

Action for Children Adoption and Foster Care South West

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

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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

Action for Children is one of the United Kingdom's largest children's charities. The aim of the charity is to help those children in greatest need. To this end, the organisation provides a wide range of services for children, of which adoption is just one part.

Formerly known as NCH, Action for Children was founded in 1869 by Dr. Thomas Bowman Stephenson, a Methodist minister. Although the organisation still has strong links with, and receives support from, the Methodist Church, it positively welcomes staff and volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and religions.

Action for Children has been an approved adoption agency since 1926. There are five established adoption projects throughout the country, including the London Black Families Project specifically to meet the needs of black, Asian and dual heritage children.

The South West project works in partnership within the South West Adoption Consortium. The Action for Children, Adoption and Fostering, South West combines a fostering service and an adoption service.

The adoption service objectives include:

- recruiting, preparing and assessing a wide range of prospective adoptive parents who have the necessary qualities to meet the needs of children requiring a placement.
- providing a post-placement social work service to adoptive families through individual, family and group work and training.
- providing independent contracted birth family support and intermediary services to three neighbouring local authorities.

The team consists of one full-time equivalent (FTE) service manager and a 0.8 FTE practice manager who works mainly, but not exclusively, with adoption. There are 6.3 FTE social workers, who carry mixed caseloads across the adoption and fostering services. One full-time member of staff is the marketing and recruitment officer, and 2.8 FTE administrative staff support both areas of work. One part-time social worker concentrates on post-adoption support work.

Children referred to Action for Children are likely to be those whom local authorities find more difficult to place. These will include children of all ages from African, African/Caribbean, Asian and mixed heritage backgrounds, brother and sister groups, children with a range of disabilities, and children of school age, as well as younger children whose parents have mental health problems or who abuse drugs/alcohol.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced, full inspection found that this voluntary adoption agency provides an outstanding level of service. No action requirements or recommendation have been made as a result of this inspection. Adopters are recruited to meet the agency's stated service requirement of meeting the needs of children who may offer more challenges. Adopters are vetted, assessed and trained to a high standard. The post adoption support offered to adopters is of an exceptionally high standard. The service also provides a counselling and support service to birth families and to adopted adults seeking their birth families. Again, this aspect of the service is of an exceptionally high standard.

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no action requirements or recommendations made at the previous inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards that relate to this outcome group.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Systems and policies are in place to ensure that children and adopters are appropriately matched. Children's needs and suitability to be adopted are assessed by the social workers from their placing authority and ratified by that authority's adoption panel and Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The adoption agency appropriately recruits, assesses and prepares potential adopters. Social workers' recommendations to approve are considered by the adoption agency's adoption panel and if agreed, are put to the ADM to be ratified. There are several online and written registers available of both children needing an adoption placement and of approved adopters. The agency is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium which includes several local authority adoption services and two other charitable adoption agencies. The consortium has its own online register and also conducts 'adoption exchange' meetings and forums every six months. From these registers and forums, agency social workers, in collaboration with social workers from the placing authority, will find the best available match between child and prospective adopters. This match will be presented to the adoption panel and ADM of the placing authority for ratification. Birth parents are consulted about their view of the proposed placement. Suitable arrangements are made by way of information giving,

introduction and induction, such that both child and adopters can make an informed decision about a proposed adoption. There have been three placement disruptions since the time of the previous inspection, all of which have been thoroughly investigated by the agency. These good matching systems ensure that children will be placed with adopters who can best meet their needs and minimise the risk of placement breakdown and the distress that this may cause to children and adopters.

The preparation of adopters is full and comprehensive. This involves them being given thorough information by a duty social worker at the time of their initial enquiry. They are sent comprehensive information packs and they can access an information website. The agency holds information evenings six times a year. Those people who express an interest in adoption have a home visit by a qualified social worker and, after formal application, are invited to attend a three day preparation course which acts as part of the assessment process. Applicants are allocated an assessing social worker. The British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) assessment process serves as preparation and guidance for adopters. There is a comprehensive training programme in place for adopters. This exceptional assessment and preparation of adopters ensures children receive high quality care by people who have a clear understanding of their role and function.

The agency adoption panel's constitution, role and function are clearly spelt out in a written document. The panel is independently chaired and it has access to members with legal, medical and educational expertise. There are members with personal experience of adoption, and members from black and minority ethnic groups. Members receive required training and their contribution to the panel and their personal development needs are effectively appraised annually. The panel meets every four weeks and decisions are referred to the ADM for ratification and are responded to in a timely manner. These rigorous steps to the approval of adopters ensure that the function of the adoption service is effectively checked and scrutinised to mitigate the possibility of children being adopted by inappropriate people .

All social work management and staff working for the service have a professional social work qualification and are registered with the General Social Care Council. All panel members, management and staff have been subject to the appropriate vetting and recruitment procedures, thus helping to ensure that they present no threat to the safety of children.

The agency has a robust complaints procedure details of which are made available to staff and adopters. A record book of complaints received about the service in 2010 is in place. No complaints about the service have been received in the past 12 months. Potential adopters are trained in supporting agreed contact arrangements between children that may be placed and their birth families. This involves the suitable preparation of letters to birth parents through the placing authority 'letterbox' systems. Training adopters in suitable communication methods helps to keep the children, who are the subject of these systems, safe. There is an agency policy on discouraging adopters from smoking and from the physical chastisement of adopted children.

