

Action for Children - Adoption and Permanency Service South West

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Peter Harrell
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This branch of Action for children has been registered since 2003. It is one of several branches over the country run by Action for Children, which is a large children's charity that undertakes a variety of work with children and young people. The branch recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters. It also provides post approval support to these families. During the period 1 April 2012 to March 31 2013, seven children from local authorities were placed, and 17 were subject to final adoption orders. The service currently has twelve children placed with 9 adoptive households and 5 approved adopters awaiting placements. Adoption support services are also provided by this branch.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

At this branch of the adoption service, children are carefully placed in secure and stable homes. As a result they make good progress in several areas of their development. Children form positive relationships with their adoptive families.

The staff team at the service make sure that specific attachment needs of adopted children are carefully considered and positive outcomes are achieved for children placed for adoption. Children's outcomes are closely measured and monitored by a

new and enthusiastic branch manager. Educational aspirations and health needs are positively promoted and there is an effective support service for children after they have been placed in their adoptive families; this has led to more stable and secure adoptive placements.

Adopters were positive regarding the quality of the service provided and the majority have been approved within eight months of receipt of their formal application. Skilled social workers and managers focus their work on planned prospective adopters' assessments and post approval careful matching of the needs of children who wait with appropriately prepared families.

Prospective adopters are carefully vetted, assessed and prepared and receive regular and consistent support from a dedicated staff team. The service also considers the needs of adopters' support network of friends and relatives. This level of service helps to ensure that adopters are equipped to meet children's needs. A newly revised assessment, approval and decision-making process ensures that adopters are highly suitable and therefore able to undertake their role as parents. The adoption panel is properly constituted. It has a very experienced chair and vice-chair which enables the service to approve adopters promptly within prescribed timescales.

The newly appointed branch manager demonstrates a strong commitment to recent changes in adoption practice through a careful re-evaluation of the service, which aims to recruit more suitable adopters and prevent delay from children who wait to be placed in permanent homes. Staff are diligent, appropriately qualified, skilled, knowledgeable and committed to delivering a quality service. They are supported with effective supervision and access to appropriate training. This ensures that adopters and children receive a high quality service from competent staff.

There is an effective service in place for adopted adults and those who have been affected by adoption.

A key area for development is to rectify the absence of an overall national manager for all the branches of the agency; this absence limits strategic support to the branch manager. Additionally, the reasons for recommending adopters are not separately highlighted in panel minutes. The manager of the service is aware of these matters, which have no direct impact on safeguarding or promoting children's welfare.

Managers and staff at this branch are highly committed to improve the quality of the service, as well as the outcomes for adopted children and adults affected by adoption.

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 there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the agency; in particular that the national manager post is filled (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (NMS 17.10)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The progress made and outcomes for children are a major strength of this service. Children are well matched which allows them to make exceptional personal and social progress, living in adoptive families who meet their often-complex needs. This is particularly positive considering the poor start in life which many have experienced. Children develop meaningful attachments, relative to and depending on their previous experiences. Children progress very well, educationally socially emotionally and physically. Children who were delayed in their development exceed their milestones. One adopter commented, 'my child is so settled now and doing so well'. Social workers remark on how children have improved; comments include, 'he is a changed little boy, I could not have wished for anything more than the adopters have provided'.

Adopters demonstrate a thoughtful and well considered approach to meeting their children's individual needs. This enables children to develop meaningful attachments, gain a positive self-image and achieve significantly improved and often unexpected outcomes in terms of emotional development and education. Children and have a positive and strong sense of their identity because they are well matched with adoptive parents who can meet their assessed needs in relation to ethnicity, culture and religious beliefs. Children enjoy everyday family life and look forward to regular special treats and holidays. Some adopters have older adopted children in their households, who are also supported by the service, and provide younger brothers and sisters with positive role-models.

Adopters understand the need to maintain a strong sense of their heritage and where it is in children's best interests they will positively promote contact. Action for Children staff assist in this by providing direct work with children, for example, providing enhanced life story books and carrying out further and on-going life story work. This will help children have a very positive view of themselves as adopted people. Children additionally have the opportunity to engage with other adoptive children through regularly held family social events.

