

Inspections of adoption support agencies

Evaluation schedule and grade descriptors

This evaluation schedule sets out the areas that inspectors will evaluate when carrying out inspections of adoption support agencies from September 2012. It should be read alongside *Inspection of adoption support agencies: framework for inspection from September 2012*.

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Evaluation schedule for the inspection of adoption support agencies

Introduction

1. This guidance sets out the judgements that inspectors will make and report on when carrying out inspections of adoption support agencies. Adoption support agencies are registered under the Care Standards Act 2000.
2. The framework aims to ensure that inspection focuses on the things that matter most to service users and helps to raise standards and support improvement in the sector.
3. The inspection framework recognises adoption as an evolving and life-long process for all those involved and inspection will consider the impact of the agency, as appropriate, on adopted adults, birth relatives and adoptive families as well as on children and young people.

How the regulations and national minimum standards are used to inform inspection judgements

4. The evaluation schedule and the judgements made on inspection are underpinned by regulations, *Adoption: National Minimum Standards* and Adoption guidance¹ and are intended to test compliance and support improvement. The headline statement of outcome for each national minimum standard can be found in Annex A.
5. The national minimum standards state:

‘Each standard is preceded by a statement of the outcome to be achieved by the agency... Agencies will normally show they are meeting the headline statement of the outcome by following the standards below. However, these do not have to be followed exactly if the agency can demonstrate, and Ofsted is satisfied, that the outcomes are being met in a different way. The exception is where standards refer to a requirement set out in regulations, in which case the regulation must be met.’²
6. Any failures to meet the regulations or headline outcomes of the national minimum standards will be reported on and the strengths and weaknesses of the service highlighted throughout the report to illustrate how inspectors have arrived at their judgement. Any areas for improvement will be the subject of a

1 *Adoption: National Minimum Standards*, Department for Education, 2011; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/Adoptionandforstering/Page1/DFE-00028-2011. Adoption Guidance Adoption and Children Act 2002, first revision: February 2011, Department for Education, 2011; The Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005; The Adopted Children and Adoption Contact Registers Regulations 2005.

2 *Adoption; National Minimum Standards*, Department for Education, 2011, p.5.

requirement or recommendation which will be linked to improving performance against the regulations, national minimum standards and statutory guidance.

Making judgements and using the grade descriptors

7. Inspectors are required to weigh up the evidence in a particular area and to consider it against the descriptors for outstanding, good, adequate and inadequate deciding on a 'best fit' before making a judgement. Examples of practice may be used to support more than one judgement. When undertaking an evaluation of an adoption support agency not all evidence will fall neatly into one grade descriptor. Professional judgement will be exercised to determine the importance of evidence.
8. The following terms are used in inspection reports to describe proportions. Where numbers are low actual numbers may be used.

Proportion	Description
97–100%	Vast/overwhelming majority or almost all
80–96%	Very large majority, most
65–79%	Large majority
51–64%	Majority
35–49%	Minority
20–34%	Small minority
4–19%	Very small minority, few
0–3%	Almost no/very few

9. Inspectors make judgements against the evaluation schedule using a four-point scale.

Outstanding	An agency of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good	An agency of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate	An agency that only meets minimum requirements
Inadequate	An agency that does not meet minimum requirements

10. The descriptors are hierarchical; a good agency should also meet the grade descriptors for an adequate agency and so on.
11. Adoption support agencies must meet statutory requirements of both primary legislation and regulations and should take account of the national minimum standards and adoption guidance. However, meeting all the requirements will not necessarily result in a judgement of 'good' or 'outstanding', nor will failure to meet all the requirements in full necessarily result in a judgement of 'inadequate'. The seriousness of any failure and its potential impact on outcomes for all those receiving an adoption support service are considered carefully to determine how it should impact on the overall judgement. Inspectors' professional judgement is used to evaluate the impact of any breach of regulation or failure to meet the national minimum standards or statutory guidance against other aspects of the service.
12. Adoption support agencies vary considerably in the type of work undertaken, the client group, size and type of organisation and include individual practitioners. Some of the grade descriptors do not apply in some settings. For example, not all adoption support agencies provide birth records counselling, nor do they all work with children. Therefore inspectors use the evaluation schedule taking into account the nature of the agency inspected and will not be able to gather evidence against every grade descriptor.

