

Family Society (Adoption Focus)

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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Adoption Focus is a registered adoption agency which previously operated as Families Through Adoption, part of Father Hudson's Society, a Roman Catholic organisation. It became registered on 12 May 2009 under its new name, but is essentially the same agency, with the same manager, although no longer affiliated to either Father Hudson's Society or the Roman Catholic church.

It provides a comprehensive range of services both pre and post adoption to families and children. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents; post approval and post placement support; and post adoption support services to children and families.

The main office is in Coleshill but it has two other office bases, one of which is in Newcastle under Lyme in Staffordshire and the other in Witney in Oxfordshire.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was an announced inspection which covered all the key and some non-key standards under the Every Child Matters outcome areas and organisation. Although this is the first inspection since its registration as Adoption Focus, it has an extensive history as an adoption agency under its previous registration. It has therefore been possible to give an overall judgement of outstanding.

The agency takes its responsibilities to safeguard children and promote their well-being extremely seriously. It has a thorough and rigorous approach to the preparation, assessment and approval of adopters to enable them to provide safe and secure placements for children and it does this in a very timely way. It also provides an outstanding level of support to families once a child is placed and following their adoption, demonstrating a lifelong commitment to providing support to keep children with their adoptive families. The importance of a child's history and birth family is recognised and adopters encouraged to maintain a child's sense of identity.

The agency is extremely well managed at all levels. The committed, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff team receive excellent support from committed and competent managers and the organisation as a whole. This enables them to provide an outstanding service to families. No actions or recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Although this is the first inspection of the service under its new name, one action and four recommendations were made at the last inspection when it operated under its previous registration. These included: undertaking Criminal Records Bureau checks on administrative staff; ensuring consistency in adopter assessments; maintaining separate records for allegations; storage of case records in a lockable room; and ensuring there is no breach of confidentiality within case records. All these have been acted upon satisfactorily.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency demonstrates a very strong child-focused commitment to meeting the needs of children referred to them by local authorities for adoptive placements. It uses a proactive approach to find out which children may need an adoptive family and has a focused, written recruitment strategy to attract suitable potential adoptive parents. This is reviewed and developed following evaluation of the success of the means used. This ensures that the most effective methods are used to increase the families available for children who are harder to place. The agency uses technology very effectively. It has developed its website, accessing the resources of an experienced web designer. This has been very successful and most enquirers make contact with the agency having accessed the website. This, and the inclusive approach to enquirers, has really increased the numbers of people approaching the agency to be considered as adoptive parents. Local authorities can also access a secure part of the website to see which approved adoptive families are available for placements which makes potential linking much quicker to prevent delay for children. A local authority stakeholder commented: 'This organisation provides options for our older sibling pairs needing placement. A recent match has been a very positive experience for the children.'

The agency is committed to providing safe placements for children by undertaking very thorough and robust assessments of adoptive parents. They are also committed to providing a prompt service to applicants and usually complete assessments within the timescales suggested by statutory guidance. Enquirers receive a prompt response, written information and an initial visit; if the agency accepts their application, they attend a five-day, very comprehensive preparation course, which adopters comment on in very positive terms. For example, adopters commented: 'Excellent course, well prepared, well facilitated and extremely useful', and, 'The preparation course gave us a lot to think about.' The course is regularly evaluated following feedback from participants and facilitators and has recently been increased

by one day as a result of this. Applicants and approved adopters can attend additional workshops, for example, about the impact of abuse, and parenting the adopted child, and there is also a workshop for the family and friends of applicants to ensure that people in their support networks have information to enable them to give appropriate support.

Preparation training is followed by a thorough assessment and robust checks to ensure adopters can care for children safely and appropriately. A stakeholder commented: 'Their standards of assessments are high.' Adopters comment that although the assessments are very thorough and look at all aspects of their lives, this is done sensitively and well. Staff are keen to continue to improve and develop their practice, however, and are not complacent.

The agency ensures that adopters understand the matching process by providing them with written information and guidance so they are prepared and know what to expect. This builds on the additional day on the preparation course, which covers linking and matching. The adopters' social worker reads the child's file as well as helping adopters identify questions they wish to ask to ensure they have as much information as possible. This enables them to make an informed decision about whether they can care for that particular child. The social worker is fully involved in introductions to support the family and ensure they can express any doubts.

