

SSAFA Forces Help Adoption Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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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

This voluntary adoption agency is part of a registered charity which supports the social care of armed services personnel and their families. It undertakes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters who serve in the armed forces, and to United Kingdom (UK) based civilians serving in overseas commands. The charity has a board of trustees who oversees its function and there is an Adoption Management Committee who oversees the adoption service and who reports to the trustees. Since 2010 the service no longer undertakes inter-country adoptions. It provides, or makes arrangements for, adoption support where a child is placed for adoption with such families. The agency also provides advice and support to service personnel who have been adopted. Prospective adopters are recruited who may be serving either in the UK or overseas.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This voluntary adoption agency provides a good adoption service and has specialist expertise in finding good adoption places for children who may be more difficult to place. These may be because they are in sibling groups, are older or who present more challenges due to early life experiences. The adoption team is well qualified and experienced and is well trained, supervised and managed.

The service must ensure that prospective adopters are assessed and approved within the recommended time periods.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has addressed all of the actions and recommendations made at the previous inspection.

The adoption panel is now properly constituted. All references taken on applicants for staff vacancies are now followed up by telephone enquiry and a dated record of this is now kept. Staff and panel members' records now contain all required information.

The service now maintains policies and procedures for the function of the adoption panel and a decision-making protocol is now in place. A clear policy for adoption support is now in place and a specialist worker has been appointed to carry out post adoption support. There is a protocol in place for the role of specialist advisors. A clear and effective management strategy is now in place. The service has a clearly defined strategy for the support of adoptive families living overseas.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not inspected.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency has a range of policies in place which help to keep children safe. These include policies on household safety which ensure that adopters' homes are appropriately checked according to a health and safety checklist. This ensures that adopters' homes do not present any health and safety dangers to children. There are policies on placing children with dog-owning families and adopters who smoke. Adopters who smoke cannot adopt a child under five or who has respiratory or heart conditions. 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 and on monitoring children's health. Concerns about a child's emotional health or related behaviour are referred to the local child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) team for psychiatric or psychological assessments and support. However, the agency will access therapeutic services if there is a delay in accessing CAMHS support. These measures help to provide a good level of health care for adopted children.

Children are helped to feel safe through the provision of information documents explaining the adoption service and where children can go for help. These documents contain the contact details of helping agencies including those of Ofsted, the Children's Rights Director and other advocates. This ensures that children are made aware of avenues of support. Placing authority social workers consult with 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 placing social worker during the early weeks of placement and asked if they feel safe and happy in the placement. The feelings of children about their placement are discussed at the review meetings. Placement update reports are presented to the adoption panel to allow them to monitor a placement progress. There has been one adoption placement disruption within the past 12 months which was suitably reviewed and learning points added to service development. Constant monitoring and checking of the adoption placement help to ensure that children are happy and are being well cared for.

Written assessments of potential adopters are comprehensive and of a good quality. Children are matched with the agency's prospective adopters via the matching systems of the placing authorities. Once they are approved, adopters' details are made available to the local authorities who are seeking an adoption placement. Approved adopters are placed on the national adoption register and other appropriate mediums. Agency social workers meet with placing authorities at an 'Information Sharing Day' to ensure that the best matches are made. This also

ensures that prospective adopters are given the full range of information about the child intended to be placed. With the support of the agency social workers, adopters produce written and visual materials about themselves and their households. This information is age-appropriate and used for informing children about the adopters. It is also made available to placing authorities. Clear information given at the outset helps to ensure that children will be living in stable placements.

Good systems are in place to ensure that children are safeguarded from possible abuse by inappropriate people. All managers and social workers, panel members and adopters are subject to rigorous vetting procedures. Managers, panel members and social workers in the adoption team receive in-house training on safeguarding children. This training is appropriate to their level of responsibility and specific to adoption work. Potential adopters receive training on safeguarding children and safe caring within the preparation course and those spoken to are familiar with the relevant policies and procedures. All social workers have online access to the Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures. The agency has included in their quarterly newsletter the dangers of social network internet use which might put adopted children at risk. Agency staff have also presented training workshops for social workers in this area of safeguarding children. There are systems in place which ensure that all necessary authorities are notified if significant events relating to the protection of children arise. The rigorous vetting of people who children come into contact with, and detailed training of staff and adopters, help to ensure that children are kept safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children are supported in enjoying sound relationships with adopters and in behaving appropriately. Adopters receive comprehensive training at preparation groups to help them identify the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on adopted children. This also helps adopters understand how this may affect children's later behaviour. Adopters are introduced to parenting techniques specific to children who have experienced attachment and loss and early life trauma. Training is also given to adopters on safe caring which includes giving adopters guidance and advice on self-protection and protecting themselves from the possibility of malicious allegations. Children are referred to their local CAMHS teams if they require psychological or psychiatric assessments. The agency spot purchases professional therapeutic services to support adopters in dealing with children's challenging behaviour. Periodic newsletters advise adopters that they may contact the agency at any time in the future if they require support in dealing with a child's challenging behavioural needs. This good level of support helps to maintain stable placements for children.

The educational needs of adopted children are well supported. The adoption panel has a member who is an educational psychologist and advises on children's educational support. Adopted children are referred to the Children's Educational Advisory Service which supports the children of armed service personnel. They will liaise with schools to ensure that adopted children's educational needs are met.

Children's educational needs are identified by placing authorities in their personal education plans and in the adoption support plan. Educational support is generally accessed from the resources of the placing authority. However, social workers from the adoption team visit schools to give help and advice about the educational needs of adopted children. Adopters experiencing problems with children's educational progress whether this be at home or in school can be referred to the local CAMHS team.

