

BAAF England

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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Setting address	British Association for Adoption & Fostering, 6-10 Kirby Street, LONDON, EC1N 8TS
Telephone number	0207 4212600
Email	
Registered person	British Association for Adoption and Fostering
Registered manager	Louise Hocking
Responsible individual	David Charles Holmes
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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

The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (hereafter referred to as BAAF) is a voluntary adoption agency, providing services in relation to domestic adoption only. Its main functions are: facilitating the placement of children for adoption; managing the Adoption Register for England and Wales on behalf of the Department for Education and the Welsh Assembly Government; managing the Independent Review Mechanism on behalf of the Department for Education; project managing the placement activity days; providing an intermediary service and adoption counselling; and providing adoption support services on behalf of member adoption agencies. These include: information and counselling for prospective adopters; training and preparation; support groups for adopters; chairing disruption meetings, running life appreciation days; and individual work with children and adults including play and filial therapy.

BAAF has three regions in England, namely Southern, Central and Northern, each staffed with a regional director and staff team, and two offices in Wales. The premises in London accommodate the 'Be My Parent' team and individual staff offering adoption support work to member authorities. The premises in Leeds accommodate the Adoption Register for England and Wales and the Independent Review Mechanism.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced inspection considered all the relevant national minimum standards and regulations which apply to this particular voluntary adoption agency, whose functions differ from the majority of similarly registered agencies.

The agency is outstanding in all respects. It is innovative, reflective, self-evaluative and committed to providing services of a very high quality to its member organisations and adoptive families. It puts children at the heart of all it does and is committed to working in partnership with other adoption agencies to improve placement choice for children and prevent delay. It has developed a number of innovative services to provide families for children who are harder to place. Children are involved and consulted wherever possible and their views are taken into account in shaping the services offered.

BAAF provides excellent advice and guidance to other adoption agencies, both through its helpline and also its publications and training. This is instrumental in improving standards of practice and thus the services which children receive and their outcomes. The direct support work it provides to families is of an extremely high quality and very well regarded. Likewise, the information it gives to adopted

adults and birth relatives is of a high quality and easy to access.

All the work is delivered by people who are committed, well qualified, very experienced and supported by an organisation which values them and wants to develop and support them to provide services of a very high quality. To quote a stakeholder: 'I think BAAF runs a very tight ship, offering services at many different levels, all of an excellent standard. It is my continual pleasure to work with a group of people that not only know their stuff, but are passionate about the work they do.'

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was undertaken by the previous regulatory body for children's services, the Commission for Social Care Inspection, in November 2006. It found shortfalls in staff recruitment processes and the compilation of complaints information. These have been fully addressed to ensure children are protected from any unsuitable staff. Collating complaints information ensures that any trends are more easily identified and facilitates remedial action to provide an improved service.

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.

Safeguarding children in its broadest form is at the forefront of all BAAF's work, and promoting children's welfare and safety is its paramount aim. Although BAAF undertakes very little direct work with children, it is instrumental in having a significant input into and impact on the working practices of adoption agencies through its advisory role, and thus is indirectly involved in ensuring children are safe. BAAF has developed guidance notes, publications and training materials which address, for example, making good assessments, safe caring, post-adoption contact and the use of social networking sites. These are of an extremely high standard and give excellent advice for professionals and adoptive parents. BAAF also works very effectively with other agencies to promote the health and well-being of children placed for adoption. This includes training in relation to placing children with disabilities. Medical advisors have ready access to up-to-date advice through the medical group, to ensure they can give consistent and appropriate advice to adoption agencies in relation to health care issues.

BAAF undertakes very impressive work in relation to facilitating the matching and placing of children who have adoption as a plan. It is very committed to working in partnership with local authorities in order to assist them to place children, particularly those seen as harder to place, in stable and appropriate placements without undue delay. The Adoption Register, which BAAF is responsible for managing, works very

well in finding suitable families for children waiting. The procedures are very clear, particularly in relation to confidentiality of information, which is crucial. The team works with adopters to ensure their information is accurate, and supports them if they feel the service from their adoption agency could be improved. To quote an adopter who has used the service: 'I am extremely pleased with the Adoption Register and feel their help, advice and support have been invaluable.' A local authority commented: 'The Register works closely with the consortium that we are part of and this is of great benefit to the children in maximising placements.' Another local authority said: 'There is a strong commitment to finding placements for children and working with consortia around the country.' All the feedback received made reference to prompt and efficient responses and helpful staff.

