

Action for Children Adoption - Midlands

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Vivien Slyfield
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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 Adoption Midlands is a branch of Action for Children, previously known as NCH, which is a well-established voluntary adoption agency. The branch is based in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters who live within a 50 mile radius of its operation. Approved adopters are then offered support, training and social events.

The branch works with local authorities nationwide to provide suitable families for children who are looked after and who cannot be placed appropriately within their own resources.

The branch also provides adoption support to adoptive families and birth families, birth records counselling and an intermediary service to people adopted through Action for Children in the past.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This was a key, announced inspection during which all the key standards and previous actions and recommendations were considered.

Enthusiastic, knowledgeable and committed managers support staff to provide an effective service through times of significant change, maintaining a clear focus on the needs of the child. The agency recruits suitable adoptive families and prepares, assesses and approves them thoroughly so they can meet the needs of adoptive children. The adoption panel and decision-making arrangements are robust.

The agency offers a range of support including a preparation group for friends and family, a men's group for adoptive fathers and post-placement courses for adopters. The agency's recognition of the life-long impact of adoption is also demonstrated through their access to records service, intermediary service and support of on-going contact between adopters and children's birth families.

All the employed staff are recruited appropriately and receive good support and training.

Improvements since the last inspection

The two actions made at the last inspection have been met with Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks being in place prior to panel members starting work and evidence on the files of appropriate implementation of the agency's safeguarding

procedure. The three previous recommendations in staying safe are addressed with the full inclusion of applicants' CRB details on the prospective adopter report, the updating of the health and safety checks and rewording of the decision maker's letter. The final recommendation is met through the signature of the author on the case records.

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.

The agency has an effective approach for ensuring they are aware of the diverse needs of the children who need adoptive families. This informs their recruitment strategy and enables the team to give appropriate and current information to any enquirer. A range of adopters are recruited to allow children referred to the agency to be placed with adopters who meet their cultural, racial and religious needs. The agency has effective working relationships with the local consortium, which assists them in providing suitable adopters to meet the local authorities children. Only one prospective adopter has waited over a year to be matched, indicating recruitment is working effectively.

The agency provides a duty system which deals with new enquiries from prospective adoptive applicants. Adopters identify this as welcoming and useful in providing the information they need at this stage. Some adopters identify the response from the agency at this point as being a deciding factor in applying to Action for Children for assessment. After the provision of an information pack adopters are invited to an information event and then to the office for an initial assessment and given more information to consider. With most prospective adopters an application is given to them at this stage. However, there were some adopters who did not have their application until after the preparation training, which does not follow the statutory guidance. The preparation groups are thorough and cover appropriate areas to help prospective adopters prepare for caring for children. Adopters said that they found the preparation useful and informative, one said: 'We've used what we learnt on the preparation course', and another stated in a survey: 'Everything we did helped prepare me for having my adoptive children placed.' Preparation training is also provided for the prospective adopters' friends and family through the groups run throughout the year.

Assessments of prospective adopters are completed in the prospective adopter report format. These reports give a full picture of the applicants and provide a full assessment of their abilities. The health and safety assessment has been updated, pet risk assessments are completed, references are sought from previous partners and employers, as well as statutory checks, including Criminal Records Bureau

checks being undertaken. Issues of diversity are included but focus more on race, religion and culture with reports not consistently considering attitudes to sexuality and disability. A 'final visit' is completed by a member of the team to give another view of the applicants and this is written in a further report to the adoption panel. This is good practice and supports comprehensive, independent assessments. The reports are seen by the applicants and alterations made if necessary before their presentation to the adoption panel.

The adoption panel is well organised and allows assessments to be considered without undue delay. The panel is properly constituted and membership reflects the diversity of children and applicants considered. Panel members are well prepared for meetings and make full and meaningful contributions to the panel discussions. A member commented: 'Panel members show commitment, motivation and enthusiasm and have a sense that we do some very important things in relation to the placement of children.' Applicants are well prepared by their assessing worker for the experience of panel and have written information and photographs introducing each member. The panel is welcoming and well chaired to allow applicants and presenting workers to give of their best. The panel allows private discussion of sensitive topics outside the meeting, usually involving the chairperson and if appropriate the medical adviser.

The meeting is fully recorded and the minutes well structured. However, the minutes do not state the reasons for the panel's recommendation; they amalgamate their recommendation and advice, and in one set of minutes referred to the decision maker 'agreeing with the panel's decision'. The agency decision maker is knowledgeable about adoption and considers all the relevant information, including the minutes before reaching a decision. There is a system in place for deputising if the decision maker is unavailable and for consultation with a senior officer if this is required in reaching a conclusion. Decision making is robust and timely.

All the staff and the branch manager have current Criminal Records Bureau checks and are appropriately qualified and experienced. The recruitment records of the agency adoption manager are not held at this branch and have therefore not been seen as part of this inspection.

Complaints are responded to in an appropriate manner without delays being evident. Information is recorded centrally about complaints and collated to give an overview for the branch manager and to allow all the agency's branches to learn from issues raised.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to adoptive families both before and after the adoption order is made. Adopters are well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting through the assessment process and this is reinforced by further support and advice when a child is placed. The duty system allows contact with a member of

the team and the out of hours contact number is staffed by the local team, which allows adopters to contact someone who will have some knowledge of them if difficulties arise. Adopters commented: 'Even if nothing is happening they still kept in touch', and another said: 'My social worker is very good at ongoing support.'

