

Adoptionplus Limited

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

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

Adoptionplus Limited was formerly registered as an Adoption Support Agency (ASA) but became registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) in 2008. This was to enable them to expand their work to include the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters to provide local authorities with adoption placements, specifically for older children with trauma and attachment difficulties. As yet, it has not completed any assessments of adoptive families or been involved in making arrangements for the placement of children. Once it has developed this, another aspect of the service will be to support and supervise the adoptive families in order to develop and train them to care for their children. Currently, Adoptionplus continues its post adoption support work by providing support for children with a history of trauma and attachment difficulties, and therapeutic counselling to adults in connection with adoption, through service level agreements (SLAs) which are in place with three local authorities. It also provides some specialised training.

Summary

This was a full, announced inspection which looked at all the key standards under the Every Child Matters outcome areas and organisation. As the agency is still in the process of developing its services in relation to its registration as a VAA, some of the National Minimum Standards do not currently apply to its operation.

A major strength of the agency is its child-centred and user led approach to the provision of services. It provides a safe service to adults and children; there is a robust approach to the recruitment of staff, all of whom are appropriately qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced. Its plans to recruit, assess and approve adoptive families indicate a similarly robust approach.

The main area of work undertaken at the moment is post adoption support, in the main to birth parents and relatives, through the SLAs. This work is of a very professional standard and there is a high level of user satisfaction. The plans to provide support to the adoptive families they recruit are robust and innovative with an emphasis on research-based therapeutic techniques. A small team of therapists has recently been recruited to provide support to adoptive families and children.

The agency is well-managed with good monitoring processes in place to ensure the work is of a consistently high standard. Training and research are valued and influence practice. Adoptionplus is a good employer and staff feel valued and supported, which enables them to deliver a strong professional service.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection since registration as a VAA.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Adoptionplus has a very clear recruitment strategy; the aim of the service is to recruit families for older children who have experienced trauma and have attachment difficulties. The manager demonstrates a creative approach to increasing awareness about the agency and takes every opportunity to promote the service in order to encourage potential adoptive families to contact them.

Adoptionplus is in the embryonic stages of consolidating its functions as a VAA, having previously been registered as an ASA. Thus it has not prepared, assessed or approved any adoptive families. It has developed a comprehensive preparation, assessment and approval process however, but as it has not been implemented, this aspect could not be inspected. Likewise it has not been involved in the matching of children but its plans include gaining full first hand information about the child from the placing authority, using its own therapists to undertake assessments and providing bespoke training for the adoptive family prior to placement to prepare them for the specific challenges which that particular child may bring. This is very thorough and aimed at securing placements which can be sustained.

Adoptionplus is in the process of establishing its adoption panel. It has appointed most of the members, including an experienced independent chairperson. The members reflect diversity and have a range of personal and professional experience to enhance their contribution to the consideration of the approval of adoptive families. It has developed panel procedures but these do not include certain aspects which should underpin their functions, such as declaring an interest, rules to ensure the panel is quorate and what to do if some panel members are not in agreement. The agency has planned the induction and training but this has not been implemented as yet as not all members have been appointed and the panel will not be meeting for some months. The written information which is available for panel members and any attendees to the panel is comprehensive and inclusive.

The agency ensures that anyone working with families and children are suitable to promote their safety. The recruitment and selection procedure is robust and there is clear evidence that all the appropriate checks and references are in place before people are employed. Social workers, therapists and counsellors are all suitably skilled, qualified and registered with the appropriate professional body and demonstrate a thorough knowledge and understanding of the impact of adoption. The agency demonstrates an extremely robust and responsible attitude towards the staff it employs on a sessional basis, who are otherwise self-employed. It assures itself that they receive the professional supervision which is required by their professional bodies and also provides appropriate training so that they are fully aware of the methods embraced by the agency.

Anyone using the service is enabled to complain if they are unhappy about any aspect; the agency provides leaflets at the start of its involvement and these are written in an accessible way. Specific leaflets are available for any children using the service and the information can also be provided on an MP3 player or translated if required. The manager is aware of her responsibility to monitor any complaints and has established a procedure for this purpose, although no complaints have been received.

The agency has appropriate safeguarding procedures which include how to deal with an allegation of historical abuse. All staff are fully conversant with the procedures and are provided with a copy. Relevant safeguarding training has been arranged for staff who have been recently appointed to ensure they have the appropriate knowledge for the work they are undertaking.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Adoptionplus has not recruited any adopters so is not providing any support to its own adopters as yet. However it has recruited a team of therapists (music, art, play and drama) to work with children to ensure that all their approved adopters will be able to access an extensive range of different therapeutic techniques. These include therapy, sensory attachment intervention, dyadic developmental psychotherapy and family attachment narrative therapy. This will underpin and support the preparation and training which the agency plans to give to its approved families prior to a child being placed with them. The emphasis will be on enabling adopters to have the therapeutic skills to work with their children and prevent crises and disruption to placements which are traditionally seen as 'high risk'. It also plans to work with the schools where the children are placed, to provide guidance and training on how to work with an adopted child in school. It currently provides therapeutic support and nurture packages to adoptive families and children as requested by local authorities and specialised training which local authorities can access and purchase. The feedback on the training provided is very positive, as is the feedback from local authorities on the services they purchase.

The agency has appointed a medical adviser and a legal adviser to provide advice to the adoption panel and support to the staff. It has access to a number of other advisers and consultants including specialist teachers, a clinical child psychologist and consultant occupational therapist. Staff in the agency and in the 'sister' organisation have expertise in issues relating to disability, race and culture which can be accessed as required.

