



# ADOPTING BEST CARE

Inspection of Statutory  
Adoption Services  
in Northern Ireland

SUMMARY





## Foreword



I very much welcome 'Adopting Best Care', the overview report of the Social Services Inspectorate's regional inspection of statutory adoption services. It contains many important recommendations which I believe will make a valuable contribution to the development of our Adoption Services and as such I commend the report to Boards, Trusts and to all who have an interest in adoption matters.

Adoption is primarily a service for children. All children are entitled to grow up in a loving family that can meet their needs throughout childhood and beyond. For most children, this will be the family into which they are born. In any year, however, approximately 2,500 children are looked after by Social Services. For a small but significant number of these children, adoption will provide the best opportunity for them to enjoy a family for life.

Adoption affects many people. Where adoption is the plan for the child, it is essential that birth parents are supported through the process and afterwards in ways that recognise the lifelong implications of adoption for them and the other members of their family. When children need new adoptive families, people who want to adopt should be welcomed. They should know what is expected of adoptive parents and, if they proceed, be given help to prepare themselves for the task ahead. Children and their new adoptive families need to be supported to help them meet any challenges and enable them to grow as a family. When adopted children become adults and want to know about their birth families, they need to be assured that help will be available to support them in their search.

The wider adoption service also includes step parent and family adoptions and the intercountry adoption service for those who wish to adopt from abroad. Family and intercountry adopters are entitled to services that can recognise the particular circumstances of their situation and can respond in knowledgeable and understanding ways.

*Barbora de Brún*

## Réamhrá ón Aire



Cuirim fáilte ó chroí roimh 'Adopting Best Care', tuarascáil fhorléargasach ar iniúchadh réigiúnach na Cigireachta Seirbhísí Sóisialta ar sheirbhísí uchtaithe reachtúla. Tá go leor moltaí tábhachtacha ann a chreidim gur cion tairbhe luachmhar iad d'fhorbairt ár Seirbhísí Uchtaithe agus dá bhrí sin molaim an tuarascáil do na Boird, na hlontaobhais agus dóibh sin ar fad a bhfuil leas acu in ábhair uchtaithe.

Is seirbhís do leanaí go bunúsach é Uchtú. Tá gach leanbh i dteideal fás aníos i dteaghlach grámhar a bhíonn in ann freastal ar a riachtanais le linn a óige agus ina dhiaidh sin. I gcás go leor leanaí, is é sin an teaghlach ina mbeirtear iad. In aon bhliain dá luaitear, bíonn na Seirbhísí Sóisialta ag tabhairt aire do isteach agus amach le 2,500 leanbh. I gcás líon beag, ach fós suntasach, de na leanaí sin, tabharfaidh uchtú an deis is fearr dóibh le taitneamh a bhaint as saol teaghlaigh lena mbeo.

Bíonn tionchar ag uchtú ar go leor daoine. Nuair a phleanáiltear uchtú don leanbh, tá sé thar a bheith riachtanach go dtugtar tacaíocht do na tuismitheoirí breithe tríd an bpróiseas, agus ina dhiaidh, i mbealaí a thugann aitheantas do na himpleachtaí ar feadh an tsaoil a bhaineann le huchtú dóibhsean agus do na daoine eile ina dteaghlach. Nuair a bhíonn gá le teaghlaigh uchtaithe do leanaí, ba chóir go gcuirfí fáilte roimh dhaoine ar mian leo leanbh a uchtú. Ba chóir go mbeadh a fhios acu gach a mbítear ag súil ó thuismitheoirí uchtaithe, má théann siad chun cinn leis, agus ba chóir go dtabharfaí cabhair dóibh iad féin a ullmhú don tasc atá amach rompu. Caithfear tacú le leanaí agus a dteaghlaigh nua uchtaithe chun cabhrú leo an ceann is fearr a fháil ar aon dúshlán a bhíonn rompu agus a chur ar a gcumas fás agus forbairt mar theaghlach. Nuair a fhásann leanaí uchtaithe suas agus go mbíonn siad ag iarraidh eolais faoina dteaghlaigh bhreithe, caithfear a chinntiú dóibh go mbeidh cúnamh ar fáil dóibh chun tacú leo ina gcuardach.

