

Action for Children - Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children is a voluntary adoption agency. The Midlands branch, located on the outskirts of Solihull, is one of five branches operating in England. It provides a range of services including the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive families who live within a 50-mile radius of its operation. The branch works with local authorities nationwide to provide suitable families for looked after children who have adoption as their care plan 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.

The branch provided placements for 30 children with its adopters in the year ending 31 March 2012. During that same year it approved 19 adoptive families.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good branch overall, but staffing difficulties and uncertainties about the future, now resolved, have impacted on some aspects of service provision, leading to the quality of care being judged as adequate.

Outcomes for children are good, and the branch provides and supports stable and secure adoptive placements which meet the assessed needs of adoptive children. As a result, children make good progress across all aspects of their development, including their ability to attach and form positive relationships.

There is a high level of satisfaction expressed by adopters and stakeholders. The branch works very well in partnership with local authorities to provide appropriate and effective placements for looked after children with a variety of complex needs. It provides effective preparation and assessment, supported by rigorous approval through the adoption panel and decision-making processes, so only applicants who are suitable to be adoptive parents are approved. However, staffing shortages have

had an impact on the timeliness of assessments. Some of the administrative aspects of the adoption panel and decision-making processes require further development, such as recording the basis of the decision, accessing the final minutes, providing a quality assurance feedback report, and recording issues where timescales have been identified as too long.

Adopters are well supported so that families stay together and placements do not disrupt. The disruption rate is low, only two placements having disrupted in the last three years. The quality of work experienced by adult service users is also good and delivered sensitively. The branch has a proactive stance to safeguarding which ensures that children are safe in their adoptive families.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. Staff are extremely hard working, qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and committed to delivering a high quality of service. They are supported by good communication, effective supervision and access to appropriate training. Service user and stakeholder feedback influences the development of the practices of the branch, but feedback from children could be further developed. The children's guide, although extremely child-focused and accessible, does not include how to contact independent reviewing officers, potentially leaving one avenue for children to raise issues unexplored.

Areas for 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 makes a considered recommendation on the suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt within eight months of receipt of the prospective adopter's formal application to be assessed (NMS 17.7)
- ensure that adoption panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS 17.2)
- ensure that where timescales have not been met, the panel records the reason in the written minutes of the panel meeting (NMS 17.9)
- ensure that the agency decision maker considers the final minutes of the adoption panel before making a considered and professional decision (Volume 5, statutory guidance, paragraph 1.59)
- ensure the agency decision maker follows the statutory guidance when approaching each case (Volume 5, statutory guidance, paragraph 1.62)
- continue to ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in monitoring and developing the service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure the children's guide contains information about how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer. (NMS 18.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children are well settled in safe and secure adoptive families where they make good progress in all aspects of their development. As a branch of a voluntary adoption agency, it specialises in providing adoptive families for sibling groups and children with more complex needs. The success rate of these placements is good, with only two having disrupted in the previous three years. Thus children experience long-term stability once they are placed.

Children become more socially confident, do well at school and develop a strong sense of their own self-worth and identity. For example, one child no longer needs to have a statement of educational need because of the progress made within the adoptive family. A headteacher commented about a child who had the highest attainment at the school: 'I can't believe it's the same child.' Children improve their reading and mathematical ability because of the support and encouragement their adoptive parents give them, which improves their future life chances.

Children who have previously struggled to attach to their caregivers have made strong attachments to their adoptive parents. They grow, put on weight and make good physical progress because they are more emotionally secure. A placing social worker commented on an adoptive family: 'They have met the child's needs fantastically well.' Another commented that the progress the child had made was, 'over and above expectations'.

Children's behaviour improves as a result of living with their adoptive parents, and through the support and advice the branch provides to those families. This enables children to access community resources more successfully as well as form more positive relationships both within and outside of the family.

Children's needs, including those arising from disability or ethnicity, are well met. For example, adopters ensure follow-up services are delivered, to ensure children's health needs are met. Children develop an understanding of their backgrounds, heritage and identity because adopters support contact arrangements appropriately and effectively. Children access appropriate leisure activities such as swimming and karate, so they develop confidence and also improved health as a result of physical exercise. Adoptive parents express a great deal of pride in the progress their children make, one commenting, 'She's like a dress full of rhinestones.' Such pride ensures children's sense of self-worth and self-confidence continue to develop.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The branch receives a large number of enquiries through its website and by telephone. These are responded to very promptly, as there is a well thought out and systematic approach to offering initial interviews through the duty system. This

ensures that enquirers receive comprehensive verbal and written information to enable them to make an informed decision about whether to pursue their interest in adoption at an early opportunity.