The Adoption Register team runs a number of exchange days each year, one of which is specifically for minority ethnic children, in addition to attending those events run by local authorities. Again the feedback from both stakeholders and adopters is very positive. One local authority commented: 'We have found that the exchange days produce matches (three from the last one in Manchester).' Another local authority commented that two matches had been made following the last exchange day and that matches were usually made in a few weeks when using the Adoption Register.

Further sources to facilitate the matching of children include Be My Parent, both in newspaper form and online. The team works very efficiently and effectively in partnership with local authorities, to meet the needs of harder to place children. A stakeholder commented: 'The speed at which they respond to and deal with any enquiry I throw their way is very impressive and I find the whole set up very efficient and effective.'

Despite the obvious effectiveness of the current arrangements, BAAF has identified ways to build on this and improve further. It has done this through securing funding for the placement activity day project, a day where approved adoptive families can meet children waiting, in an environment where the children have fun. A local authority manager commented: 'I have been impressed by the thought given to the work, the care taken to protect children, and the sound building of quality knowledge in this new area of work. I believe this work is in good hands and that we stand a chance of placing some of our hardest to place children for adoption through this project.' The Adoption Register team is also involved in another pilot project, looking at how decision making affects speed of placement. This shows reflective, innovative practice and a great commitment to finding appropriate adoptive families for all children who require one.

BAAF is very clear about its role in safeguarding children and has a very clear policy and procedural guidance so staff know their responsibilities. This is a very child-focused document, supported by other related policies such as whistleblowing, staff recruitment and record keeping. It is currently under review to ensure it is completely up to date. One of the regional directors takes a lead role to ensure safeguarding has a clear focus and acts as a first point of contact to discuss issues which may be of a safeguarding nature. Staff have regular briefings so they know

how to respond to any concerns. These measures are instrumental in ensuring children and service users are kept safe and that any allegations are responded to and dealt with appropriately.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

BAAF provides outstanding support to adoptive families to enable them to continue to care for their children in stable, appropriate and happy placements. BAAF directly supports adoptive families through its helpline, its support services, its publications and indirectly through the training it provides to professionals on all aspects of adoption support. This includes literature in relation to education, and training for teachers so they can consider the needs of an adopted child during their time at school. To quote a local authority: 'BAAF is the source of well informed guidance on practice issues via their publications and individual consultancy as needed, which is much valued. Their input to regional adoption agency meetings on practice and trends is very valuable.'

The agency is extremely effective in the direct support it gives to families to maintain children in stable loving placements. To quote an adopter: 'The support from the therapist was the single most important factor for the success of this placement. She taught us how to parent in a way which will support the children through change and also taught us how to play with the children to accelerate attachment. I can honestly say that we will not have been where we are today (a loving family with individuals who grow together in a calm atmosphere) if it wasn't for BAAF's support and the skills we now have as a result of the training we received.' The adopter also comments that the child has grown in confidence as a result of the therapy. Another adopter commented: 'We feel that BAAF offers a particularly important service because of their knowledge and experience of adoption and how this impacts on behaviour and relationships in the home and school environments.' Following a session with the therapist another adopter commented: 'At the end of it all we felt understood, encouraged and helped.'

Another means of direct support is the support group, including telephone consultancy and training, for Black adopters which BAAF run on a bi-monthly basis on a Saturday, to facilitate attendance. Feedback from this group is also very positive: 'I thought the group was excellent. We discussed issues that are particularly relevant to Black adopters' children.'

