

Barnardo's - Adoption North East

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This agency is based within a service which operates as a voluntary adoption agency and an independent fostering agency. This inspection only considered the part of the service acting as a voluntary adoption agency. The agency is operated by a national charitable organisation, and is one of several branches maintained by the charity.

The adoption agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters. Approved adopters are offered a variety of support services including social work visits, adopters' support groups and training. Additional, more complex packages of support can be provided through negotiation with local authorities on their behalf where necessary.

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 adoption agency that provides an outstanding quality of service to the adopters it approves and supports and the children placed with them. This helps to ensure children's safety. Children make good progress and are helped to achieve positive outcomes.

The agency is highly effective in recruiting adoptive parents from a wide cross section of society. The assessment of prospective adopters is robust and they are very well prepared, supported and trained. It is open to considering any enquirer, regardless of their ethnicity, sexuality or marital status. This has resulted in an increase in the number of applicants, particularly from minority ethnic communities and same sex couples. This means that it has a very diverse range of adopters who are well able to meet the needs of children needing adoptive families.

The agency works positively and proactively with placing authorities and other agencies to ensure that children and their new families receive the support they need. The agency works hard to ensure that very high levels of support are provided to adoptive families throughout the adoption process. Where necessary, the agency

arranges local packages of support including therapeutic input to maintain placements and ensure they are positive for those concerned.

The agency is well managed and operated. The staff team is experienced, well trained and well supported. The agency's adopters regard this team very highly. Operational and strategic management is effective. The organisation that operates the agency engages nationally with latest developments in adoption and this feeds into the agency's planning and development. For example, the agency is running a pilot concurrency project aiming to reduce delay for, and the number of placement moves experienced by, adopted children.

Monitoring of the quality of service provided is good. However, the process of ensuring that recruitment records meet the required standards is not fully effective.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- regularly monitor all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies. Specifically, ensure that monitoring ensures the completeness and quality of records required by Schedule 3 of the 2003 regulations. (NMS 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

This adoption agency helps produce good outcomes for children. The agency works very carefully with placing authorities to ensure that children are well matched with their adoptive families. Arrangements for introductions and on-going support are strong. Consequently children are safe and thrive in their adoptive families. Children feel safe and secure. For example one said, 'dad cuddles me and loves me', and another, said the best thing about their new family was 'it's forever'.

Support provided by the agency to its adoptive families and their children is individually focused on maintaining families, promoting positive attachment and improving outcomes for children. The agency works effectively with placing authorities to ensure that necessary support is provided. Where appropriate, support is provided directly from agency staff, arranged in liaison with local services or sourced through the placing authority based on the individual needs of the child and their family. The agency has a process for monitoring the outcomes being achieved by children being placed through adoption using information gained in support visits and reviews. This helps ensure that children are supported to progress and provides information for when future support needs are identified.

The support provided helps to promote positive outcomes for children. Children's attachment with their adoptive parents develops and their health and learning improve as they settle into their new families. For example, one adopter described how their child had progressed, as symptoms of anxiety and distress present when the child was placed had reduced completely. A social worker likened the improved outcomes for one young person to 'layers' being assessed, which was enabling the core problems for the child to be identified and addressed. From being a very damaged child the social worker said the child 'is now functioning as a little boy within a family of his own'. In another situation an adopter described how psychological support for them and guidance on how to manage a child who was extremely distressed, led to an episode in which a past event was identified. Work is being undertaken to resolve this for the child, which has made a major difference to the child's quality of life.

Adopted children benefit from access to health and educational services which meet their needs. The agency supports adoptive parents to access the services they need. For example, support is provided to help them access the best school for their children.

Adopters provided good examples of children's progress. One said, 'we could feel the child relax when she was with us over time; she will now go to sleep on our knees so we know she is trusting us.' Another said that the adopted child is now able to 'go out and play with other children on the street', which would not have been possible when the child was placed because of difficulties in relating to others.

Quality of service

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

This agency is very successful in recruiting, preparing, training and approving a highly diverse range of adopters suitable to meet the range of needs of children needing adoptive families.

Adopters are recruited and approved from a range of ethnicities and family types. Same sex couples and single adopters are welcomed and their ability to parent a child well is acknowledged and respected. Assessments challenge applicants' perceptions and ability to parent children in a robust but non-discriminatory manner. This has resulted in the agency gaining a positive reputation for its open and equal approach and its ability to work with a wider range of people.

The agency has restructured the way it manages and responds to enquiries. Consequently it provides a very fast response to these enquiries. Enquirers are provided with good information, and initial visits to their homes are undertaken very soon after their enquiry. This efficient response is appreciated by prospective adopters and results in more enquiries because of the agency's reputation for efficiency.

Assessments of prospective adopters are very thorough. Suitability checks are robust

and work undertaken during the 'home study' part of the assessment helps prospective adopters to prepare for their future role as adopters. Assessments clearly focus on competence to parent a child as well as ensuring they have appropriate personalities and attitudes. The agency monitors and quality assures these assessments effectively. An adoption worker said, 'we look at what people can do for a child rather than the sort of person they are.' This clearly reflects the agency's non-discriminatory approach to assessing applicants' suitability. Assessments are timely, with the most recent assessments all taking less than eight months from application to approval. Assessments are reviewed at their mid-point to ensure that they are on track and the quality of work is suitable. The agency is developing systems to prepare to amend its assessment process to make it timelier and to reflect the government's adoption plans. Adopters are highly satisfied with the assessment process, commending it for its flexibility, thoroughness and the support they experienced throughout the process. One adopter said: 'We couldn't imagine another adoption agency that could give as much knowledge and experience.'