Áirítear ar an tseirbhís níos leithne uchtaithe leatuismitheoirí agus uchtuithe teaghlaigh mar aon leis an tseirbhís uchtaithe idirtíortha dóibh sin ar mian leo uchtú ón iasacht. Tá uchtaitheoirí teaghlaigh agus idirtíortha i dteideal seirbhísí a bhfuil ar a gcumas coinníollacha sonracha a gcúinsí a aithint agus a bhfuil ar a gcumas freagairt i mbealaí eolasacha agus tuisceanacha.

Déanfaidh mo Roinnse, go cinnte, na moltaí atá sa tuarascáil seo a mheas go cúramach. Tugann sé fiordheis chun cur chuigí radacacha i leith fhorbairt na seirbhísí uchtaithe amach anseo a dhéanamh.

*Barbra de Frain*

# Summary

## INTRODUCTION

'Adopting Best Care' is the overview report of a Northern Ireland wide examination of the statutory adoption service in each of the four Health and Social Service Boards and their 11 respective community Trusts. The aims of the inspection were to assess the extent to which adoption services meet statutory requirements and reflect standards of good practice. The inspection fieldwork took place between January and October 2000 and final inspection reports were issued to Boards in October 2001.

Inspectors considered the organisation, structure and management of adoption services and made a detailed examination of professional practice in a sample of the cases of 42 children, 29 birth parents, 46 domestic adopters/prospective adopters, 20 intercountry adopters/prospective adopters, 23 family adopters and 20 adopted adults. They interviewed managers, social workers and a number of people who had used adoption services, including children. A questionnaire was also sent to 636 prospective adopters, adopters and adopted adults asking about their views of Trusts' adoption services. Three hundred and fifty people completed the questionnaire representing a 55% response rate.

'Adopting Best Care' presents the inspection findings and makes recommendations to the Department, Boards and Trusts. These will help to enhance the experience of children, families and all others affected by adoption and will establish a good foundation for a modern adoption service that is fitted to meet the challenges ahead.

### a) THE PROVISION OF ADOPTION SERVICES

#### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust is committed to providing comprehensive adoption services and works to ensure there are coherent local services to meet identified needs.*

#### Key findings and recommendations

- There was a clear focus on achieving permanency for children through adoption by all Boards and Trusts. Although there were differences in the adoption rates for looked after children, overall the number of children who were adopted increased significantly in the year 2000/01. This is commended.
- There was a need for Boards and Trusts to strengthen service planning to support the adoption of children and improve the wider adoption service, such as the services for domestic, intercountry and family adopters and adopted adults. It was difficult, however, for Boards and Trusts to plan for the future in the absence of a regional adoption strategy.

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- In general, Trusts had reviewed and improved some aspects of their service structures. Most, however, had not complied in full with the regulatory requirement to review their Adoption Panel arrangements and the way they operate as adoption agencies.
- Information about activity levels and timescales for the delivery of adoption services needed to be improved as did Boards' and Trusts' monitoring and audit arrangements. The Inspectors recommended that standards should be established to inform all aspects of the adoption service.
- Good partnerships existed with voluntary adoption agencies and user groups but there was scope to improve services by increasing and enhancing partnership arrangements with voluntary agencies and user groups. There should be greater opportunities for them to contribute to service planning and delivery.

The Inspectors made a number of recommendations to address the above and improve the provision of adoption services. They recommended that the Department should:

- develop a regional strategy for adoption services;
- introduce standards for all adoption services; and
- establish an adoption rate for looked after children to be achieved over a projected period.

Boards and Trusts need to take actions in the areas of:

- business planning, audit and monitoring;
- reviewing arrangements for adoption services;
- working with voluntary agencies and user representatives to plan and deliver services; and
- making use of the findings of the survey of people who had used adoption services to help identify where changes are needed.