The helpline is available to adopters on a daily basis and is well used by them. Experienced social workers answer the queries and give practical advice and information, signpost to other agencies and support adopters to go back to their own agency for further assistance. An adopter commented: 'The helpline has been a good source of support on the couple of occasions I've used it. I had a number of concerns about my adoption agency and received good advice about how to deal with them. My relationship with my agency and social worker has improved significantly since then.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

BAAF has limited opportunities to work directly with children. Despite this, it is a child-focused and child-centred organisation which is able to demonstrate that children's views are crucial and underpin all of the work they carry out. They work carefully with their member organisations to ensure children's views are represented and that children have been fully involved and prepared appropriately. Children are also involved in talking about their experiences directly in a number of conferences which BAAF has run, for example, in relation to social networking and contact. BAAF has been instrumental in eliciting children's views in relation to the support they require with their communication needs, and the characteristics of good carers, which it then uses to inform the practice of other agencies.

BAAF provides an excellent service to its member agencies to enable them to work with children in a child-focused way, and ascertain their wishes and feelings. It provides an impressive range of high quality literature and practice guidance which address issues such as life story work, child appreciation days and contact. It also provides literature for children themselves, to help them understand adoption and what it means for them. These are in the form of children's guides and books about various aspects of adoption. These are written for children of varying ages and abilities, and some are written by children themselves. BAAF has its own literature for children using its services, such as Reggie the Register. It also involves children and obtains their views and permission whenever possible, for example, when using a profile to find a family. This shows a commitment to put the child at the centre. Children's views are being actively sought in the placement activity day project; they are involved in developing their profile, and there is comprehensive guidance for social workers and foster carers to ensure the children know exactly what the day is about and are well prepared.

There are excellent arrangements to enable adopted adults and birth relatives to obtain information about their adoption, searching and reunion. BAAF has developed a very impressive and easy to navigate website which can undertake sophisticated searches for information. Use of the Adoption Search Reunion Website is free and gives excellent, clear information, guidance and help with following up leads.

The other aspect of work with adopted adults is in relation to the records of the British Adoption Project. BAAF holds the records, and will undertake birth records counselling and intermediary work in relation to the people affected by this project. This work is governed by comprehensive procedural guidance to ensure there is consistent formalised practice of a high standard. The work undertaken so far demonstrates an excellent awareness of the sensitive issues involved and excellent guidance to the relevant agencies in handling the disclosure of information.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

BAAF plays a very significant and extremely effective part in raising public awareness of adoption and thus increasing the numbers of people coming forward to express an interest in becoming assessed as adoptive parents and providing families for children. It does this through National Adoption Week, working in partnership with other adoption agencies by providing assistance and advice to make their local campaigns more effective, but also through its positive and effective working relationships with its media partners. These avenues have been successful in making matches, particularly for children who have been harder to place. BAAF continually assesses the effectiveness of what it does, and strives to improve and innovate. For example, it has recently developed adoption champions, to increase public awareness. Local authorities and other adoption agencies, who benefit from the increased interest in adoption, comment very positively on BAAF's involvement in this important area of work: 'They are excellent in getting large-scale media coverage and providing spokespersons with the opportunity to appear live on radio or television and interacting and answering questions as they come in.'

Children are helped to understand about adoption and what it means for them through an excellent range of appropriately written literature which BAAF produces, for example, 'Is it true you have two mums?' They are helped to understand the particular services which BAAF provides through an excellent leaflet about the Adoption Register (Reggie the Register) and a recently developed guide to adoption support, which is customised to meet the needs of each particular child who uses the service. Adults know about the aims, objectives, services and facilities of the service through the Statement of Purpose, which can be accessed through the website and made available in different formats. This document is very clear, easy to understand, and child and outcome focused. BAAF is successful in meeting all its stated aims and objectives to an extremely high standard.

The agency is managed extremely effectively by a very strong leadership team, headed by the responsible individual who brings a wealth of knowledge and experience of business, finance, the public and the voluntary sector to complement the social work professionals. All managers are very experienced in both childcare and family placement work and hold appropriate professional and managerial qualifications.

The agency is financially sound and has seen an increase in its reserves over recent years. The board gives rigorous and regular scrutiny to the accounts, which are audited annually as required. There is a very strong awareness of the need to

maintain and build on the financial viability, highlighted in the development plan, to ensure services continue to be provided.

