

Cornerstone

Inspection report for adoption support agency

Unique reference number	SC066944
Inspection date	28/11/2012
Inspector	Mandy Williams
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Adults and children

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Registered manager	POST VACANT
Responsible individual	Janet Elizabeth Lancefield
Date of last inspection	29/04/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Cornerstone (North East) Adoption and Fostering Service is a registered charity. It was established in 1999 as an independent fostering agency (and is registered as such) to provide placements for children on a long-term or permanent basis, which may lead to adoption, with foster carers who have a practising Christian faith background.

As many foster carers went on to adopt the children they were looking after and Cornerstone wished to continue to offer support, they became registered as a adoption support service in 2006. They are also registered to provide birth record counselling and intermediary services to adult adoptees. These services are only available to those adopted through the agency. The service is small, providing on-going support to only two families at this time and they are not involved in any post adoption counselling currently. This inspection relates to the adoption support elements of the service only, with the fostering service being subject to a separate inspection.

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**.

Cornerstone provides a good adoption support service to individuals that have been involved previously with the agency's fostering service. The agency knows the families it supports extremely well, ensuring that any problems are identified and addressed without delay. Families display confidence in the agency and know that they will receive the help and support they require. The support is provided swiftly, when required.

The agency is engaged in positive inter-agency work. Clear arrangements are drawn up and commissioners regularly updated on their progress. The post adoption support provided is flexible to the needs of families and subject to regular review. Outcomes for families are positive and there have been no placement disruptions.

Shortfalls identified at this inspection mainly relate to management functions. Recommendations have been made concerning a specific guide for adoption support services; procedures for allegations of historic abuse; staff training on birth record counselling; and feedback from service users to help inform the development of the service.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- develop a system to seek feedback from service users on the success of the service provision. This feedback to be recorded centrally and on the case record of the service user (NMS 15.6)
- develop a specific children's guide to adoption support services; rather than a generic children's guide covering the wider functions of the agency (NMS 18.6)
- ensure that written procedures are developed for dealing with allegations of historical abuse which may be made by service users during the course of service provision (NMS 22.12)
- ensure that staff are equipped with the skills required to meet the needs of service users and kept up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments; this specifically relates to training on birth record counselling and intermediary services. (NMS 23.1)

Outcomes for service users

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

Service users are very positive about the service they receive. The majority of carers who are initially approved by the agency as permanent foster carers do proceed to adopt the children in their care. They report that they have felt able to make this lifelong commitment with the assurance of the on-going help and support that they will receive from the agency.

Both adoptive families and children's social workers report that this continuum of support is also beneficial, as the agency knows the families very well and are able to identify any early indicators of difficulty prior to the issue becoming critical. One adoptive parent commented, 'I can't praise them enough. I know that I can turn to them if I have any problems. This is all I need.' Families feel well supported as a result and are best equipped to deal with the demands that they may face. There have been no placement disruptions post adoption.

Adoptive families are well prepared for facilitating contact with children's birth

families post adoption. One social worker commented, 'The carers have been supported to view contact in a very positive manner. They have been excellent with regards to contact and have maintained this post adoption, despite it involving long distance travel.' This has allowed young people to maintain relationships with birth family members that were significant to them. Adoptive parents have embraced this with guidance and support from agency staff.

Adoption support assessments are thorough, being tailored to the individual needs of children and families. The services provided are subject to regular review and are revised accordingly. This flexibility ensures that families receive the most appropriate support that is responsive to any developments in the family. However, the agency has not developed a formal system for service users to feedback on their performance and to inform the future development of the agency.

Quality of service

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

Service users report that they receive a prompt response to any request for support. On occasions this is provided by the agency prior to any agreement for funding being clarified. For example, the agency has accessed the services of a play therapist to support a young person who was in need. Those receiving the support, as well as social workers have valued this, as families have received the support they require in a timely fashion, possibly preventing the issue becoming critical. The agency's commitment to those that they work with is indeed commendable.

Staff in the agency are skilled at dealing with difficult issues sensitively. Staff have a good understanding of the potential impact of a child's early life experiences on their adoptive families. This ensures that families are well prepared for the challenges that may be ahead. Families feel able to address the problems that they face as they have confidence and trust in the agency's ability to understand and respond to their needs. This includes their spiritual needs.

Both foster carers approved by the agency and those that have proceeded to adoption have access to regular training events. Topics in recent months have included; attachment; communicating with children; and special educational needs. This ensures that carers have the skills necessary to meet the needs of the children that they are caring for and that they are responded to in the most appropriate manner. It also gives carers the opportunity to meet with others, where they may be able to offer peer support.

The working partnerships with the authorities who commission post adoption services are effective. Written agreements are in place and feedback is provided routinely. This ensures that commissioners are fully aware of the progress being made.

The agency has not undertaken any birth records counselling or intermediary

services for some time. Recent legislation has altered the approach that should be taken in regard to such enquiries. However, staff have not received any update training in the delivery of this part of the service.

Safeguarding

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

There have been no new staff recruited since the last inspection. However, the agency has ensured that they have updated criminal records checks when required and confirmed workers registration with appropriate professional bodies. Thus, appropriate measures are taken to ensure that only those suitable continue to work for the agency.

Staff receive regular up-date safeguarding training. A comprehensive safeguarding policy and procedure is in place, which includes a procedure for allegations against carers. Regular safeguarding training is also provided to the agencies carers. This ensures that all those involved fully understand the protocols to follow in the event of any child protection concerns. However, the agency does not have a policy relating to historic abuse.

The agency makes children aware of issues that will help keep them safe, such as bullying or internet safety. These are explained age appropriately in the agency's guides to the service. It is also clear to children who is available to them should they have any issues of concern.

There have been no allegations or complaints. However, there are procedures in place for handling these if they were to occur.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the adoption support agency are **adequate**.

At the time of the inspection the agency had been without a Registered Manager for a number of months. The agency's Statement of Purpose has received a recent update to reflect this position. The document is comprehensive and sets out the aims and objectives of the agency.

The last inspection resulted in the making of one recommendation. This related to updating the contact details for Ofsted in the children's guide. This has been completed. The agency has a number of children's guides targeted for children and young people of different ages and needs. These are user friendly and give an outline of the agency. However, there is no specific guide to adoption support for those accessing this part of the service provision.

The agency has sufficient staff to manage its current workload. Staff are appropriately qualified practitioners who demonstrate the skills and knowledge

required to provide effective post adoption support. Efficient administrative support also serves to ensure the smooth running of the service. With the exception of the Registered Manager's post the staff team has remained stable since the last inspection. Staff receive regular supervision and appraisal. This ensures that they receive the support they need to meet the needs of adoptive families seeking their assistance.

The agency's general manager is good at updating the trustees about the work of the agency. There is regular oversight as comprehensive reports are produced outlining the work the agency has undertaken. The agency's accounts are formally audited and these demonstrate that it is financially viable.

The general manager is well respected by professionals and service users and has a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. The agency has a detailed development plan in place.

However, they have not been successful in meeting their identified targets for this year and are in the process of reviewing their priorities. This relates directly to the Registered Manager's vacancy and the problems the agency have experienced in recruiting to the post. Plans are now in place to resolve this situation.

The agency's records are well ordered and comprehensive. Clear records are maintained about the work undertaken with a family, with case files receiving routine audit. They reflect the work that has been completed and are kept up-to-date.

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 adoption support agencies.