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## b) THE ORGANISATION AND MANAGEMENT OF SERVICES

### STANDARD Key findings and recommendations

*The Trust's organisational and management structures promote efficient and effective adoption services.*

Inspectors considered the way services were organised and found that there were better standards of adoption practice when:

- Looked After Children's (LAC) teams had been established which separated LAC responsibilities from family support and child protection duties;
- independent chairpersons had been appointed to the LAC review system;
- additional permanency planning mechanisms had been created by Trusts;
- adoption services had been amalgamated into family placement teams for the purpose of progressing concurrent planning for children;
- birth parents were offered counselling by a worker who was independent of the child's social worker;
- social workers in step parent and family adoptions were experienced adoption workers;
- intercountry adoption was centrally co-ordinated and delivered by a senior practitioner with special expertise in this area; and
- services for adopted adults and birth relatives were centralised in one Trust.

- There was a need for a radical reorganisation of services to improve the handling of initial enquiries, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters. There was also a need for a regional system to maintain information on children needing adoptive families and approved adopters who are awaiting an adoptive placement.
- Management structures in general were appropriate and responsibilities suitably apportioned. In some situations the range of responsibilities carried by first line and middle managers diluted adoption expertise and this adversely affected standards of professional practice in adoption.

'Adopting Best Care' contains recommendations to improve the organisation and management of services and these include:

- setting up regional initiatives to maintain information on children needing adoption and prospective adopters and keep a public focus on the adoption needs of children;

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- review by Boards and Trusts of the way services are structured and their management arrangements; and
- considering additional ways of improving permanency planning for children.

## c) STAFFING

### STANDARD

*Staff undertaking work are appropriately qualified and have sufficient knowledge and experience to deliver the range of adoption services provided by the Board/Trust in a competent manner.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- All adoption services staff are qualified social workers. The majority of adoption services managers had good expertise in adoption but this was not always the case in looked after children's services, where most social workers had relatively recent experience of permanency and adoption. It was of concern to note that only 1 senior practitioner post had been established in this complex area of work.
- Most Trusts had arranged training in permanency planning. In some, a high proportion of adoption workers had completed post-qualifying awards and this was commended. The inspection highlighted, however, a significant range of training needs that should be addressed to meet the changing needs of adoption and equip staff for the complexities of adoption work.
- Inspectors saw some good examples of new service developments, but the staffing resource implications of progressing permanency for children had not always been recognised by senior management. In general, adoption practice was of a higher standard in the better resourced teams. There had been a significant increase in the workloads of members of Adoption Panels, which had not been balanced by an equivalent reduction in other responsibilities.
- Social workers reported that they received regular supervision. Team leaders' oversight of work was evidenced to varying degrees and in some situations there was a lack of management oversight in progressing the decisions of LAC reviews. In one Board, high profile children's cases had evidence of good team leader involvement and this was commended.

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Key recommendations to the Department, Board and Trusts include the need to:

- make sure that the forthcoming reform of professional social work training and post qualifying education provide for the development of advanced competence in adoption;
- establish senior practitioner posts to assist permanency planning for children;
- identify development and training needs to inform the commissioning of training through the Personal Social Services (PSS) training strategy;
- address a wide range of training needs identified by the Inspectors; and
- review staffing resources allocated to promoting permanency for children and adoption.

## d) PUBLICITY AND INFORMATION

### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust publicises the full range of its adoption services and how to access them. It ensures that information about complementary services and those provided by other agencies is also available.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- There were positive publicity initiatives by some Trusts that had led to the successful recruitment of adoptive families.
- In general, written information for adoption services users was helpful and in a number of cases, attractively presented. The Inspectors, however, found:
  - a lack of suitable written information about adoption for children, birth parents and family adopters;
  - the need for prospective adopters to be given more positive messages about the children available for adoption and shown more contemporary images of adoption and adoptive applicants;
  - better information was needed about other agencies and sources of help for service users;
  - service users were, in general, not given information about Trusts' representations and complaints procedures.

Key recommendations made by the Inspectors included:

- the commissioning by the Department of a range of standardised information for service users;
- identifying and planning to address the regional publicity and recruitment needs of adoption services to complement local initiatives.

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- establishing systems to identify the types of families required by children who need to be adopted.