The agency provides adopters with packs of information at different stages, post approval and post adoption, to give them details that are relevant to their particular experience. A newsletter is circulated once a year and there are at least two family events, which bring adopters and their families together. A range of post approval training is provided, including parenting, attachment and explaining about adoption to your child. The agency has recently established a group specifically for adoptive fathers and is looking at how it can extend the use of this new development. The friends and family groups run by the agency acknowledge their important role in supporting adopters and gives them valuable insight into how they can best provide support.

The specialist advisers provide a valuable and skilled resource for both adopters and the agency staff. The medical adviser is committed, very aware of adoption issues and of the relevance of the medical information she receives. Social workers for the agency find her accessible, approachable and responsive to their queries. Similarly they find their legal adviser accessible and able to provide relevant advice.

The low level of disruption indicates that adopters are well supported to provide secure homes for their adopted children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency clearly recognises the lifelong implications of adoption for everyone involved and demonstrates a strong commitment to provide a good service in recognition of this. Adopters are very aware of the significance and value of a child's birth family and treasure early memorabilia when it is provided. Adopters are supported to have a face-to-face meeting with birth parents and there is a small indirect contact service provided by the agency. There are some situations where there is ongoing direct contact with birth families, which are supported, and in some instances supervised, by the agency.

The reorganisation of managers has allowed the branch to establish a practice manager with part of the role having responsibility for access to birth records and a service to adopted adults. This allows a clear overview of the service and sensitivity is used in consideration of requests, with an ability to 'fast track' those who need a speedy service due to age or health needs. The service is appropriately supported by administrative staff, which staff commented is now more clearly defined. The wider organisation supports staff and managers through meetings, drawing together all those working with access to records to share skills, knowledge and experience in the development of the service.

The branch provides an accessible and flexible service. Those seeking access to their records can request a meeting closer to their home and care is taken to ensure the venues used are appropriate and confidentiality is respected.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose which outlines the aims and objectives of the organisation and enables people to know what services to expect from Action for Children. Enquirers receive appropriate written information which clearly states the qualities and skills which are required to become an adopter and the children for whom an adoptive family is needed. The website also has this information and the facility to make an enquiry online. Adopters commented that they received a warm and informative response from their initial dealings with the agency, which was influential in them using this agency. The children's guide is personalised for each child and is compliant with the regulations.

The branch manager is appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced. She has a clear job description and lines of accountability and responsibility are evident. The agency is well managed with good communication at all levels. The branch manager is now supported by two practice managers who are similarly skilled and experienced in their areas of work. Staff are very positive about the impact of local managers on them during a time of change. They see the managers as 'always accessible' and stated of the branch manager, 'She is brilliant', and another worker said: 'I feel very protected by the branch manager.'

There are no significant delays in any of the processes for adopters and there is a managed delay for those accessing records. There are currently sufficient staff to undertake the work and all are skilled and experienced in adoption work. They work well as a team with administrative staff being fully integrated and part of the team. One member of staff stated: 'I never previously worked with a team as supportive of each other and their families.' It is noteworthy that although there have been considerable changes in the organisation and some local changes, staff have maintained a quality service. One member of staff said: 'The quality hasn't changed for our adopters.' Adopters commented on the sensitivity and skill of their assessing worker; one adopter said: 'He worked around me for the assessment times', and, 'I was amazed how much information he got from the home study.'

Staff are well supported through regular, planned monthly supervision, which they find useful. Despite financial restraints, training has continued to be provided, which is relevant and informative. Safeguarding training is mandatory for all new staff.

The trustees are kept well informed about the work of the agency through regular reporting mechanisms. Reports about the operation of the branch are provided at least twice per year. These are also presented to the panel to keep them informed and aware of developments. The managers use feedback forms and questionnaires to hear the views of those using their service and then implement changes and developments that reflect these views.

Adopters' records are well organised, structured and presented. Case files showed evidence of supervision and of decisions made. All the files seen have evidence of file audits being undertaken. Electronic records are immediately backed up and can be retrieved in the event of a local disaster. The staff personnel files inspected contained evidence of robust recruitment and selection checks. However, that was not the case for the files on panel members, some of which did not fully comply with the requirements of the regulations. The adoption archive is now stored by an independent organisation through a service level agreement with Action for Children. There continues to be a strong awareness of the significance of the original material stored and of its sensitivity.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The service user is at the centre of all its work and their needs comprehensively addressed. All service provision addresses any particular needs in relation to disability, race, culture or gender. Access to information is addressed with sensitivity, showing an awareness of the needs of each individual. Supporters are welcome to assist service users. All policies and written information are inclusive.

The premises are clearly identifiable, accessible and suitable for the purposes of the agency. Records are stored appropriately in locked rooms and liability insurance is in place.

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 application for assessment of prospective adopters is taken prior to the preparation course, as in the statutory Adoption Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002 (NMS 4)
- ensure that the minutes of the panel meetings are accurate and informative, and clearly state the reasons for the conclusions reached and advice about matching considerations (NMS 12.3)
- ensure that files on panel members contain all the information required by schedule 3 and 4 of the regulations. (NMS 28)