

Action for Children - Adoption Black Families

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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Date of last inspection	26/09/2007

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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 Action for Children, Adoption Black Families project was set up in 2003 to address the need to recruit adopters to provide permanent homes for children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. It approves around 16 families a year and has placed 22 children for adoption within the past 12 months. The agency has membership of both the South London and the South West London Adoption Consortiums.

It is managed as one of the four adoption branches that exist within the Action for Children adoption service. A service manager of the agency oversees the practice manager, social workers and sessional workers who carry out the assessments and training of adopters; supported by an administrative team.

The branch recruits, prepares, assesses and approves families that are able to provide permanent adoptive homes for children from different ethnic backgrounds. It also provides adoption support for all approved adopters. A member of the team undertakes intermediary work for adults who were adopted through Action for Children in the past. The agency will provide a counselling service for birth families affected by adoption if requested.

The adoption service is located in a small business park in Stockwell, London.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The Adoption Black Families service of Action for Children provides a good level of care for the children who require adoption. In spite of recent organisational, staffing and management changes the services continues to recruit, prepare, assess and approve adopters who will meet the needs of children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The service must ensure that assessments of adopters are carried out in a timely fashion to maintain the number of adoption places available to children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has improved the quality of adopters' assessment reports by applying more robust management audit systems and conducting team analysis of assessment reports at the mid-stage period of assessment.

Adoption panel minutes now contain the names and status of panel members in attendance.

The administrative team are now permanent employees of the service. Social workers now receive one-to-one supervision on a monthly basis.

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.

Children are helped to feel safe through the provision of a range of information documents explaining the adoption service. These contain the contact details of helping agencies including Ofsted, the Children's Rights Director and other advocates and ensures that children are made aware of avenues of support. Similarly, potential adopters receive information material about adoption, including the agency's statement of purpose, which clearly sets out how, and to whom they make representations or complaints.

Potential adoption households are appropriately checked to ensure that they do not present any health and safety dangers to children. The agency has a number of written policies to further protect children. These include policies on potentially dangerous dogs and on adopters who smoke. Adopters who smoke cannot adopt a child under 5 years old and the policy takes further steps to discourage adopters from smoking and to promote a healthy lifestyle. However, this policy does not exclude people who smoke from adopting older children. Adopters receive training, advice and guidance on promoting children's healthy lifestyles. Children will be referred to the local child and adolescent and mental health services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments if there are concerns about their mental health or related behaviour. This provides a good level of health care for adopted children.

Placing social workers consult children about their feelings of proposed placements at various stages of the adoption process. If they are of an appropriate age, children are seen alone by their social worker during the early weeks of placement and asked if they feel safe and happy in the placement. Following a number of placement disruptions the service has improved the assessments of potential adopters by more rigorous management audit and team analysis at the mid stage of assessments. Assessments of potential adopters are accurate and of a good quality. Children are suitably matched with prospective adopters. Approved adopters details are available to local authority family finders who are members of the relevant adoption consortiums. The agency's social workers work in collaboration with them to ensure that the best matches are made. Approved adopters details are also placed on the national adoption register. There is a centralised marketing and recruitment team who have specific responsibility for the recruitment of potential adopters with particular focus on meeting the needs of those groups of children who may be more

difficult to place. Finding the appropriate adopters for children ensures that they will have the best opportunity for a stable placement.

Managers and social workers in the adoption team receive training on safeguarding children which is appropriate to their level of responsibility and specific to adoption work. Potential adopters receive training on safeguarding children within the preparation course as a result they are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. All social workers have online access to the safeguarding children procedures produced by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. There are systems in place which ensure that all necessary authorities will be notified if significant events relating to the protection of children arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children live in homes which have been fully assessed as being safe and providing adequate space and are furnished and decorated to a suitable standard. Households are checked by social workers during home visits to ensure that they are equipped with resources that will meet children's needs.

At the time that a proposed match is being considered between a child and adopters a placement planning meeting takes place between the placing authority and the adoption service. The birth parents are consulted by the placing authorities and their feelings about the proposed adoption are made known to the meeting, as are the views and concerns of the foster carers currently caring for the child. Foster carers and potential adopters attend the placement planning meetings. This ensures that as much information about a child's history, needs and preferences can be properly shared and made known to the potential adopter.

The service actively plans the support that children and adopters will need following an adoption placement being made. Placing authority social workers collaborate with social workers within the adoption team to construct an adoption support plan which details how the needs of children and adopters will be met. These plans are appropriately reviewed. The plans may include identifying how the initial costs of providing essential items and expenses will be met. Social workers meet with adopters on a weekly basis at the early stage of placement to monitor how the plan is being applied and to gain an awareness of any potential difficulties that might be arising and how to deal with them. Children of an appropriate age are visited by placing social workers at the early stage of placement and are seen alone.

The agency has developed a behaviour support policy which sets out for adopters how best to help children develop acceptable behaviour and how to manage unacceptable behaviour. Adopters are introduced to this policy at preparation groups and social workers will discuss this with them during routine support meetings. The help children may need in managing behaviour is detailed in their adoption support plans. Detailed planning helps to ensure that children will receive all necessary ongoing support.

Children's educational needs are also identified in the adoption support plan and in their personal education plans, if they are of the appropriate age. Educational support is accessed from the resources of the placing authority. Social workers will visit schools to give help and advise about the educational needs of adopted children. Adopters experiencing problems in dealing with children's challenging behaviour or educational progress whether this be at home or in school can access support from the local child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) team.