## e) CHILDREN IDENTIFIED FOR ADOPTION AND THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PLACED FOR ADOPTION

### STANDARD

*The child's welfare is the paramount consideration. Work with children is based on a comprehensive assessment of their needs. The assessment is supported by care plans that are reviewed in accordance with the requirements of the Children Order or a post adoption placement plan.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- When the Inspectors considered the children who were referred to the Adoption Panel, freed for adoption or adopted during the period covered by the inspection they discovered that:
  - very young children as well as older children are available for adoption, and
  - fostering can be a route to adoption, if foster carers can live with some uncertainty.
- Each Trust had established a permanency policy. There was evidence of this beginning to have a good impact on care planning for children. However, some children had been left in harmful family situations for too long before Trusts took action to remove them.
- There was a need to strengthen the assessment of children through better social work expertise and more access to and use of multidisciplinary resources. There was evidence of timely and active planning for a number of children and Inspectors saw examples of successful concurrent planning which provided stability for children when their future was uncertain.
- Most children had a care plan and LAC reviews had been convened within or just outside the appropriate timescales. The standard of the review documentation and care planning ranged from poor to excellent.
- In a significant number of cases, adoption could have been considered sooner for children and in other situations adoptions were not progressed quickly enough by social workers. Legal processes and the courts were responsible for some delays in children being adopted, although the Inspectors commended recent initiatives that were aimed at reducing delays in the legal processes.
- Good work had been undertaken with children to prepare them for adoption, but some case files did not show that this had been done. A significant number of children had been adopted by their foster carers, although some foster carers felt they had been placed under undue pressure to adopt their foster children.

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- Greater expertise was needed in determining appropriate contact arrangements between children and birth families and in developing post placement and post adoption support arrangements.
- When they interviewed children, the Inspectors found that children wanted to be adopted and had been worried about not having security in their lives before adoption became their care plan.

'Adopting Best Care' contains a number of key recommendations to improve adoption services for children. Amongst these are the need to:

- let people know that very young children are available for adoption and provide opportunities for them to hear about the positive experiences of those who have adopted;
- review children in family support programmes. When children are looked after, establish targets for parents to achieve before they are returned home;
- ensure that care plans for children include targets and timescales for achieving the plan. Underpin concurrent planning for children with clear statements of purpose and intensive support for carers;
- 'fast track' access by looked after children, adopted children and their families to child and adult psychiatry and psychology services;
- develop senior practitioner expertise in assessing children to create a regional consultancy resource;
- safeguard children against undue delay in progressing their adoption;
- make sure that the life story needs of children are met and they are properly prepared for adoption;
- provide foster carers with training to help children more to adoptive families. Make sure that children do not stay in foster placements too long if these are not meeting their long term needs. Don't place foster families under pressure to adopt;
- develop expertise in determining contact issues between children and birth parents during and after adoption proceedings;

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- review children who are freed for adoption; address their post placement and post adoption support needs, including their need for written information;
- in the event of an adoption placement disruption, convene an independent panel to review the circumstances; and
- be conscious of the thoughts, hopes and fears of children about their future.

The report also contains important recommendations to the Department to:

- develop a common framework for assessing children;
- commission research into life outcomes for children who are adopted; and
- introduce new legislation to suit the needs of a modern adoption service.

And to the Northern Ireland Guardian ad Litem Agency (NIGALA) to:

- establish guidance on permanency considerations in care and adoption proceedings;

And to the Children Order Advisory Committee to:

- consider issuing guidance to enable care and adoption proceedings to be consolidated in care order applications when, from the outset, adoption is the care plan.

## f) BIRTH PARENTS

### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust provides, or otherwise ensures, the necessary services to work in partnership with birth parents.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- Inspectors found that there was a need to improve the range of family assessment facilities available to Trusts. There was also a need to strengthen expertise in assessing parenting capacity and provide for a multi-disciplinary approach to the assessment.
- There were examples of good practice in the support of birth parents whose children were being adopted. In some cases, however, there was a lack of clarity about the role of the counselling support worker.