All staff working for the service receive training on the agency's corporate 'safeguarding children' policy and potential adopters are introduced to the policy as part of their preparation training. Adopters also receive further training on safe caring and on safe internet use. The agency has a contractual arrangement with three local authority adoption services to provide counselling and support to birth parents whose children are adopted, and to adopted people who are seeking their birth records. The agency has social work practitioners with particular skills in this area of work. These systems and services help to promote the safety and emotional well-being of people affected by adoption.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Potential adopters are well supported by a range of services provided by the agency. These include a website information service, the provision of a comprehensive information pack, information evenings, home visits by social workers and preparation groups. The assessment and approval process provides extensive information about the reality of adoption, including the long term effects of birth trauma and attachment and loss on children. Adoption support plans are in place for all children which outline how the needs of the young person placed, and the needs of the adoptive parents, will be met. These plans are properly reviewed. Ensuring adopters are well informed about both the positive and negative aspects of adoption reduces the likelihood of placement breakdown and disruption for young people.

The post approval and post Adoption Order support given to adopters by the agency is of an extremely high quality. Information packs are given to adopters at both of these stages which inform them about the support services that are available to them. Support group forums for adopters are held every month and there are two annual social events for adopters and adopted children. There is a quarterly newsletter which gives information and advice to adopters. The agency can access the local authority educational support service for looked after children. There is also a panel member with educational expertise who can be consulted for educational advice. Although the agency may access psychiatric and psychology support through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) team of the placing authority, the agency also employs the services of a clinical psychologist who provides a consultancy and training service for adopters. Adopters have 24 hour access to a duty social worker for advice and information. Some adopters have been provided with membership of Adoption UK and the agency have paid for some adopters to attend Adoption UK training courses. There is a resource library available for adopters. The agency slogan "as long as it takes" is a genuine assertion which in reality means that effective support is given to adoptive parents beyond the making of the Adoption Order. This ongoing support further mitigates the likelihood of placement breakdown and helps to ensure children are placed in a secure family setting.

The agency have contractual arrangements with neighbouring local authorities to provide a counselling and support service to birth parents whose children are

adopted, and to adopted people who are seeking their birth records. There are specialist workers employed within the agency who are appropriately trained to undertake this work. One adopted person using the service stated that "the support worker has stuck by me when I needed them, I couldn't have done it by myself, they have been tremendous." One birth parent using the service stated that "Action for Children have been great, they have helped me to keep contact with my kids even though they have been adopted". These services help to promote the emotional well-being of those people affected by adoption.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The adoption service ensures that the placing authority have consulted birth parents at all relevant points during the matching and adoption process, including matters that pertain to ethnic, cultural and religious matters. Parental views about the intended adoption of their child and the proposed adopters are taken into account unless they negatively affect the best interests of the child.

As previously stated, the agency has contractual agreements with neighbouring local authorities to provide adoption support services for birth parents whose children are placed for adoption, and for adopted adults who are seeking their birth records. Those people referred to the service have access to effective support and counselling from specialist workers within the agency.

Adopters are trained in the appropriate use of the 'letterbox' systems of placing authorities to ensure that children are safeguarded. The 'letterbox' system allows children to have an agreed level of contact with their birth families and gives them a level of information about their personal history and heritage.

The agency ensures that the placing authority collaborates with them in writing children's adoption support plans. These are clearly written and contain full assessments of children's needs and detail the actions necessary to support them in the transition to their adoptive homes and the ongoing support they require. These plans are appropriately reviewed. Potential adopters are given full information about a child's history including their medical history.

Wherever possible a meeting is arranged between birth parents and adopters to provide a degree of accord about the placement. The consultation with parents and the promotion of agreed contact between birth families, adoptive families and adopted children helps to ensure the long term well-being of adopted children and birth families.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no National Minimum Standards that relate to this outcome group.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is evidenced by the range of staff, panel members and adopters from differing racial and cultural backgrounds. Some practitioners and panel members have personal experience of adoption. There are a small number of 'same sex' couples and single people that have been approved as adopters, evidencing the non-discriminatory approach of the service. The recruitment process prioritises potential adopters who express an interest in adopting a disabled child. The agency promotional material displays images of cultural diversity. The agency has a corporate policy on equality and diversity which includes its policies on age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation. This policy is available to all staff on the agency website and is included in training for staff and adopters. These extensive measures demonstrate a positive commitment to enhancing the equality and personal wellbeing of staff, adopters and children alike.

A clearly written and comprehensive Statement of Purpose is in place, which was reviewed in November 2010. This spells out the aims and objectives of the service. Adopters are provided with clear written information about the service at the recruitment and introduction evening stage and this is fully explained to them at preparation group training and further reiterated by assessing social workers throughout the assessment process.

The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified, both professionally and in management, and is a registered member of the General Social Care Council (GSCC). She has many years experience in child care practice and management. The team manager and social work practitioners within the service are professionally qualified and are members of the GSCC. Supervision for practitioners is given at the required frequencies. Team meetings are held regularly. Staff comment that they feel well supported by management. Staff working within the service undertake comprehensive induction training and ongoing training to ensure they maintain and expand their knowledge base. All staff and management undertake an annual appraisal of their personal development and training needs. 30% of the social work staff have achieved the Post Qualifying Award in Social Work and a further 30% are currently undertaking the award. This high level of staff training provides children and adopters with the best possible social work expertise and support.

The service has sufficient well qualified staff to meet the identified adopter recruitment and approval plans of the service. There is a Marketing and Recruitment Officer who organises adopter recruitment drives around service priorities which correctly identify those children who are the most difficult to place.

The case records of children and adoptive parents are clearly written, comprehensive and up to date. There are good audit systems in place for the management and monitoring of records. A disaster recovery plan is in place for these records.

The local managers of the service construct an annual business plan which sets out their service priorities for the coming year. The group manager of the adoption service undertakes a six monthly review of the quality of care. An annual report of the adoption service is presented to the trustees of the charity who take an active role in the quality assurance of the service. This thorough ongoing review of policy and practice ensures that children receive the best possible service.