Adopters can access advice and counselling from social workers in the adoption team or will be linked to counsellors in specialist agencies. The service does not currently circulate an information newsletter but arranges quarterly support meetings for adopters. The service organises occasional social or leisure events for adopters and adopted children which gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers. There are currently no forum meetings held for adopters birth children or for adopted adults.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children of an appropriate age are informed about their rights and where they can go to get help.

They receive useful advice about the adoption service from a children's guide. This guide outlines key information about adoption and their rights as adopted children, and contain the contact details of Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director.

Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds by the provision of life story work and later life letters of a reasonable quality. These are usually constructed by placing social workers. Social workers from the adoption service will ensure that these are in place by the time of the first placement review and that they are of an acceptable quality. The importance of adopters' appreciation that adopted children need to have an awareness of their personal history is explained to them in their preparation training and in ongoing supervision visits. The agency arrange 'Telling Workshops' to give guidance and advice to adopters on telling children of their adoption status.

Birth parents are consulted about their views of the proposed matching with prospective adopters and these views are presented to the placement planning meeting. Adopters are encouraged to meet with birth parents unless this will negatively impact on the well-being of the child involved or is otherwise thought inappropriate. Birth parents may be offered the opportunity to receive counselling from the agency if this is requested by the placing authority. Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court. The adoption service will undertake supervised contact if this is requested by the placing authority. There is an historical commitment still in place to continue to provide a letterbox system to facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. This work is now

mainly undertaken by placing authorities.

Adults who were adopted through Action for Children are well supported in accessing their birth records. A specialist practice manager undertakes intermediary work. One adopted person who received this service commented:

'The support I received was invaluable. I will be forever grateful for the sensitive care I received.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not an area of this inspection.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The way that the service promotes equality and diversity is good. The aims of the service are to recruit adopters to provide permanent homes for children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. Although there is an all female social work team the service will access gender related advice from specialist male workers within the organisation. Similarly, advice about the needs of children with disabilities will be sought from people with this expertise within this large, national voluntary organisation. Members of the adoption panel are of each gender. There are a diverse range of social workers from minority ethnic groups within the social work team and within the adoption panel. The adoption service has approved applications from single and same sex adopters. Some members of the adoption panel have personal experience of adoption. There is an agency policy in place on promoting equality and diversity.

Potential adopters expressing an interest in adoption are sent an information pack within seven days and are invited to attend a meeting with a social worker within two months. The service arranges occasional information evenings which potential adopters can attend. Children, adopters and other stakeholders benefit from a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which clearly sets out the aims, objective and priorities of the service and which details the composition of the service management. This statement is reviewed annually. A clearly written children's guide for children of reading age provides detailed information about the service. These documents ensure that children, service users and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the agency and what services and facilities it provides.

Adopters are assessed, trained and provided with adoption support by social workers within the adoption team. The team includes a mixture of permanent, contracted and sessional social workers. The quality of adopters' assessments is now monitored by second opinion visits, mid-stage analysis by the social work team and management audit. The time taken to complete assessments can be slow and 60% of adopters

wait longer than the recommended eight months from the time of formal application to panel recommendation. The service arranges four preparation groups a year for adopters. Adoption support plans are constructed by placing social workers in collaboration with social workers in the adoption team and these clearly identify the help that adopters will need in providing the best care for children. Adopters are provided with clearly written post approval and post adoption information packs.

The registered manager of this branch of the adoption service is a professionally qualified social worker who is registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). They have many years experience in child care management and practice, and has an appropriate management qualification. Social workers in the adoption team are all professionally qualified and are members of the GSCC. Two of the six social workers in the adoption team have the Post Qualification award in Child Care. Social workers receive monthly supervision and there are fortnightly team meetings. All management, practitioners and panel members undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. In addition to their attendance at a preparation course to introduce them to the key areas and realities of adoption, adopters undertake further appropriate training to prepare them for their role as adopters. The vetting and recruitment practice for staff, panel members and potential adopters is appropriate and ensures that the dangers of children being cared for by inappropriate people are reduced.

An independently chaired panel meets on a monthly basis to make recommendations to the agency decision maker about adopter approval. The panel is properly constituted from a central list of members. It is well administered and the recommendations and decisions are made in a timely manner by the panel and the agency decision maker. This ensures that adoption plans for children are well thought out and reduces the time that children wait for an adoption place.

Case records of adopters and adopted children are comprehensive and clearly written and are stored in a manner which ensures their confidentiality. Archive files of children's adoption files are securely stored in a manner which ensures their security and longevity so that they will be available to adopted adults who may wish to trace their adoption records in the future. A disaster recovery plan is in place to support the storage of important case records.

A business continuity plan is in place to ensure that the service will cope with the effects of an incident/emergency. This plan is reviewed annually. The service conducts a biannual report of the adoption service which details its effectiveness in meeting its service aims and objectives and identifies necessary areas of development. This report is present to the charity trustees. Internal review of service provision helps to improve the quality of children's care.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the adoption panel's recommendation about the suitability of the prospective adopter to adopt a child should be made within eight months of the receipt of their formal application. (Adoption Statutory Guidance, February 2011, Chapter 3 paragraph 1)