Adopters' preparation groups advise them to promote children's healthy lifestyles and to support children in pursuing their personal skills and interests, whether these are play, recreational or sporting. Children live in homes which have been fully assessed as being safe, providing adequate space and are furnished and decorated to a good standard. Households are checked by social workers during home visits to ensure that they are equipped with resources that will meet children's needs. Social workers may apply to placing authorities for setting up grants or to charities if adopters are likely to incur additional expenses beyond their financial means.

The adoption team social workers offer a good level of support. However, there is no external service where adopters can be referred for advice and counselling to counsellors in specialist agencies if they are adversely affected by adoption. The service circulates a quarterly information newsletter which gives adopters help and advice about the support they may receive. There are regular support group meetings for adopters which often have guest speakers who give talks on aspects of adoption. The service organises periodic social events for adopters and adopted children which also gives them the opportunity to discuss aspects of adoption with their peers. There are currently no forum meetings held for adopters' birth children.

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. This plan details how the needs of children and adopters will be met. These plans are appropriately reviewed. Social workers meet with adopters on a weekly basis at the early stage of placement. This supports social workers in monitoring how the plan is being applied. It also helps them 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 to gauge their feelings about the placement.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

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 which is contained in a children's leaflet, outlining key information about adoption and their rights as adopted children. These guides contain the contact details of Ofsted and the Children's Rights Director.

Children are aided in understanding their backgrounds through the provision of life story work and later life letters; these are of a reasonable quality. These are usually constructed by social workers from the placing authority. Social workers from the adoption service 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 provides ongoing training courses to give guidance and advice to adopters on telling children of their adoption status.

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. Social workers from the placing authorities consult with birth parents about their views of the proposed matching. These views are presented to the placement planning meeting. Birth parents whose children are to be adopted by a voluntary adoption agency may be offered the opportunity to receive a counselling service from the placing authority or an agency that the placing authority has a service level agreement with. Contact arrangements between birth family members and adopted children are established at an early stage of planning and agreed by the court and the agency will help to facilitate these arrangements. The letterbox systems in place within the placing authorities facilitate written contact between birth families and their adopted children. The agency provides training for adopters to give them an understanding of the use of letterbox systems. There is also training for adopters within the preparation groups to help them understand the importance of supporting this contact. These measures help to promote children's sense of identity and self-esteem.

Adopted adults who were adopted through the agency or who are members of the armed services, can receive support from the social work team in accessing their birth records. They are also signposted to an appropriate agency that can provide intermediary support in contacting their birth families. The numbers of adopted adults taking up this service are very small as such people are more likely to directly link to local authority adoption services.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

This outcome group is not inspected.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Information materials reflect the multi-ethnic ethos of the agency and its commitment to the diverse range of its service recipients. The aims of the service are to recruit adopters to provide permanent homes for children who may be more difficult to place. This may be

because they are members of a sibling group or because they are older children, or they have a disability. Additionally, the agency recruits adopters from black and minority ethnic groups, single adopters and same sex adopters. Although there is an all female social work team, the service will access gender related advice from specialist male workers within the organisation.

Although the racial composition of the social work team is entirely white, there are several members from different national and cultural groups. The service will access race related advice from specialist workers within and outside the organisation. There are members of the adoption panel of each gender. There are several members from black and minority ethnic groups. There are members of the adoption panel with personal experience of adoption and adoptive parents. One member of the panel is a birth parent whose child was adopted. 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 five days and are contacted by telephone by a social worker who gives them further information about adoption. This is followed by two home visits to give adopters further information and to give an early assessment about the applicant's suitability to adopt. 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. The Statement of Purpose clearly sets out how and to whom potential adopters may make representations or complaints about the service. This statement is reviewed at least annually. Complaints leaflets are also sent out to potential adopters at this stage. No complaints about the service have been received within the past 12 months. Adopters are presented with a booklist of relevant literature and there is a small resource library that adopters can use.

There is a children's information leaflet for children of reading age, or which can be read to them, which gives 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 and contracted sessional social workers.

The quality of adopters' assessments is monitored by a manager of the service and a quality assurance checklist is in place to facilitate this. Second opinion visits are carried out by social workers within the team on every assessment. This high level of scrutiny helps to ensure that assessments are of a good standard before they are submitted to the panel. In the past 12 months the time taken to complete adopters assessments and panel recommendation has been longer than the eight months recommended by the Adoption Guidance (February 2011) in every case. This is due to the frequent geographical changes that affect service families because of periodic deployment, postings and house moves. The service arranges three 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. These measures of adoption support are good and help to ensure that there is less likelihood that children's adoption placements will break down.

The Registered Manager 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 have an appropriate management qualification. Social workers in the adoption team are all professionally qualified and are members of the GSCC. All of the social workers in the adoption team have the Post Qualification Award in Child Care. Social workers receive monthly supervision and there are regular team meetings. All management, practitioners and panel members undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. Adopters undertake appropriate training to prepare them for their role as adopters. This is in addition to their attendance at a preparation course which introduces them to the key areas and realities of adoption, 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 six weekly 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 the time that children wait for an adoption place is reduced.

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. This 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 ensure that the service will cope with the effects of an incident or emergency. There are risk assessments in place on all parts of the premises.

The service conducts a quarterly 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 presented to the charity trustees via the Adoption Management Committee. 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 should be made within eight months of the receipt of their formal application (Adoption Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002, Chapter 3.1: February 2011)
- ensure that prospective adopters and adopters are made aware of, and encouraged by, the Adoption Support Services Advisor to access support services. (NMS 15.4)