

# Birthlink Adoption Service

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**Type of inspection:**

Announced (short notice)

**Completed on:**

15 August 2019

**Service provided by:**

Birthlink

**Service provider number:**

SP2004007141

**Service no:**

CS2004085774

## About the service

The Care Inspectorate regulates care services in Scotland. Information about all care services is available on our website at [www.careinspectorate.com](http://www.careinspectorate.com).

**Birthlink** is a registered adoption service providing specialised post adoption support. Service users are adopted adults, birth parents and other birth relatives of people adopted as children and their families. In addition, adoptive families, local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies use its services. Other social care and health professionals may also contact the service for advice.

The service advises that "Birthlink aims to enhance the wellbeing and promote the welfare of all people affected by adoption with a Scottish Connection."

The service has a registered manager, senior practitioner and three social workers. Service support is provided by an office and business manager and an administrator. They also utilise the services of volunteer searchers who carry out full searches of public records and original birth record checks. The service is currently recruiting a further supervising social worker, volunteer searcher and administrative member of staff. Birthlink is overseen by an Executive Board, members of which are actively involved in supporting the service.

Staff members maintain a daily information telephone service for post adoption queries and for enquiries from the United Kingdom and across the world relating to adoptions. A support and mediation service is offered to adults involved in adoption as well as to parties seeking further information on birth relatives and reunions.

Birthlink retains the records of adoptions arranged by the Guild of Service and Family Care, previous titles and roles of the current agency. It has not, however, arranged adoptions since the mid 1980's. The service also maintains the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland for which it receives partial funding from the Scottish Government. This allows adopted adults, birth parents and other relatives to register their willingness to be contacted by other parties.

In addition, the Scottish Adoption Registry has been founded and is maintained by Birthlink. This is a computerised index of available adoption records. The comprehensiveness of this is dependent on the willingness of local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies to transfer information to it and keep it updated.

Birthlink has other strands to its service which are not subject to inspection, some of which, however, are highlighted in this report.

This service was previously registered with the Care Commission and transferred its registration to the Care Inspectorate on 1 April 2011.

## What people told us

We spoke with a number of people who were using, or had used, the service recently including adoptees and adoptive parents. Some had been involved with the service now for some time on an ongoing basis. Each of these people spoke of the exceptional service that they had received/were receiving and confirmed that they would recommend the service to others without hesitation.

Some comments from those we spoke with are as follows:

"What really struck me was the empathy of the staff."

"She (worker) let me speak, listened and understood where I was coming from."

"I can't put it into words how good she (worker) was."

"I'm so glad I chose Birthlink."

"The level of service was absolutely first class."

"Without her (worker) I'd really have struggled with this."

"I was very surprised at the level of support, being supported constantly all the way through from the point of contact."

"The work the office has done is unbelievable."

"So much thanks to Birthlink. They are fantastic people."

"I couldn't rate Birthlink highly enough."

"We appreciated the support (worker) gave us and the opportunity to talk and be understood."

"From day one, since starting the process, the support that I've got has been excellent."

## Self assessment

The service was not required to submit a self-assessment for the purpose of this inspection.

## From this inspection we graded this service as:

Quality of care and support	6 - Excellent
Quality of staffing	not assessed
Quality of management and leadership	4 - Good

## Quality of care and support

### Findings from the inspection

Birthlink services are entirely service user led and, therefore, service users were able to be explicit about the areas of the service that they wished to access. They were supported by a highly motivated, committed and skilled team who ensured their needs and wellbeing remained central and, as a result, service users were found to experience exceptional outcomes.

Feedback from people who had used the service was entirely positive and their views were consistent that Birthlink offered an 'outstanding' and 'invaluable' service. One commented, "having Birthlink support and advice made it easier. Having them involved was like someone holding your hand."

The varying and complex emotional needs of service users and families were seen to be met consistently, sensitively and professionally by the team which meant that service users felt safe and supported to an excellent standard throughout the process. One commented, "Dealing with emotions and feelings is her (worker's) expertise. The trust there is immense".