Applicants are well prepared for the task of being an adoptive parent through a thorough preparation course which runs three times a year. Differing needs can be met, for example, through the provision of interpreting services if English is not a first language. Placing social workers commented on how well prepared the adopters were, and how they used the information from preparation and assessment to inform their parenting style, all of which contributes to successful and secure placements. Adopters commented that the preparation course altered their views about parenting and gave them a much clearer picture of what was involved, including appropriate strategies to manage the challenges they may face. Preparation training also includes the views of adopted children about what makes a successful adoptive family to make it more child focused.

Staffing shortages have had an impact on when a social worker can be allocated to progress the application following the preparation training. This has resulted in eight out of 11 applications taking longer than eight months to complete, although all were completed within 12 months of receipt of the application to adopt. Despite this, adopters express a high level of satisfaction with the approval process. Assessments are robust and analytical and give an accurate picture of the family and the resource they offer to children, which contributes to a successful matching process.

The adoption panel is robust in its consideration of applications to adopt which further supports safe and secure placements. Panel members contribute differing experiences, both personal and professional, as well as a variety of ethnic origin, to ensure a full and balanced discussion of differing views. Although they provide feedback on the quality of reports at each panel meeting, this is not done on a six monthly basis as a more formalised means of quality assurance; neither is the timeliness of assessments and reason for any delay recorded.

The decision-making process is also timely and well considered, to further ensure only appropriate adoptive parents are approved. However, the decision maker does not currently receive the final minutes of the adoption panel, as approved by all panel members, before making the decision. Furthermore, the basis of the decision is not recorded as fully as the recent statutory guidance recommends. This may lead to challenges of the process in the future.

The branch works very well with local authorities to make good matches. It ensures prospective adopters always receive full information about children's needs to enable them to make a considered decision about whether they have the required strengths to meet those needs successfully. Placing social workers commented about how well supported adopters were during the matching and introduction process, despite the significant distances involved in most cases. This ensures that any queries and questions are asked and answered to form a sound basis for a successful placement.

Staff work very hard and are extremely committed to providing a high quality service

which meets the needs of adoptive families. They are tireless in their commitment to support families, particularly when placements are in crisis, and this support has enabled children to remain with their adopters. Staff support adoptive families at the level they require, but all adopters said they knew the workers were there for them should they require their support. Social workers are also adept at challenging local authorities to provide more support if this is identified as necessary to meet children's needs and support placements. This includes the provision of therapy, or financial support to enable an adopter to stay at home for longer. The branch can also access the resources of the wider agency, for example, therapeutic projects.

Adoption support post placement is provided on an individual basis, either by signposting to relevant services or by pieces of individual work. The branch ensures adopters are kept in touch through a regular newsletter, and two social events which include the whole family. This provides opportunities for adoptive children to meet together in an activity-based environment, and also contribute their views to the development of the branch. The branch also runs a men's group in conjunction with another voluntary adoption agency, which provides good support to male adopters. Social workers are also very good at facilitating networks of local adopters to act as peer support, and informal adoption support groups have resulted from this. Adopters have commented that this was really effective. There is also improved access to training, including a workshop on explaining adoption and another on child development, to further support adopters to understand the task of adoptive parenting and be effective parents. Their support networks benefit from a family and friends' workshop which helps them understand what they can do to provide effective support once children are placed.

The branch provides a service to adopted adults and birth relatives, where the agency was involved in the adoption. It is supported by well-considered policies and procedures and an infrastructure which includes access to specialist workers for specific advice, aspects of data protection and historical abuse. This ensures the service is delivered sensitively, safely and well, with consideration of the needs of all parties. This enables people to understand their situation and make or re-establish relationships where this is appropriate. The branch also tries to cut the costs involved if service users have limited income. One letter received included the following comment: 'Thanks for the lengths you have gone in order for him to find me.' There had been significant delays in this area of work, but this has now reduced considerably, with people waiting no longer than three months.

Adopters and stakeholders express a high degree of satisfaction with the branch. Comments from adopters include, 'very professional and approachable too', 'very supportive', 'always good at talking things through', 'a tremendous backup for the children', and, 'caring and friendly'. Stakeholders comment on, 'good working relationships', 'a positive experience', and one said, 'the social worker was incredibly efficient.'

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

There are good arrangements in place to protect children from harm and promote their safety and well-being. The agency ensures that anyone who works with children is safe to do so through robust recruitment and selection practices. Prospective adoptive parents are thoroughly prepared and assessed to ensure they understand how children's previous experiences impact on their behaviour and how they should be parented. This forms a significant part of the preparation training and subsequent home study. The panel chair adds further robustness to this process by undertaking her own check of the adopters' files to ensure all necessary checks have been carried out and there is no missing information. Good safeguarding practice is further reinforced following approval by the written behaviour management policy which all approved adopters receive, and individually tailored safe caring plans which are developed once a child is placed. Where necessary, risk assessments are fully considered to protect children. Adopters are also made fully aware of the dangers of internet use and how to minimise these risks.