The agency's panel provides a thorough consideration of all cases presented to it and provides clear feedback to the agency regarding the quality of the assessments presented to it. Decision making by the agency is prompt and well considered.

The agency works very closely with children's placing authorities when matches are being considered. Social workers work proactively to locate children who may be suitable for the agency's adopters. When possible links are proposed, agency social workers ensure that their adopters receive full information about the child being considered. They are helped to understand this information with support from the agency's medical adviser or psychologist where appropriate. Adopters' assessments help them consider the range of children they may consider and whether they feel able to consider children with types of needs they had previously excluded. When matches are being made, adopters have access to the agency's 'Comfort Zone' training which helps them to understand children's needs and their own style of parenting to help them consider the appropriateness of the match. Where younger children are being placed, adopters have produced profiles or family books in audio format so children can become accustomed to their adopters' voices before they meet. This ensures that placements made are well matched and stable.

Adopters receive excellent levels of support throughout the whole adoption process. They are very well supported throughout the assessment and this continues while they are waiting for a placement, during the matching process and after the child is placed. The agency provides support groups and training for its adopters, and people are encouraged to 'buddy-up' with other people for support. Individual support is provided where necessary. For example, the services of an interpreter are utilised as necessary. Support during the introductions process is of a high quality, which helps people engage in the process and make early attachments more effectively. Once placements are made the agency advocates strongly on behalf of its adopters and their new children to ensure they receive the services they need. This includes working forcefully with placing local authorities where necessary to ensure appropriate support is provided. The agency also liaises with other agencies that are able to provide input into adoptive families to support them. One adopter said the

outcome of this support was that things are 'wonderful now'. As a consequence, adoptive placements are stable and rarely disrupt.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The agency places children's safety and well-being as central to its practice. Consequently, children feel safe and are safe in their adoptive families.

Social workers from the agency regularly visit adoptive families and spend time with the children at these visits. This ensures that children's well-being is monitored and that they have people to speak to if they need help or support. The agency's children's guide provides comprehensive information about the agency and other avenues for support and guidance in a child-friendly manner.

Recruitment procedures for staff members and prospective adopters are robust, with thorough checks on suitability being undertaken and recorded. This ensures 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 and ensures that adopters understand the impact of neglect and abuse on children and how they should deal with children in these situations. Training during the assessment process and after approval helps equip adopters to deal safely with children's behaviours and to take into account trauma children may experience as a result of past abuse. In situations in which adoptive parents are having difficulties, high levels of support are provided to help resolve the situation. This helps to promote children's safety and the stability of the family.

Children's safety is also assured by careful health and safety risk assessments of prospective adopters' homes, which are updated specifically in relation to the child being placed.

There have been no allegations made in relation to the agency's staff or adopters in the last year. Appropriate procedures are in place should this situation occur. The agency's staff team are alert to any signs of concern regarding the care or services being provided to children and take action appropriately to challenge the service provided or address matters with prospective adopters as appropriate.

Leadership and management

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

The agency has a well-planned and carefully focused recruitment programme. This succeeds in providing a diverse range of adoptive families to meet the needs of children and prevent delay. The agency recruits at specific events in the local community, including festivals celebrating minority ethnic communities such as the local Mela. It has positive links with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

communities. The agency has developed a reputation locally for its non-discriminatory approach and is successful in increasing the number of applicants from Asian communities. This, and its prompt response to enquiries, has led to an increase in the number of applications to adopt.

The agency works effectively with local authorities so that children benefit from early placement with adoptive families. Currently, the agency is operating a pilot project to provide adopters to take children on a concurrency basis while plans for their return home or adoption are developed. The agency is working with a nearby local authority in this area. This work is in its early stages but is a positive move towards helping children secure adoptive families without delay. This work is also a sign of the agency's clear focus on the latest initiatives within adoption and a commitment to innovative practice that aims to improve outcomes for children.

The agency has implemented the requirement and recommendations made at the last inspection. The quality of social work practice and service delivery are well monitored at an operational level, to ensure the quality of the agency's work. This means that assessment, preparation, training and matching processes are well monitored and managed and provide for good outcomes for children. The views and opinions of adopters at all stages of the process are sought and used to inform the development of the agency. The agency seeks children's views during its direct work with them and their adopters and has started a process of more structured consultation and engagement, although this is still at an early stage. Complaints are dealt with effectively and the agency learns from the outcomes of investigations. Only one complaint has been received in the last year.

Although recruitment processes are sound these are not always well monitored by the manager of the agency. For example, information was difficult to locate in a staff member's recruitment file and some was missing from one application but was present for an earlier post. Although full information is retained, there are inconsistencies in how and where it is recorded. This means that the manager is not readily able to be certain that all required checks were carried out and information retained.

The strategic management of the agency is of high quality. Clear plans to develop practice further are in place, including the concurrency project and work being done in preparation to implement a more streamlined assessment process in line with government plans for adoption. There is a high level of expertise in the agency's senior staff that ensures that best practice is identified and included in the agency's plans.

The agency's social work and staff team is experienced, well qualified and well supported. The staff provide outstanding levels of support to adopters at all stages of the process that is highly valued.

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.