

Adopt Together

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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Setting address	7 Colwick Road, West Bridgford, NOTTINGHAM, NG2 5FR
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Telephone number	01159558811
Email	ian.crompton@faithinfamilies.org
Registered person	Faith In Families
Registered manager	Ian James Crompton
Responsible individual	Sumerjit Ram
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Adopt Together is a voluntary adoption agency which operates from premises in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire. It is provided by the registered children's charity, Faith in Families. The agency is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption and adoption support, including birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents. It works with local authorities to place looked after children with its approved families and provides a range of adoption support services to children, adoptive parents, adopted adults and birth relatives.

The agency had 29 approved adoptive families in the year ending March 2012, and had provided placements for 25 children within that same year.

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 **outstanding**.

Adopt Together is a highly effective, forward-thinking and vibrant adoption agency which delivers outstanding outcomes for children. Since its last inspection it has maintained extremely high quality service delivery, in addition to developing further initiatives to promote the prompt and safe placement of children with well prepared and supported adoptive families. Partnership working with local authorities and other innovative projects has resulted in significant success in matching children with approved adopters who meet their needs, also preventing delay.

The agency has improved and developed its recruitment strategies to ensure that it is inclusive to any enquirer, regardless of ethnicity, sexuality or marital status. This has resulted in an increase in the number of applicants, particularly from the Asian community, as well as same-sex couples.

The agency has a proven track record of successfully placing children with more complex needs. Its disruption rate of 2.2% over the last two years is very low compared to the national average of 10%, particularly when the needs and

challenges of the children placed are considered. It achieves this by extremely effective and thorough preparation and assessment of applicants, well-considered matching and excellent support. Everyone who has had involvement with the agency speaks very highly of their experiences, be they social workers, independent reviewing officers, adopters or children.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a significant commitment to adoption, as well as outstanding leadership. Trustees are highly experienced and skilled and provide excellent oversight. All staff are passionate and committed to ensuring excellent outcomes for children and families. The views of service users, including children, are given a high priority and are used to significantly improve the service. Continuing and building on this aspect is an important part of the agency's development plan.

One area for improvement has been identified as part of this inspection. This relates to formalising the recording of assessment and planning for adoption support so that this is consistent across the agency and shared more explicitly with service users.

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 service user receives written information about the service they are to receive; what the service is designed to achieve; what is involved in the particular service provision and how the service will be monitored to ensure that it is delivering the intended outcome. (NMS 15.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children make exceptional progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs, including those relating to ability, ethnicity and identity are extremely well met. For example, one social worker commented on the 'huge progress' two children have made; another said that the progress was 'incredible'. Another social worker said, 'they have moved on so much'. Adopters can see 'phenomenal' and 'massive' changes in their children's functioning. One independent reviewing officer noted: 'I have seen a significant difference since the last review. The child is making good progress at school and is thriving emotionally and behaviourally so that he can enjoy and achieve.'

Children settle and make strong attachments to their adoptive parents. Children blossom and thrive and their confidence and self-esteem comes on in leaps and bounds. They enjoy a variety of activities to suit their individual interests and experience lots of new opportunities, so that they enjoy and achieve to their full potential. Children spoke about going to the gym, doing athletics and other sporting

activities, going to dance classes and swimming. This ensures that they become integrated into the community as well as developing their confidence and promoting good health.

Children have excellent school attendance and make extremely good progress at school. For example, a professional commented that two children had made really good progress educationally. Another child increased a level in reading attainment, and a school review noted: 'I am impressed with the progress.' Children's health needs are also very well met. An adopter commented that the child's motor skills were now 'fantastic'.

Children develop a positive self-view and a rich understanding of their identity. Children are supported in contact arrangements, both direct and indirect, which meet their needs and which enhance their knowledge and understanding of their history. Siblings are placed together to enhance their sense of belonging. A large majority of the placements last year were of sibling groups of either two or three children. Children also develop a good understanding of their cultural identity where this has been identified as an issue. Children have a positive view of their adoptive status, as they make friends with other adopted children at the social events and groups which the agency provides. All the children are extremely positive about these events and really enjoy the activities as well as making new friends.