The services which Adoptionplus provide are extremely user-focused. The agency has a service level agreement with three local authorities to provide a counselling service for birth relatives, and additionally undertakes other pieces of work on request. The feedback from the three local authorities who commission the service is very positive. They describe the service as 'a high quality service, sensitive to the needs of service users'. Other comments include: 'efficient, thorough, proactive and innovative' with 'good collaborative working arrangements' and a 'very professional service'.

It is very clear from interviews with service users and written feedback received directly and seen in the agency that the service is user-led; they are asked what they want to achieve and what they think the issues are and are given clear information about the limits and boundaries of a counselling service. They are asked for regular feedback, both during the course of the service and once it has finished. Young people receiving a service have information which is child-centred and written in a way that is easily understandable. The feedback from service users about the service is universally extremely positive; all feel it has helped them understand their situation and enabled them to move on and for some, they felt the outcome was extremely far-reaching: 'it prevented me from killing myself'. Counsellors are described as 'brilliant' and 'very good'. They feel listened to, understood and supported. Telephone counselling is provided if that is more convenient and supporters are involved to assist if the service user requests this.

The agency has undertaken some memory box work with young people to enable them to contribute towards their adopted sibling's heritage and also understand their own situation. The feedback from service users and professionals in relation to this work is extremely positive and the records indicate that it was very child-focused and task centred and the full involvement and agreement of the young people concerned was gained.

The agency has no legal responsibility to work with birth parents, this being the duty of the local authority. It provides an independent counselling service for birth relatives on behalf of three local authorities and undertakes specific pieces of work with children on a spot purchase basis in relation to maintaining their heritage. This aspect of the agency's work has been considered under the wider remit of its adoption support functions and has been included in this judgement.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a written statement of its aims and objectives to enable anyone using the service to know what it can expect. These are underpinned by policies and procedures which reflect the Statement of Purpose, and to which all staff have access. Any documents can be either read to a service user, translated into other languages or Braille, put onto an MP3 player or given to a supporter to explain to them. It has a children's guide to adoption and a separate guide which addresses its adoption support services. These are child friendly and can also be made available in other formats; for example via an MP3 player, to facilitate all children having an understanding of what the agency can provide for them. These are supported by other child friendly publications which the agency has developed which explain various aspects of how a child comes to be looked after and adopted.

There is good, clear written information for enquirers which is very inclusive and informative about the children for whom the service wish to recruit families as well as the support which is available. The website is well designed and provides good information, including an audio version of one of the children's books which can be accessed free of charge.

The agency is very well managed; the manager, who is very experienced, knowledgeable and appropriately skilled and qualified, provides enthusiastic and supportive leadership. There is a clear vision of where the agency wants to be and this is communicated with a real commitment, drive and passion. Everyone has a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and lines of accountability are clearly defined.

The arrangements for monitoring are very robust, both by the manager and the management board. The management board members are very skilled and knowledgeable about the work of the agency and they receive detailed written reports for the board meetings which occur three times a year. However, they are also available for consultation and advice at other times. The senior management team also monitor the work of the agency at their regular management

meetings, and the manager has systems in place to ensure she knows what is happening. This includes supervision, staff meetings and evaluations from service users.

Staff are well supported to undertake their work and thus provide a professional service to families and children. They receive monthly supervision, they have regular team meetings and there is a high level of very good quality training including a five day course on dyadic developmental psychotherapy. The counsellors have professional supervision in addition to meeting with the manager on a consultative basis to discuss their work. Staff commented that the access to training was very good. The practice of the agency is based on research findings, so staff are constantly updated on the latest thinking and research developments to inform their practice. Communication is very good and the administrative support is efficient and effective.

Adoptionplus is a very good employer; staff said it was 'supportive and nurturing' and 'a brilliant place to work with a lovely atmosphere and environment'. Staff feel valued, have opportunities to undertake new challenges and find it rewarding. They said 'there is a vitality and desire to service clients really well in a non-judgemental way. It is responsive and flexible to meet their needs'. This is borne out by the very positive feedback from service users and stakeholders. There are enough staff to meet the needs of the agency but as it develops, they may recruit more.

Appropriate records are maintained on service users; these are stored appropriately with clear policies on confidentiality and data protection. As the service expands, more detailed recording policies and procedures will be developed to meet the requirements for different record keeping.

The personnel files are very well maintained, well organised and information is easily accessible which facilitates the systematic updating of checks and registrations. Panel members' files will be similarly maintained once the members are fully established.

The premises are suitable for the purposes of the agency, although there are plans to move in the near future. Both the current and new premises are accessible with appropriate facilities for meetings and interviews. Appropriate insurance cover is in place and there is a business continuity plan which addresses the provision of premises, staff and the safeguarding of records in the event of an emergency.

The agency is financially viable; there are systems in place to ensure it can fulfil its obligations for six months in the event of a financial crisis and it is underpinned by a holding company which guarantees its operation. There is close monitoring of the finances through detailed monthly reporting and scrutiny by senior management and the management board. Financial procedures govern its management and accounts are independently audited on an annual basis.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service user is at the centre of all its work and their needs comprehensively addressed. All service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture or gender. A choice of male or female counsellors is offered, there is good information available on cultural and religious needs, access to information is addressed in an innovative manner through the use of MP3 players as well as translations and supporters are welcome to assist service users. All policies and written information are inclusive.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- ensure the panel policies and procedures include all the aspects detailed in National Minimum Standard 10.2 (National Minimum Standards 10.2)
- develop a policy on case recording which addresses the purpose, format, content, storage and access to case files in line with regulations (National Minimum Standards 27.1).