Through regular review with all parties involved, staff were seen to consider risk and to manage expectations in relation to identified goals remarkably effectively, supporting service users to safely work towards achieving their aims in an informed way and at an appropriate pace.

We identified that the service regularly seek and receive feedback from service users and use this to inform improvement and future developments. We would encourage the service to continue to expand the meaningful involvement of service users in line with their participation policy.

In order to further enhance the level of after adoption service provided, the service is looking to create a specific adult post adoption counselling service, distinct from the currently provided mediation service, and one member of staff has recently commenced an accredited counselling course in line with this objective. Feedback from service users directly informed this development and, therefore, offers an example of the service user led, highly responsive nature of the service.

Birthlink has a number of strands to its service beyond post adoption supports, which have evolved in response to identified need, including their current involvement in the work of Future Pathways, the alliance organisation set up to look at the survivors of historic abuse.

A major practical priority for the service currently is the computerisation of current records, including the historic adoption files from when Birthlink was known as the Guild of Service. These are major pieces of work for the charity to undertake but the need for this has been recognised and work undertaken in response to allow it to progress in the near future.

We found a demonstrable record of innovative, effective practice and very high quality performance across a range of the service's activities and were confident these would be sustained.

## Requirements

**Number of requirements:** 0

## Recommendations

**Number of recommendations:** 0

**Grade:** 6 – excellent

## Quality of staffing

This quality theme was not assessed.

## Quality of management and leadership

### Findings from the inspection

The service has experienced some significant staffing changes since the time of the last inspection, including the retirement of the previous registered manager. It is clear, however, that the board members, registered manager, office and business manager and staff within the service have strived to ensure that these changes have had no negative impact on the experiences of people using the service. This was confirmed through the feedback received by all service users with whom we spoke, who described consistency in worker and exceptionally high quality of service over time.

The service was also in the process of recruiting additional members of staff in line with emerging demands including a further social worker, administrative worker and volunteer searcher.

We found positive and well co-ordinated partnership working took place between the service and their stakeholders, including the National Records of Scotland, Future Pathways Alliance and local authorities. We found this to involve board members, management and other staff members. This aspect of the service is integral and remains an active item on the service development agenda to ensure it is sustained and continually reviewed.

Supervision structures were found to be in place and while these were not found to be being used as effectively as the service would hope, staff advised that they felt very well supported through a combination of formal, informal and peer supervision.

Team meetings were held on a relatively regular basis and were valued by the staff team. Some staff commented that in addition to team meetings, practitioner meetings were previously held offering the opportunity for practice discussion and development. They expressed that it may be beneficial for these to be reintroduced.

The composition of the board was robust and included people with very relevant skills and experience which supported them to carry out their roles. This also included individuals who had previous direct experience of using the service. They were noted to be very active and involved in the organisation, working hard to ensure that the service is sustainable over time. One board member commented, "Everyone on our board is emotionally engaged with the service" adding that board members "...take a lot of personal interest and responsibility."

The registered manager was keen to highlight that the service is considering as part of their development plan an additional strand to the service which would allow the formal support of learning with other agencies, utilising the existing skills and knowledge of the staff in their specialised field. We also noted that, while Birthlink have always offered observational placements to students, another member of staff is due to commence training to achieve a practice educator qualification which will provide another route by which the service can support and share learning with others.

### Areas for improvement

The significant changes which have taken place within the service have impacted the structure and subsequently remit, role and responsibilities of the registered manager. As a result, a senior practitioner post was created and filled by a very experienced member within the team. We discussed with the service the need for clarity and transparency to be achieved in respect of current management roles and also recruitment processes for all members of staff within the service. (see recommendation 1)

We noted that although there are systems in place for annual appraisal of staff members, these have not been utilised fully for some time. While we were assured by the registered manager that this has been identified and appraisal dates are being put in place, we encouraged the service to ensure annual appraisals are undertaken and used effectively to identify and monitor staff progress, achievements and areas for development. (see recommendation 2)