The adoption panel provides further robustness to the approval process, guided by clear written procedures. The panel is appropriately constituted with members who reflect a variety of experiences, knowledge and backgrounds. Their recruitment is rigorous and their knowledge enhanced through induction and training. Panel members demonstrate a real commitment to their role, are well prepared and take their responsibilities seriously. Applicants are invited to attend to ensure the process is transparent, and they are made welcome. Panels are very well organised and administered and the minutes are extremely thorough to give a full and accurate record of the proceedings. The agency decision is made very promptly, but only after careful consideration of all the information, and conveyed in writing to the adopters at the first opportunity.

The recruitment and selection procedure for staff is extremely rigorous and robust to ensure only those people suitable to work with service users are appointed. All staff are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced to ensure they provide a good service. A local authority stakeholder commented: 'I have always been impressed by the sensitivity of a number of the agency's staff...they show empathy, good knowledge of attachment theory and an ability to offer sustained support, which gives me confidence to match our children with approved adopters from this agency.'

The agency has an appropriate complaints procedure, and a complaints, comments and compliments leaflet which is given to all service users at the start of any contact with the agency. This includes a child-friendly version within the children's guide. Complaints and comments are taken seriously and used as a way to improve the service, although there have been no formal complaints.

Safeguarding is given a high priority. The agency makes its responsibilities in relation to safeguarding very clear to applicants in the information about the assessment process and to adopters in the placement agreement they sign once matched with a child. There are clearly written appropriate procedures which are readily available to staff to ensure they know how to respond to any allegations or concerns, which is underpinned by regular training. A stakeholder commented: 'Safeguarding remains high on the agency's agenda.'

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides outstanding support to its adoptive families. Adopters are well prepared for the task of parenting an adopted child through the preparation, assessment and approval process. This is supplemented by post-approval training on a variety of relevant topics such as the effect of abuse, parenting the adopted child and behaviour management. Emphasis is given to supporting an adoptive family post placement, through regular visiting and telephone contact. One adopter said: 'I couldn't fault the help and support my social worker gave.' This regular contact encourages adopters to voice any difficulties before they become insurmountable to enable appropriate additional support to be sought if necessary. The agency works well in partnership with local authorities to achieve support for adopters to promote stable placements.

There is an outstanding commitment to support families once the adoption order is made. Families are made aware that they can contact the agency at any time, and they avail themselves of this at varying stages and for varying lengths of time. Families have commented that this support is 'brilliant' and 'fantastic' and that they know the social worker is 'always on the end of the phone'. Support varies from listening, giving advice, signposting to other agencies, direct work with children and families, putting adopters in touch with each other for peer support, and training. The agency has developed a very good pack of information for schools to help them understand the needs of adopted children, and this has been effectively used with some families to support the children in the school setting. Some families have been supported for many years to promote the stability of the placement and prevent a breakdown. The rate of placement disruption is low, which is testament to the good matching and excellent support. A stakeholder commented: 'It really does support very long term and continues to advocate for its families.'

The agency holds two social events a year for adoptive families, which is a good way of adoptive children getting together to socialise, as well as for adopters to meet social workers and other adoptive parents in an informal way. The Witney office has a monthly coffee morning for the local families which is very well used. The other offices have tried this in the past and continue to try to encourage adoptive families to come to similar events, but have not been as successful. All adoptive families receive a very good quality newsletter twice a year; this helps them know what is going on and keeps them in touch with the agency.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

This agency has no statutory responsibility towards birth parents as it is a voluntary adoption agency. It recognises the importance of the birth family, however, in helping children understand their history, and this message is given clearly to prospective adopters during their preparation and the assessment. Adoptive families demonstrate a very good understanding of the issues and are committed to maintaining contact through the local authorities' letterbox systems, being involved in one-off meetings with birth parents and using the life story books with their children as useful tools.