Quality of service

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

The agency is very inclusive and encourages enquiries from anyone who may be suitable to care for an adoptive child. Adopters commented that they were made to feel very welcome when they first approached the agency and that this was instrumental in them making their application. There is a very timely response to any interest shown, including information of a very high quality being sent out promptly, followed by an initial interview. The 'First Thursdays' open events, established over the last year, are another mechanism whereby anyone interested in adoption can find out more about the children who wait and the adoption process. They can also speak to someone from the agency. As these events happen on a monthly basis, this has increased the number of applications and subsequent number of approvals of adoptive families which can provide a stable and secure home to meet children's needs.

The preparation, assessment and approval process is extremely rigorous and results in parents who are thoroughly attuned to meeting the needs of adoptive children. Training can be delivered flexibly; for example, if applicants have English as a second language. One children's social worker commented that the adopters would not have been able to parent such challenging children without the preparation, which she rated as 'second to none.' Other placing social workers also commented on how well prepared the adopters are. The preparation training, which is integrated with the home study, results in very analytical assessments of the competencies of applicants. This is further supported by an assessment review carried out by a senior

practitioner independent of the case. Applications are completed within eight months, unless there is an adopter-led reason for a delay. An additional session for the supporters of the adopters is effective in ensuring that those connected with the adoptive family have a good understanding of the needs of the children likely to be placed for adoption. They are advised as to how they can provide the best support to maintain secure and successful placements.

A committed and thoughtful adoption panel, which comprises a very good mix of people with differing but relevant backgrounds and experiences of adoption, adds further rigour to the process by ensuring a thorough discussion of all the issues. Decision making is similarly robust and the agency decision maker makes timely and extremely well-considered decisions. She also provides written feedback on the functioning of the panel on a twice yearly basis, to support improvement. Likewise, the adoption panel provides a rigorous analysis of the work of the agency, which has led to improvements in practice.

Although the ultimate responsibility for matching lies with the local authority, this agency demonstrates an exceptionally rigorous approach in ensuring adopters know and understand the implications of a child's needs and whether or not they can meet them. The manager always provides a comprehensive written review of matching considerations, to ensure the social worker has thought about all the issues. This provides an extra level of professional analysis. Additionally, the agency has devised its own risk assessment indicator questionnaire, based on research on disruptions which was carried out by one of its own staff. This highlights the vulnerabilities of the match so that extra support can be provided at an early stage to maintain the stability of the placement. Adopters commented on how well their social worker was at 'grounding' them when they were being unrealistic about meeting children's needs.

As well as having an in-depth knowledge of how children's behaviour is affected by their previous experiences, adopters also demonstrate an extremely empathetic attitude towards birth parents. This translates into managing contact arrangements very effectively, including direct contact arrangements with birth parents and birth siblings, as well as indirect letterbox arrangements. One children's social worker commented that direct contact with the birth mother was 'fantastically well managed' by the adopters. This depth of understanding has helped children understand their history, develop a positive self-view and move forward.

Adoptive families are thoroughly supported; both after placement and after the adoption order is made. One adopter commented: 'My social worker and her manager have both really been in to bat for us.' Another adopter said: 'They really go out of their way to help you; I can't fault the support.' Adopters know they can contact the agency at any time, and are always provided with contact details when the office is closed, for example, during public holidays. Adopters comment that their social worker always gets back to them, and they are extremely confident in their abilities. There is a high level of trust based on consistent and positive relationships. This intensive support has been instrumental in ensuring that children remain with their adoptive families; one children's social worker commented: 'It could so easily

have broken down.'

The agency provides an extensive range of support, tailored to individual needs. This includes: linking families with a more experienced adoptive family; a group for children; a group for fathers, run in conjunction with another voluntary adoption agency; social events for adoptive families; therapeutic social work; support with education; social work support and extensive written guidance to build on the training. The children's groups are particularly effective in enabling adopted children to meet together, form positive relationships with each other and the agency and develop an understanding of their adoptive status. Adoptive parents are confident that their children will be well supported in these groups, as the staff understand their issues and no-one judges if the behaviour is unusual. The education adviser has proved extremely effective in empowering adoptive families to understand their rights and obtain the best educational service for their children so they have positive educational outcomes. Although the support offered by the agency is based on an assessment of needs, this is not consistently recorded or shared with families, so that they are clear about the purpose and how this will be evaluated.