Summary evaluation schedule criteria for the full inspection

13. The term 'service user', used throughout the evaluation schedule, refers to children, young people, adults who were adopted, birth relatives, adopters and adoptive families. The judgement areas for the inspection and report are:
 - overall effectiveness
 - outcomes for service users
 - quality of service provision
 - safeguarding children, young people, adults and families
 - leadership and management.

Overall effectiveness

14. Inspectors will consider evidence and judgements from across the evaluation schedule before arriving at the overall effectiveness judgement. The judgement focuses on the overall management and operation of the service and its impact on service users.

Overall effectiveness: grade descriptors

<p>Outstanding</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be outstanding if the requirements for an outstanding, good and an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and, having given due regard to age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief, the following applies:</p> <p>The agency is consistent and focused in ensuring that there are very positive outcomes for all service users even in the most complex situations. There is a responsive approach to the leadership and/or management of the service and its provision, with service users being actively engaged in service planning and development. The agency is also dynamic and continuously learning from both work carried out and from developments and research in the sector. The agency is constantly seeking new and effective ways to improve.</p>
<p>Good</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be good if the cumulative requirements for an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and, having given due regard to age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief, the following applies:</p> <p>The agency is effective and ensures positive outcomes for service users, even if this may mean helping them to cope with unavoidable disappointments. The intended outcomes of individual pieces of work are clear to and agreed with service users, although this may not always be possible with children and young people, and success is measured and understood. Service users' views are routinely monitored and analysed and inform service delivery and the development of staff. The lifelong implications of adoption are clearly understood and reflected in practice. The agency has an accurate understanding of its strengths and weaknesses and takes effective steps to improve.</p>
<p>Adequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be adequate if, having given due regard to age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief, the following applies:</p> <p>The agency is generally effective and provides a safe and welcoming service to everyone it works with. The aims of the service are clear to service users and outcomes usually positive. The agency monitors service delivery and take steps to improve it and although service users' views are sought they may not yet be embedded into the agency's development.</p>

Inadequate	The judgement is likely to be inadequate if the adoption agency fails to meet the requirements for an adequate judgement and/or there are failures to comply with regulations as a result of which the outcomes for service users are inadequate or their welfare is not safeguarded.
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Outcomes for service users

15. Inspectors evaluate the outcomes for any children, young people, adopted adults, adoptive families and birth relatives who receive a service from the adoption support agency. When making this judgement inspectors take account of the nature of the adoption support provided and the potential for disappointment, particularly in birth records counselling and intermediary services.
16. Inspectors evaluate:
- how service users are listened to and involved in defining the service they find most helpful
 - what service users say about the services they receive
 - whether service users receive an effective adoption support service.

Outcomes for service users: grade descriptors

Outstanding	<p>The judgement is likely to be outstanding if the requirements for a good and an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and, irrespective of age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ service users define the service they receive, although in some circumstances it is recognised that children and young people may not wish to be engaged in this, and the agency works in close collaboration with them to formally review and evaluate services – this may lead to changes in ongoing service delivery ■ service users report exceptional and beneficial changes in their situations, although they may not achieve their desired outcomes ■ all service users receive very high quality adoption support.
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<p>Good</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be good if all the requirements for an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and, irrespective of age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the large majority of service users significantly influence the delivery of the services they receive, although in some circumstances it is recognised that children and young people may not wish to engage in this ■ the large majority of service users report positive changes in their situations, although they may not achieve their desired outcomes ■ the large majority of service users receive high quality adoption support.
<p>Adequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be adequate if, irrespective of age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the majority of service users understand and agree with the delivery of the services they receive and the majority of service users report positive change in their situations, although they may not achieve their desired outcomes ■ most service users receive adoption support which helps them to achieve their agreed outcomes.
<p>Inadequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be inadequate if the adoption support agency fails to meet the requirements for an adequate judgement and/or there are failures to comply with regulations as a result of which the outcomes for service users are inadequate or their welfare is not safeguarded.</p>

Quality of service provision

17. Inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- adoption support is tailored to the needs of the individuals involved and provided to the whole adoptive family, birth relatives, adopted adults and children and young people as appropriate
- the service is delivered promptly by those with knowledge and understanding of adoption
- services are delivered professionally and with sensitivity

- birth records counselling and intermediary services meet the needs of service users and their relatives where appropriate.