Staff are very proactive in addressing potential safeguarding issues at an early stage. They are encouraged to recognise and address any concerns which may develop into a more serious issue, by providing support and working closely with the child's social worker. These are discussed in team meetings and supervision, where safeguarding is always an agenda item, and closely monitored. This proactive approach, which ensures that safeguarding is always at the forefront of staff practice, is effective in preventing the escalation of concerns and ensuring an appropriate response if a child protection issue is highlighted. Staff practice is also developed through practice discussions at the staff conference and team meetings, which include learning from serious case reviews.

Once children are placed, the agency works closely with the local authority social worker to ensure children are visited regularly, often by undertaking some of these visits on their behalf. As children are placed from all over the country, significant distances are often involved, and this cooperative working is essential to provide adequate protection for vulnerable children placed in new families a long way from anyone they know. This ensures that children have the opportunity to talk to someone and raise any concerns they may have. The format of the home visit record sheet is very child focused and clearly addresses safeguarding, to ensure social workers always consider and report on these issues.

Children are protected by robust safeguarding procedures which are implemented effectively in practice. Likewise, work with adults is undertaken in a way which is very mindful of their, and other people's, vulnerabilities, and supported by staff with a remit to consider safeguarding in its wider sense, including data protection and historical abuse.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the voluntary adoption agency are **good**.

The branch is supported in its recruitment of adopters by a centrally based marketing

team, who adopt a planned, nationwide approach to recruitment. The branch has a strong awareness of the needs of looked after children who require adoptive families, and is successful in attracting those who will provide suitable placements. Social workers are also very good at helping applicants expand their initial thoughts about the needs of children they can realistically meet. For example, one adopter commented that the social worker helped her realise that she could provide a family for a disabled child, and has done so successfully. The agency as a whole is trying to increase the number of families to care for minority ethnic children by targeting community and faith groups to increase the pool of adopters able to offer a family to the children who wait the longest in the care system. It is an inclusive agency, and approved adopters include those from same sex relationships and single adopters.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a strong commitment to adoption. The agency has recently looked at how it provides its adoption service, restated its commitment and restructured to improve managerial accountability. This is in its very early stages and is not fully embedded in practice. However, the branch has shown its ability to improve and develop despite the uncertainty surrounding these changes which has prevailed over the last few months. The three recommendations from the previous inspection have all been met, improving recording procedures and compliance with statutory guidance. Additionally, it has improved the initial visit process to make it quicker, asks referees to sign the references obtained for the adopter assessments, improved adopter access to training, and has adapted its summer event as a result of listening to children. Further developments from feedback from children include giving adopted children a plaque to commemorate their adoption.

The agency and branch have a number of quality assurance processes to improve outcomes for children. The branch seeks regular feedback from adopters and stakeholders. It also seeks feedback from children at the social events, but acknowledges that this could be further developed and improved. The England committee receive regular reports on the outcomes of the adoption branches to enable them to monitor outcomes and progress.

The branch has a very good relationship with partner agencies, such as local authorities. All gave extremely positive feedback about the cooperative working arrangements and the calibre of staff they work with, all of which benefit children through providing and supporting good placements. They commented specifically about good communication, good liaison, good records, and the commitment of staff at attending meetings with the adopters. One social worker gave a very good example of how both agencies worked together to identify the issues in a placement which did not seem to be progressing as expected, and how they worked together to resolve them, resulting in the adoption application being lodged. All were very happy to use the branch again and some had actively sought out further placements as a result of their positive experiences.

The staff, some of who have been with the branch for a long time, are very committed but also demonstrate a good range of experience and knowledge to deliver an effective service, which is recognised and valued by partner agencies and adopters. Despite some staffing shortfalls, staff are determined that this does not

impact on the service the families receive, and the high level of satisfaction and low level of disruption demonstrate they have been successful in this. The agency as a whole has a good training programme and staff keep abreast of developments through a variety of means. It is a learning organisation and uses team meetings as a forum to discuss any learning from disruptions, complaints, allegations, case studies and research to develop and improve practice. Staff are also effectively supported by good supervision and accessible managers at a local level.

The branch has recently moved to new premises. This provides good quality accommodation and appropriate facilities for secure record storage and meetings. Record keeping is of a good quality, monitored by managers, who make helpful comments to improve practice, and provides a good and accurate record of the contact with the agency. The children's guide has been recently amended, and is a very child-friendly and accessible document giving useful information to children about the services they can expect. However, it does not contain information about how to contact independent reviewing officers; as a result, children may not be able to access this alternative avenue of raising a concern.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for voluntary adoption agencies.