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- The adoption placement of some newborn babies had been progressed in a timely manner but this was not always the case, despite the fact that mothers had not wavered in their decision to place their children for adoption.
- Birth parents of looked after children expressed frustration to the Inspectors at the length of time it took for their children to be adopted and in some cases, the lack of attention given to them when their child had been adopted.
- Inspectors noted the very high number of contested Freeing applications where the courts found in favour of the Trust.

The report identifies key recommendations to improve services for birth parents. These include:

- reviewing the adequacy of family assessment arrangements;
- setting clear objectives for work with birth parents;
- ensuring that experienced adoption workers support birth parents; and
- the need for the Department to consider establishing a pilot project to provide support and advocacy services to help birth families in adoption proceedings.

## g) ENQUIRERS, PROSPECTIVE ADOPTERS AND ADOPTERS

### STANDARD Key findings and recommendations

*The Trust has effective arrangements to recruit adoptive parents and to advise, assess, counsel and support those who become prospective adopters or adopters and those who do not.*

#### *Domestic Adopters*

- In situations where there were no reasons for delay, inspectors found that the timescales between adoptive applicants returning an application form and their referral to the Adoption Panel, ranged from 1 year to 6 years. It is not acceptable that people should wait 2 years or more before they know the outcome of their application to adopt. Foster carer adopters fared better, although some of their homestudy assessments took an unnecessary length of time.
- Some Trusts provided applicants with pre assessment information and preparation groups and this was commended. The quality of assessments of prospective adopters varied. Some reflected a good standard of practice but most tended to be descriptive with a lack of exploration of important issues.

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- Reviews of approved adopters awaiting the placement of a child did not in general adhere to agreed timescales and in some cases did not happen. There were people on the waiting lists who had spent several years waiting for a 'straightforward' placement of a newborn child.
- Inspectors found increasing use of post adoption allowances to support adopters of looked after children. However, in some cases the amount paid appeared to leave families on the brink of financial hardship.
- Some adopters stated that they would have liked to have seen their homestudy reports and attended the Adoption Panel. The main problems cited by prospective adopters/adopters who were interviewed or who completed the questionnaire were the delays they experienced, the lack of regular updated information about the status of their application and the lack of contact by Trusts after their approval.

### *Intercountry adopters*

- Waiting times for assessment ranged from 3 months to over 2 years. The standard of practice in one Board was good. In others it was less well developed and there was a lack of familiarity with intercountry adoption procedures. Homestudy assessments in general followed the pattern of domestic assessments and did not always deal well with the additional issues faced by intercountry adopters.
- Intercountry adopters who were interviewed or who responded to the questionnaire were mainly concerned about fees charged by Trusts, the delays they experienced and in some cases, the 'negative' attitudes of some staff and their lack of knowledge about intercountry adoption.

### *Step parent/family adoptions*

- The Inspectors found this to be a complex area of adoption. Reports for the court were usually completed on time. There were some good assessments but in others there was no reference to important family events which would have had a bearing on the adoption, nor was there a consideration of options other than adoption open to the family. There was a lack of suitable materials for children in family adoptions. In general, however, users reported positive experience of social services' involvement.

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The Inspectors identified the need for radical change in the ways enquiries are received and prospective adopters and adopters are prepared and supported at each stage of the process. They made a number of recommendations, which included the need to:

- handle enquiries and adoption waiting lists in a more focused way and agree acceptable timescales for all parts of the adoption application and approval process;
- develop models of preparation and assessment to address the education/awareness needs of domestic and intercountry adopters;
- share the homestudy report with applicants and enable them, if they wish, to attend the Adoption Panel;
- review approved adopters within agreed timescales and maintain the interest of those who wait;
- consider entitlement to adoption allowances in respect of each looked after child who is adopted;
- adhere to best practice standards and fulfil obligations in respect of intercountry adopters; and
- issue guidance on step parent and family adoption.

The Inspectors also made recommendations to the Department to:

- consider the need to review the Adoption Allowances Regulations;
- provide for the strengthening of post placement and post adoption support arrangements in forthcoming guidance on intercountry adoption and provide training for all relevant professionals.

