as well as additional learning.

There are clear line management structures which provide professional accountability and support for all staff up to departmental leadership level. East Sussex is widely regarded as a good employer and many of the staff have worked for the agency for

many years and this helps to provide a consistent approach throughout the agency.

The service is very well managed and monitored, to ensure positive outcomes for children and other service users. Regular meetings take place throughout the adoption service structure, to ensure that there is a joined-up and timely decision making process regarding children's needs. The service reports every six months to the executive, which provides a high level of scrutiny and monitoring.

The authority has an effective and transparent complaints procedure, outlined in clearly written leaflets. Adopters and birth family members confirmed that they are able to access this service if they wish to do so.

The local authority has effective policies on recording and records management, which reflect the need for data protection and confidentiality. File records seen for both adopters and children are comprehensive, well-ordered and up to date. Records are regularly monitored, and securely and confidentially stored. Confidentiality agreements are made with panel members and any visitors to the service, including inspectors, which helps to ensure that personal information is safeguarded.

The premises are appropriate for the needs of the service and are identifiable and accessible to the public. The information technology systems are secure and there is a good business continuity plan. Adoption records are archived within storage facilities designed to keep the most sensitive data and documents safe and protected from environmental risks.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The authority has an equalities and engagement officer who acts as a consultant to the practice manager to advise on engagement of all minority groups.

The agency strives hard to ensure that due care and attention are given to issues of equality and diversity throughout the whole of its operations. Services are user focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the agency is non-discriminatory and that they are treated with sensitivity and respect. Staff are provided with good support and training in this area. Commitment to these values is woven through every aspect of the service's work.