Work with adopted adults and birth relatives is also extremely sensitively carried out. One service user commented: 'the social worker has been very professional, very supportive and very caring: a positive experience all round.'

There is an exceptionally high degree of satisfaction with the agency, from stakeholders, other service users and adoptive families alike. More than one adopter said: 'I wouldn't think twice about recommending them.' A children's social worker said: 'I am very impressed with the worker; she has been a rock, very personable and professional and so good with the adopters.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The agency places the safety and well-being of children at the centre of everything it does; its child-focused policies and procedures are implemented in everyday practice to ensure children are protected from harm. As a result, children feel safe and are safe in their adoptive families.

Social workers from the agency regularly visit children, in addition to the children's social worker, which ensures that there are a number of adults to whom children can turn if they need advice or support. The reviews of the placements are exceptionally thorough and child-focused, so any relevant safeguarding issues are highlighted and addressed. Additionally, children who attend the children's groups can speak to the workers there. They indicated that they would feel happy to do so. The child-friendly children's guide, which is customised to each individual child, provides comprehensive information about other agencies which provide support and guidance, thus providing further avenues for children and young people, should they have any concerns or worries.

There are extremely robust procedures and practice, to ensure that only people who are safe to care for or work with children are recruited and approved. The preparation and assessment process for adopters is rigorous, based on up-to-date research. This results in approval of adopters who have the competencies necessary to care for adopted children. There is a significant focus on ensuring that adopters fully understand the impact of neglect and abuse. Adopters develop appropriate strategies to manage the behaviour which results from abuse. This is successfully embedded in the way in which adopters respond to their children's behaviour. The training is underpinned by very clear written communication from the adoption team manager, which ensures that adopters are fully aware of their and the agency's responsibilities with regard to safeguarding, child protection and behaviour management. The potential dangers of social networking sites are also emphasised. Helpful booklets for adopters and children are provided to reinforce the guidance. Contact arrangements are carefully considered and in one instance, a different from of signing letters was agreed to ensure confidentiality and safety.

Practice guidance ensures that social workers are mindful of the warning signs which may indicate that adoptive families are under particular pressure, so that they can be proactive and provide support to prevent escalation. There have been no allegations in the last year, but staff have excellent access to appropriate policies, procedures, advice and guidance, in addition to regular, updated training, so they know how to respond promptly and appropriately to safeguard children. Effective links have been made with the Local Authority Designated Officer and the Local Safeguarding Children Board, so that staff and the agency as a whole can benefit from training and up-to-date developments in this area.

Children's safety is also assured in practical ways by robust health and safety risk assessments and comprehensive written guidance on issues such as sensory gardens, safe driving, caravans and pet ownership, which balance risk-taking as part of a child's normal development, with safety.

Work with adopted adults and birth relatives is underpinned by extremely comprehensive and clear written guidance to staff, which recognises the potential vulnerabilities of those who wish to access their records or initiate contact. This, together with clear procedures which address historical abuse, ensure that these services are delivered in a safe and sensitive way.

Leadership and management

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

The agency has an extensive, well planned, carefully focused and clearly thought out recruitment programme. This programme is regularly evaluated for its success in providing a diverse range of adoptive families to meet the needs of children and prevent delay. For example, the agency provided an active presence during Black History Month and two local Caribbean carnivals. It has positive links with lesbian,

gay, bisexual and transgender communities and advertises in magazines which are likely to provide enquirers in relation to disabled children. It has been successful in increasing the number of applicants from Asian communities. Additionally, the changes made to regular open evenings for anyone interested in adoption have resulted in a doubling of applications from that source.