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## h) ADOPTED ADULTS

### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust provides the necessary information, advice and counselling to adopted adults about their adoption.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- There was evidence of sensitive work in a number of cases, including active assistance to adopted adults in tracing tasks and good preparation of birth relatives. Some exchanges were more to do with 'information giving' than counselling. On occasions, the emotional impact of the search on the various parties had not been fully explored. Apart from services in one Board, work with adopted adults had not been well developed in most Trusts.
- Users' satisfaction with the service was high although the most frequent issue raised with Inspectors was the perceived lack of help in tracing birth families.

The Inspectors recommended that the Department should consider supporting the setting up of a volunteer project to provide additional help to people seeking information about their origins. They also recommended that Trusts should develop good practice guidance to inform work with adopted adults.

## i) ADOPTION PANELS

### STANDARD

*The Adoption Panel operates in accordance with statute and guidance and contribute effectively to the Trust's adoption practice.*

### Key findings and recommendations

- Adoption Panels were discharging their statutory duties effectively and members were commended for their significant commitment to the Adoption Panel. Inspectors commended a number of good practice initiatives and there was evidence that the quality of issues raised in Adoption Panels was having a positive impact on wider adoption practice.

There was a need for Adoption Panels to:

- provide guidance for staff on the role of the Panel;
- review their arrangements for linking children with families; and
- arrange meetings for members to consider business and training matters.

The Department is due to issue new regulations to govern the operation of Adoption Panels and the Inspectors recommended that these should be issued as soon as possible.

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## j) REPORTS, RECORDS AND RECORDING

### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust has satisfactory arrangements for the completion of statutory reports, the maintenance of case records, and safeguarding of confidentiality.*

### Key findings and Recommendations

- Some files were well organised. Others were unstructured, making it difficult to find LAC documentation, key dates, vital information and events. Some adult case files contained little supporting information. Because of the complex nature of adoption, file structures and their contents should be easily accessed and this was not the case in a number of situations.
- The Trusts' policy and procedures manuals set out the regulations governing the confidentiality and preservation of case records which accord with the Adoption Agency Regulations. Apart from one Trust which had developed a state-of-the-art system for storing records, there had been no reviews in Trusts of the effectiveness of storage arrangements.

It was recommended that:

- Case files should reflect the structures recommended in 'Adopting Best Care'; and
- the Department should support a training seminar to promote best practice in storing adoption case files and the maintenance of archive records.

## SPECIALIST ADVICE AND SERVICES

### STANDARD

*The Board/Trust has access to and, where necessary, uses specialist skills, advice and liaisons with other agencies to assist its adoption work.*

### Key findings and recommendations

Inspectors considered the medical advice available to the Adoption Panels and the legal advice available to the Panels and Trusts.

- There were high levels of Adoption Panel attendance and evidence of significant contribution to adoption services by medical advisors. In some cases, however, there were no written comments by the medical advisors on medical forms and in others medical advisors had not been fully complying with the regulation to provide written information to prospective adopters. The Inspectors recommended that these issues should be addressed and that Trusts should define the role of medical advisors to allow for appropriate business planning in children's community medical services.

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- Legal advisors were in regular attendance at the Adoption Panels and some had made a substantial contribution to the Panel's deliberations. Legal clinics had also been established in some Trusts and this was commended. Inspectors noted unacceptable periods of delay in the preparation of statements of fact in some Freeing Order applications but commended recent initiatives by legal representatives to manage the timescales in freeing processes. The Inspectors found a need for legal advisors and representatives to be aware of the Departmental policies and strategies that direct the work of Trusts.
- Inspectors also identified a lack of appropriately qualified local specialists in adoption who can assist evidence based planning and provide expert witness testimony in court. They recommended that this need should be addressed through the provision of post qualifying opportunities to enable social work staff to develop specialist expertise in this complex area of work.

## CONCLUSION

The inspection highlighted the complexities of progressing permanency planning for looked after children and commended Trusts for the progress they had made in placing adoption firmly on the agenda for children. There was a clear need, however, for the Department, Boards and Trusts to consider the implications of this for other aspects of family and child care services and adoption services. The inspection stressed the importance of developing an integrated cohesive adoption service to meet the future needs of children, birth families, adoptive families and all others affected by adoption. The key recommendations in 'Adopting Best Care' should enable this to happen.



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