Quality of service provision: grade descriptors

<p>Outstanding</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be outstanding if the requirements for a good and an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <p>Services provided are excellent. The agency uses up-to-date research to ensure that outcomes for service users are individualised and exceptional.</p>
<p>Good</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be good if the requirements for an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the agency has a detailed clear plan which aims to achieve the desired outcomes for each service user ■ support is tailored to each service user, enabling them to progress at their own pace, for example in their understanding of the impact of adoption on their lives ■ support provided for each service user is responsive to changing circumstances ■ the adoption support agency works in a three-way relationship with the service user and the local authority where services have been commissioned – this results in effective and focused adoption support ■ the knowledge and training of the staff have an evidenced positive impact on relationships with, and outcomes for, service users ■ the focus on individual users permeates every aspect of the agency’s work with service users, commissioners and others.
<p>Adequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be adequate if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the agency understands what it is trying to achieve with each service user ■ staff and providers are trained and demonstrate up-to-date knowledge and understanding of adoption issues relating to the service they provide ■ there is a prompt, welcoming professional user-focused service accessible to all irrespective of age, ability, disability, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity and religious belief ■ service users are helped to understand the possible effects of adoption on them and their family, and as

	<p>appropriate of the outcome, of a search and or a reunion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ adoptees and birth relatives receive effective birth records counselling and intermediary services. They are appropriately supported to understand their own situations even if they do not achieve the outcomes they want.
Inadequate	<p>The judgement is likely to be inadequate if the adoption support agency fails to meet the requirements for an adequate judgement or there are failures to comply with regulations and as a result the outcomes for service users are inadequate or their welfare is not safeguarded.</p>

Safeguarding children, young people, adults and families

18. This judgement focuses on whether the adoption support agency puts safeguarding at the centre of all it does and ensures that all those receiving a service and their families are safe and benefit from effective safeguarding and child protection procedures. This includes procedures for handling disclosures of historic abuse from both adults and children.
19. Inspectors evaluate the extent to which:
- the recruitment of staff and volunteers protects all those using the adoption support service
 - agencies who work with families ensure that the families understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people and are able to take this into account in the care they provide
 - the agency provides support and advice to children, young people and adult service users when appropriate
 - the agency is able to refer service users to independent sources of advice and support when they cannot provide it themselves
 - allegations and disclosures are handled in a manner that is in the best interests of all service users and their relatives
 - disclosures when made by adopted adults are handled effectively and safely.

Safeguarding children, young people, adults and families: grade descriptors

Outstanding	<p>The judgement is likely to be outstanding if all the requirements for a good and an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the agency tracks and understands all developments
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	<p>in safeguarding, considers the implications for their work and ensures that their policy and practice reflect this.</p>
<p>Good</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be good if the requirements for an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ there is a culture of openness and agencies constantly strive to improve their safeguarding practice ■ staff display high levels of awareness of and expertise in child protection practice and an understanding of the implications of historic abuse ■ service users and their families say that they have been supported to understand child abuse – they confirm that this includes a positive impact on both their child’s behaviour and their parenting ■ the agency has established effective communication channels with child protection agencies and adult safeguarding services so it is easy to access advice and support ■ the agency monitors allegations and complaints and learns from them ■ contacts are maintained with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer which add to the ease and effectiveness of consultation on any concerns and promotes a safe service.
<p>Adequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be adequate if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ recruitment processes for anyone working for the purposes of the agency are thorough and meet regulatory requirements ■ practice does not place children or vulnerable adults at risk of harm ■ service users and their families are supported or trained to understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people’s development and behaviour ■ children know who they can talk to if they have concerns or complaints ■ allegations or suspicions of harm, either current or historic, are handled sensitively and in accordance with robust procedures, including where appropriate vulnerable adult procedures. All relevant agencies are involved. Everyone understands their role and knows

	<p>what to do and what to expect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the agency works in partnership with Children’s Services when appropriate ■ referrals are always made to the local authority when the agency has concerns about the safeguarding of any children and young people – this always takes priority over any other considerations ■ before work commences, service users are told of the agency’s approach to child protection and historic abuse ■ the agency’s safeguarding policy is submitted to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer based on the address of the registered agency.
Inadequate	<p>The judgement is likely to be inadequate if the adoption support agency fails to meet the requirements for an adequate judgement and/or there are failures to comply with regulations, and as a result the outcomes for service users are inadequate or their welfare is not safeguarded.</p>

Leadership and management

20. The judgement on leadership and management in agencies that are run by individual sole providers will focus on professional development, professional supervision and the business management of the agency.

21. Inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- the agency’s own evaluation and quality assurance processes, including how it learns from the views of children and young people, adult adoptees, birth parents, adopters and partner agencies and from complaints, lead to improving outcomes for all
- the agency establishes effective relationships with commissioners and partner organisations which ensure that service users can access the services they need and service level agreements are met
- the agency engages in effective joint working with other professional services as appropriate, for example health and education
- the agency learns from problems, such as placement disruptions, and allegations – the learning is used to plan effectively for and provide professional learning and development to anyone working for the purposes of the agency

- leaders and managers employ and retain appropriately experienced, knowledgeable and qualified staff and promote their professional development
- the adoption support agency meets the aims and objectives in their Statement of Purpose and provides an effective children’s guide, where appropriate
- the agency’s managers engage in effective and timely business planning and take positive steps to address any shortfalls in revenue to ensure that service users continue to receive a service
- leaders and managers monitor and report regularly on compliance with regulations, national minimum standards and statutory guidance – they ensure that requirements are met and an effective service is delivered to all service users
- registered individuals working alone ensure that they comply with regulations, national minimum standards and statutory guidance and deliver an effective service to all service users.

Leadership and management: grade descriptors

Outstanding	<p>The leadership and management judgement is likely to be outstanding if the requirements for a good and an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ leaders and managers rigorously monitor the quality and timing of the adoption support services provided and drive significant improvements in services and outcomes ■ leaders and managers are ambitious for the service and set targets for the development of the agency, and individual providers for themselves, which are realistic, challenging and focused and impact positively on achieving excellent outcomes for service users
Good	<p>The leadership and management judgement is likely to be good if the requirements for an adequate judgement are met or exceeded and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ service users, including children and young people if they receive a service, influence and contribute to the development of the agency ■ the service has very effective relationships with commissioners and partner organisations and with other agencies ■ staff training and supervision are based on the individual’s development needs and reflect new legislation and/or practice developments and result in improved outcomes for service users

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ leaders and managers monitor the delivery of the service and conduct a detailed annual review of the agency’s work and use this to actively drive improvement ■ planning is founded on robust evidence tackling key areas of weakness systematically and building on areas of strength ■ all recommendations from the previous inspection have been acted upon ■ outcomes of complaints inform services.
<p>Adequate</p>	<p>The judgement is likely to be adequate if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the views of service users, including children and young people if they receive a service, are monitored and reviewed ■ the agency engages with commissioners and partner organisations and meets service level agreements ■ staff or the individual provider receive sufficient training and supervision to enable them to provide effective well-informed adoption support ■ leaders and managers monitor the financial stability of the business and take positive steps to address any anticipated shortfalls in income and there are financial accounts audited by an accountant confirming the agency’s financial viability ■ leaders and managers monitor their performance and report on it annually under national minimum standard 25 in order to drive improvement; this does not apply to individual providers ■ the adoption support agency, only with the agreement of service users, keeps the commissioners of service informed of progress for service users ■ the Statement of Purpose and children’s guide are clear, accessible and comprehensive so children and young people, adult adoptees, birth parents and relatives, adopters, adoptees and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the adoption support agency and the services it provides ■ service users know how to make a complaint ■ records are clear, up to date and stored securely ■ the adoption support agency is adequately staffed and resourced to meet the needs of those in receipt of a service ■ most service users receive an adoption support service

	<p>within agreed timescales</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ the agency has appropriate insurance cover and efficient and robust administrative systems in place ■ adoption support agencies make regulatory notifications ■ requirements and most if not all recommendations from the previous inspection have been acted upon.
Inadequate	<p>The judgement is likely to be inadequate if the adoption support agency fails to meet the requirements for an adequate judgement, timescales are not met and/or there are failures to comply with regulations and as a result the outcomes for service users are inadequate or their welfare is not safeguarded.</p>

Equality and diversity

22. Adoption support agencies should be working to ensure that no child or adult is disadvantaged due to their age, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, religious belief, sexual orientation or due to any disability. The success of agencies in promoting better outcomes for all children, young people and adults will be considered under each of the judgements in this framework. Equality and diversity are critical aspects across the evaluation schedule and will be reported on throughout the inspection report and taken into account across all judgement areas.

Fitness and conditions of registration

23. In addition to the areas above in registered settings inspectors will consider whether:
- the registered persons remain fit for registration
 - the adoption agency is operating in accordance with any conditions placed on its registration.
24. Where inspectors identify concerns relating either to the registered person's 'fitness' or to whether the conditions of registration are being met, these will be reported. The compliance, investigation and enforcement team will be consulted as appropriate.