The agency has established extremely effective and innovative relationships with partner organisations, so that children benefit from early placement with adoptive families. These include local authorities and other voluntary adoption agencies. For example, the recently established activity days organised by another voluntary adoption agency, British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF), have resulted in seven placements with this agency's adopters. The project manager described BAAF's involvement as 'immensely supportive'; it was a founding member of the steering group, continues to be an active participant and provides office accommodation to facilitate its on-going success.

Links with a neighbouring local authority have also proved very successful in placing children promptly. This partnership working has therefore resulted in improved outcomes for local children, as it has been instrumental in finding adoptive families for them much more promptly than would have been the case. Partnership working has reduced delay in providing children with safe and secure families where they thrive and achieve very positive outcomes. Further partnerships are in the process of being developed in relation to adoption support, to improve accessibility, responsiveness and range of services.

Although there were no requirements or recommendations to improve practice following the last inspection, the agency has implemented a number of developments, as well as maintaining the high quality service which has been established over the years. These include the partnership working and improved recruitment referred to above, but also the development of a concurrency project in conjunction with another two voluntary adoption agencies, which is in its very early stages. The aim of this project is to place children with adoptive families as soon as possible and prevent changes of placement, both of which contribute to good outcomes for children. It has also appointed an equality and diversity adviser to assess all its processes and ensure that they are fully inclusive. She is already having an impact in this regard and her suggestions are being implemented to further improve practice

Leaders and managers have established rigorous monitoring at all levels, to ensure a high quality of service and identify areas where the agency can develop further. For example, managers routinely monitor records and case files, regularly discuss cases in supervision, and have a significant input into matching considerations. Service users are regularly consulted about their experiences of the service, and their views are given considerable weight. This has led to changes in the preparation training and adoption panel processes. Children's views have influenced the activities provided, the way their feedback is sought, and children are currently considering questions for adoption panel members to ask of applicants.

There are excellent reporting arrangements to ensure that leaders and managers are aware of any shortfalls and can take appropriate action. For example, the adoption panel provides a very thorough and insightful report on the quality of work and timeliness of applications. This has led to improvements in assessment reports, albeit from a high baseline. There have been no disruptions this year. The rate of 2.2% over the last two years is extremely low, compared with the national average of 10%. There have been no complaints either, despite the complaints documentation being included in all information sent and reinforced verbally so everyone is aware of their rights. However, the agency is keen to learn and uses evidence-based research to inform its practice.

There is an exceptionally strong and effective leadership team supported by the board of trustees, who are experienced, very knowledgeable and committed. They have been selected for their differing skills as well as their passion for improving outcomes for children. This results in exceptionally good governance, with regular and detailed reporting on all aspects of the agency's work, including professional issues and finance. Trustees are also subject to annual appraisal and training to ensure their competence. The growth strategy demonstrates the commitment of the agency to be innovative and a leader in its field while still maintaining the high standard of service delivery which it has established over the years. This, coupled with the deficit strategy which has seen a 40% reduction in the deficit, demonstrates that targets are ambitious and realistic. They are clearly focused on outcomes for children, which is the agency's driving force. It also ensures the viability of the agency by developing other services to support the work of the adoption service.

The staff, including administrative staff, are highly valued and included in considering how the agency can develop and move forward. They comment that they are 'part of the journey' and have ownership of any changes. They are very well supported by their managers. This includes regular and effective supervision, high quality training opportunities, regular team meetings and agency away days. This has resulted in a group of staff who are extremely highly thought of by families and professionals alike, who deliver a service of exceptionally high quality. They are exceptionally committed, child focused, skilled, knowledgeable and experienced.

All the written information, such as information for adopters, the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide, is clear, comprehensive, child focused, accessible, professionally presented and available in other formats so that it can be accessed by all members of the community. It contains images which promote inclusivity and ensure that people feel welcomed, whatever their backgrounds. Record keeping is extremely professional, with a high premium placed on confidentiality, both in terms of access and storage. The premises reinforce the agency's ethos of inclusivity. The building is accessible, and very attractively decorated with many pictures which reinforce the commitment to children of all abilities, ages and cultures.

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.