The agency has worked hard to improve its recruitment and selection procedures to ensure that only people suitable to work with children and service users are appointed. There is a rigorous appointment process supported by appropriate checks and references, and a robust system for ensuring Criminal Records Bureau checks and General Social Care Council registration remain in date. These measures protect children and vulnerable adults.

The agency is staffed by people who demonstrate a very impressive degree of knowledge, competence, commitment and passion about their work. This includes staff at all levels and roles within the organisation. All staff are appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable about various aspects of adoption practice. This is enhanced by a good induction, access to excellent training opportunities, both internal and external, practice forums and excellent support.

Staff are very happy working for BAAF. They say the organisation allows them to be creative, listens to them and allows them to get on with things, while maintaining a good balance between autonomy and supervision: 'BAAF is inclusive, professional, and has people with impressive knowledge, skills and experience, who are very supportive.'

Support for staff is excellent. All staff receive regular, recorded supervision of a good quality, followed by an annual appraisal which feeds into the learning and development plan. BAAF also provides a number of support groups, including one for Black workers and another for people with personal experience of adoption, which not only provides support but also acts as a forum for influencing policy. There is also access to an independent and confidential counselling service. There is ready access to advice on a variety of issues including equality issues, medical and legal matters and up-to-date research. These measures support and enable staff to continue to provide a high quality service to children and adult service users.

The agency is monitored very effectively at all levels which results in service users consistently receiving a service of a very high quality. To quote a stakeholder: 'BAAF is a well respected organisation within the adoption sector.' Further comments included: 'BAAF's contribution to adoption partnership work in England is absolutely invaluable. BAAF is a very good organisation to work with. The quality of its advice and policy guidance is of the highest order. BAAF's published materials are used widely; its training programme is valued highly; and its consulting service is also regarded highly.' Arrangements for monitoring include formal information sharing between the different offices and the adoption agency manager and regular management meetings. The board of trustees has a diverse membership, including those with personal experience of adoption, to enable them to have an informed basis for their scrutiny. They meet on a quarterly basis and are presented with very detailed reports, including a system for highlighting shortfalls in performance indicators. This ensures transparency of scrutiny and facilitates remedial action being addressed.

The agency has a policy and procedure in relation to all aspects of record keeping, implemented in practice, which clarifies those records which are required by the adoption regulations and arrangements for access. The agency holds the adoption case records on behalf of the British Adoption Project, which are stored with appropriate security. These records have been duplicated and copies kept elsewhere as an added protection. There is a thorough collation of the complaints records to enable and facilitate monitoring and detection of trends. This has also been provided to the board and illustrates the open and transparent ethos of the agency and their willingness to learn and use complaints as an opportunity to develop and progress.

The agency's premises are suitable to enable it to carry out its Statement of Purpose. The premises are secure, including secure facilities for the storage of records, and information technology systems are appropriately protected to ensure confidentiality. There is a business continuity plan which addresses the premises and records, to prevent as little disruption as possible to the provision of the service in the event of an unforeseen event. The manager has a system for notifying any significant events to ensure children's safety and well-being are promoted.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. BAAF fully embraces and celebrates all aspects of equality and diversity and is welcoming and respectful of all difference. All its policies and procedures are fully inclusive, and there is a disability action plan to further address that specific aspect. It works in partnership with other agencies to improve their awareness and practice through its practice notes, publications and training, all of which are of a very high quality. It has been in the forefront of promoting awareness of alternative family structures, including the publication of literature such as 'The Pink Guide to Adoption' and 'Recruiting Black and Minority Ethnic Adopters', and providing training events on, for example, assessing gay and lesbian adopters. It continues to promote the placement of all children, including disabled children, and works extremely hard to break down the barriers for children who are seen as harder to place. It is an inclusive organisation and is supportive of its staff through, for example, the Black workers' groups. There are a number of different specialist groups within BAAF to ensure all aspects of diversity are fully considered and that good practice is promoted to all its member organisations.