Adoption Focus, on behalf of Father Hudson's Society, manages a very small and diminishing letterbox system for children placed by that agency when it was a voluntary adoption agency. It does this well and ensures, along with Father Hudson's Society, that young people, when they approach 18 years of age, are aware of how they can continue contact in their own right, find out more information from their records and access the services which are available to them as adults.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose gives clear information about the services the agency provides. This is sent to enquirers as part of the information pack so they know what they can expect from the agency. The Statement of Purpose is underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures which give very clear guidance to staff about their roles, responsibilities and how to carry out their duties. There are three children's guides, which reflect differing ages and abilities; these give very good information to children about the service. They are very colourful, appropriately written and child-friendly, enhanced by photographs and pictures. Of particular note is the photograph of the manager as the person to whom any complaints should be made in the first instance; this makes it easier for a child or young people to contact the agency as they can see who they will be talking to.

The written information given to enquirers is of a very good standard and gives comprehensive information so the assessment and approval process is transparent. The website has been developed since the agency became registered and is also a very good source of information and the main route for enquirers to make initial contact with the agency. Although the agency currently does not hold information meetings, as the take up was not very good, the same information is given to

enquirers in initial visits. Adopters confirm these are thorough and tell them everything they need to know to make the initial decision to apply. All the information has inclusive images which reflect the diverse nature of children and adoptive families to encourage a more diverse range of applicants and emphasise the inclusive ethos of the agency.

The agency is managed extremely well at all levels. The management team has been strengthened by the addition of a team manager post, which enables the nominated manager to take a more strategic role in developing the service. The roles and responsibilities are clear and the team manager is able to deputise in the manager's absence, making managerial support and oversight easier to access. There is good communication between staff and managers and between the three different sites. This has been strengthened by improved technology.

The staff are well supported to provide an excellent service. New workers have a thorough induction, all workloads are managed so they are not overstretched, there are regular team meetings, regular supervision of a good professional quality, excellent training opportunities and good administrative support. The effect of this support is recognised and appreciated by the people who use the service, either through being a stakeholder or an adoptive parent. One comment made by an adopter encapsulates this: 'This is one of the most professional group of people. They are true to their ethos and I feel all of the decisions they have made have been in our and the children's best interests. They are a credit not only to their profession but also to themselves. I cannot praise them highly enough.'

The service is extremely well monitored at all levels. Service users are asked to feedback at all stages of their contact with the agency and it is clear that this is used to inform and influence the development of the service. The trustees provide additional rigour to the monitoring of the service. They meet regularly, receive thorough written reports and are committed to ensuring the adoption service is delivered to a high standard.

The agency has a sufficient number of appropriately qualified, knowledgeable and committed staff to enable the service to be carried out without any delays. Staff feel supported by the agency to do a good job, through effective employment policies, procedures and practices. Training opportunities are very good and all staff have undertaken a wide range of relevant training to improve and develop their practice. This includes external as well as internal courses.

The standard of case recording and file maintenance is very good, enabling information to be easily accessible. There is clear managerial oversight through file audits and case decisions made in supervision, all of which are clearly in evidence on the files. The files are stored securely and with due regard to confidentiality. Panel members' and staff personnel files are well ordered and contain all the information required to demonstrate a rigorous, safe recruitment and selection procedure.

The premises are appropriate for the service providing office space and areas for meetings. There are three sites, the main site being in Coleshill, with an office base

in both Witney and Newcastle under Lyme. This provides service users with easier access to staff more locally, although the main office is central to the area it serves, is accessible both in terms of its location and layout and much larger. Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure continuity of service in the event of a disaster.

The agency is financially viable; its work is underpinned by clear and thorough financial procedures and regular scrutiny by the trustees of the agency. Accounts, which are subject to annual independent audit, are clearly presented and scrutinised on a regular basis, thus enabling any potential difficulties to be identified at an early stage and plans made to manage these in a structured way. This ensures that service users receive continuity of service without fear of disruption.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency has an inclusive policy which is implemented in practice. It has embraced this through commissioning training on assessing gay and lesbian adopters to ensure staff and panel members, who are themselves a diverse group of people, feel confident in what is a new area of work for them. All its written information contains inclusive images to emphasise the ethos and the agency makes every effort to make all its information accessible. All service users are treated with great respect and children's individual needs are paramount when family finding.