In addition, whilst we found that supervision structures were found to be in place and staff advised that they felt well supported, we noted that formal supervision was not always being undertaken in line with the service's policy, no supervision agreements were in place, recording content of supervision required improvement and different forms of supervision were being undertaken by different members of staff. We encouraged the service to consider a review of their supervision templates to support the detailed and accurate recording of discussions, incorporating the use of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Timebound) objectives. It was highlighted to the service that regular reflective and appropriately challenging supervision and annual appraisal for staff, carried out by a clearly identified member of staff, would be essential to ensure that staff continued to feel well motivated and supported to carry out their complex tasks, including those in relation to working with individuals affected by adoption. (see recommendation 2)

We were impressed to see that the team have identified and commenced training in relation to trauma based practice which will provide staff with additional key knowledge and skills with which to undertake their roles. However, we found that generally, training amongst the qualified staff team was variable and some key training had not been undertaken, including in respect of adult protection. There was also no training overview held by management and training records were held individually in different places and did not appear to be easily accessed. We encouraged the service to develop a system of overview in this area. We also highlighted that the development of a service training development plan would compliment the broader service development plan and individual professional development needs of staff identified in annual appraisal. This would support the identification and overview of essential and key training to be undertaken by staff to support the work provided by the service. We hope to be able to consider this at the time of the next inspection.

We also discussed how the service could further enhance their service development plan by not only detailing the priorities of the agency and how these would be addressed but by explicitly specifying by whom and when. This would identify clear timescales within which identified priorities were hoped to be achieved and therefore allow the service to benchmark progress. We felt that the development of a more robustly 'SMART' development and improvement plan which was used as a live document would help ensure identified items are monitored and progress sustained and would act to evidence their strong commitment to ongoing improvement.

In conclusion, we found a number of important strengths which, taken together, outweigh areas for improvement and these strengths will have a significant positive impact on people's experiences and outcomes. However, improvements are required to maximise wellbeing and ensure that moving forward, people will consistently have experiences which are as positive as possible.

## Requirements

Number of requirements: 0

## Recommendations

Number of recommendations: 2

1. The service should ensure clarity is achieved in respect of management roles, remit and responsibilities. Appropriate policies and procedures should also be followed to ensure transparency and good practice in recruitment processes across the service.

This is to ensure that management and leadership is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards which state, "I experience high quality care and support because people have the necessary information and resources" (HSCS 4.27) and "I am confident that people who support and care for me have been appropriately and safely recruited." (HSCS 4.24)

2. The service should ensure that staff receive regular, reflective and appropriately challenging supervision and annual appraisal, in line with the service policy, which is effectively recorded and used to support development.

This is to ensure that management and leadership is consistent with the Health and Social Care Standards which state, "I benefit from a culture of continuous improvement, with the organisation having robust and transparent quality assurance processes." (HSCS 4.19)

**Grade:** 4 – good

**What the service has done to meet any requirements we made at or since the last inspection**

## Previous requirements

There are no outstanding requirements.

**What the service has done to meet any recommendations we made at or since the last inspection**

## Previous recommendations

There are no outstanding recommendations.

## Complaints

There have been no complaints upheld since the last inspection. Details of any older upheld complaints are published at [www.careinspectorate.com](http://www.careinspectorate.com).

## Enforcement

No enforcement action has been taken against this care service since the last inspection.



## Inspection and grading history

Date	Type	Gradings
2 Mar 2017	Announced (short notice)	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 6 - Excellent Not assessed 6 - Excellent Not assessed
13 Mar 2015	Announced (short notice)	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good 4 - Good
4 Feb 2014	Announced (short notice)	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good 5 - Very good
30 Jan 2013	Announced (short notice)	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good 5 - Very good
4 Nov 2010	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 5 - Very good Not assessed Not assessed Not assessed
25 Feb 2010	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing Management and leadership 5 - Very good Not assessed 5 - Very good Not assessed
10 Sep 2008	Announced	Care and support Environment Staffing 4 - Good Not assessed 4 - Good

Date	Type	Gradings	
		Management and leadership	4 - Good

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