Concerns

25. The great majority of Ofsted's work is carried out smoothly and without incident. If concerns arise during an inspection, these should be raised with the inspector as soon as possible during the inspection visit. This provides an opportunity to resolve the matter before the inspection is completed. Any

concerns about the factual accuracy of the findings in the report can be raised after the inspection and will be considered as part of the quality assurance process.

Complaints

26. If it has not been possible to resolve concerns through the process detailed in paragraph 25, a formal complaint can be raised under Ofsted's complaints procedure: www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130128.
27. Lodging a complaint does not normally delay the publication of the final inspection report.

Annex A

These headline outcomes are taken from the national minimum standards and vary in their application depending on the nature of the adoption support service provided.

Outcomes

- Children know that their wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care, are helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases and know how to obtain support and make a complaint (NMS 1).
- Children have a positive self view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background (NMS 2).
- Children enjoy sound relationships with their prospective adopters, interact positively with others and behave appropriately (NMS 3).
- Children are able to enjoy their interests and develop confidence in their skills (NMS 6).
- Children are supported to achieve their educational potential (NMS 7).
- Contact with birth parents, siblings, other members of the birth family and significant others is arranged and maintained when it is beneficial to the child (NMS 8).
- Children live with prospective adopters whose home provides adequate space, to a suitable standard; the child enjoys access to a range of activities which promote their development (NMS 9).
- Children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families and life before their adoption (NMS 12).
- Birth parent and birth families take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption (NMS 12).
- Service users confirm that the adoption support service provided met, or is meeting, their assessed needs (NMS 15).
- Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to the adoption where appropriate and contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relative if that is what both parties want (NMS 16).
- Children, service users and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the adoption agency/adoption support agency, and what services and facilities it provides. The adoption agency/adoption support agency meets the aims and objectives in the Statement of Purpose (NMS 18).

Quality of service provision

- The education and achievement of children is actively promoted as valuable in itself and as part of their preparation for adulthood. Children are supported to achieve their educational potential (NMS 7).
- The adoption agency approves prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of looked after children who are to be placed for adoption and who can provide them with a home where the child will feel loved, safe and secure (NMS 10).
- The adoption agency provides prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of children who live outside the British Islands and who can provide them with a home where the child will feel loved, safe and secure (NMS 11).
- Children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families and life before their adoption (NMS 12).
- Birth parents and birth families take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption (NMS 12).
- Adopted adults and birth relatives are assisted to obtain information in relation to the adoption where appropriate, and contact is facilitated between an adopted adult and their birth relative if that is what both parties want (NMS 16).
- The adoption agency approves prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of looked after children who are placed for adoption and who can provide them with a home where a child will feel loved, safe and secure (NMS 10).
- The adoption agency approves prospective adopters who can meet most of the needs of children who live outside the British Islands and who can provide them with a home where the child will feel loved, safe and secure (NMS 11).
- Children have clear and appropriate information about themselves, their birth parents and families and life before their adoption. Birth parents and birth families take an active part in the planning and implementation of their child's adoption (NMS 12).
- Children and adults affected by adoption receive an assessment of their adoption support needs. Service users confirm that the adoption support service provided met or are meeting their assessed needs (NMS 15).

Safeguarding

- Children feel safe and are safe; children understand how to protect themselves and are protected from significant harm including neglect, abuse and accident (NMS 4).

- The agency is provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service (NMS 19).
- There is careful selection of all staff, volunteers and persons on the central list and there is monitoring of such people to help prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and service users (NMS 21).
- Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children, the person making the allegation, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation (NMS 22).

Leadership and management

- Children, service users and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the adoption agency/adoption support agency, and what services and facilities it provides. The adoption agency/adoption support agency meets the aims and objectives in the Statement of Purpose (NMS 18).
- The agency is provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service (NMS 19).
- Children and service users receive a service from staff, volunteers, panel members and decision-makers who have the competence to meet their needs (NMS 23).
- Staff and volunteers are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children and service users (NMS 24).
- The agency is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently and delivering a good quality service which meets the needs of children and other service users (NMS 25).
- The registered provider manages the agency effectively and efficiently and is suitable to work with the agency's service users. They are trained to ensure the best possible outcomes for service users (NMS 26).
- Records are clear, accurate and up to date and stored securely, and contribute to an understanding of the child's life (NMS 27).
- All significant events relating to the protection of children are notified to the appropriate authorities (NMS 29).