A limited amount of work with adopted adults is carried out predominantly by one worker in the branch. Those who have received a service feel they have a better understanding of their histories and feel supported by the service, even if the outcome was not what they hoped for. Adopted adults are also actively helped to seek further information from other authorities.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is active in recruitment of as broad a range of adopters as possible. People involved with the branch express a high level of satisfaction with the services they have received, in particular, they comment on the swift response and professionalism of staff. Upon initial enquiry, prospective adopters are sent clear comprehensive information within two days, which helps them to make an informed decision about whether adoption is right for them. There is an informative and accessible website. Enquirers are promptly invited for initial interview with a suitably qualified and experienced social worker.

The new arrangements with shorter assessment timescales are being implemented by this service since they came into effect in July 2013. These timescales are met, unless there is a reason or personal circumstance request from an adopter. The Branch manager and staff are positive about the current changes in adoption practices and consider creatively how they will engage with prospective adopters in order to ensure they are able to deliver an effective service. Initial visits are well considered, there is a consistently thought out approach to decision making at every stage of the assessment process.

This service has recently recruited single and dual adoptive parents from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences, some of whom are specifically able to meet the complex needs of children awaiting placement. The process of matching adopters with children is well organised and adopters say that this was very detailed and inclusive. Adopters come from very diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences; they engage well with the service which provides regular support groups, and they comment very favourably on the agency's supportive and lifelong approach to adoption. Preparation and post approval training is of a high standard and well attended. Feedback from placing authority social workers and other childcare professionals demonstrates a high level of regard for the service, comments include, 'I think that they are brilliant, I have no concerns whatsoever'.

The adoption panel functions well and provides close scrutiny to assessments of prospective adopters. Adopters say 'the panel is well organised and very thorough but friendly'. The panel has a very experienced chair and vice chair, decisions made by the panel adhere to clear policies and procedures. The panel's composition is appropriate, with a central list comprised in accordance with regulations. Members of the panel are appropriately trained and appraised; they have a wide range of life experiences, both personal and professional, and take their responsibilities seriously. This provides an effective layer of robust scrutiny of assessments and evaluation of adopters. Panel meeting minutes are thorough and detailed. They provide a concise record of discussions which have taken place. However, the reasons for recommending carers are not specifically and separately recorded in the panel minutes.

Assessment reports of prospective adopters are of a high quality, in both their analysis and content. The panel administration is thorough. Regular panel monitoring and reporting has taken place, is part of the evaluation process and included in the service's development plan. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to in a prompt manner, thus reducing the time that children have to wait for appropriate placements.

After approval, adopters are equipped to provide a very high level of care, enabling them to meet the challenging and complex needs of a wide range of children and young people. This is combined with a very carefully planned and considered matching processes, this ensures that children are placed with adoptive parents who can meet their needs. Adoption support is given substance by written assessments and detailed support plans so that this can be evaluated. At the matching stage, the branch's social workers are adept at following up missing information so that adopters have everything they need to make an informed decision about whether they can successfully parent a child. The branch's social workers attend all meetings with adopters. At this stage and also once a child is placed, where information regarding a child is substandard or missing, social workers challenge local authority social workers in a constructive manner and make strenuous efforts to obtain required documentation to benefit placement stability and for a child's future well-being.

Adoption support groups take place regularly; this enables adopters to share common feelings. There are various social events, which are open for all adopters and children to meet together and have the opportunity to share any concerns with staff which they may not want to share in a more formal setting.

Despite being a limited service compared to the other aspects of the adoption agency, access to records and intermediary work is carried out with sensitivity and in a safe manner.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This branch of the adoption service, as part of a national children's charity, has a developed and robust approach to safeguarding matters. The chair of the adoption panel says that safeguarding and child protection matters are a primary focus of the service and is a key feature of adopters' preparation groups.

Although not often required, risk assessments are undertaken when necessary and any safeguarding incidents are appropriately followed up. This ensures that children enjoy safe placements with their adoptive families. Although there have been no safeguarding allegations against adopters or staff, or notifiable incidents to Ofsted since the last inspection, the branch manager was able to demonstrate how she puts acquired knowledge into practice when faced with an incident of concern.

Health and safety checks make sure that all the family homes are suitably safe for

young children. In order to make sure that only people assessed as safe are able to work with children and adult service users, the agency has recruitment procedures in place which follow relevant safer recruitment guidance. The recruitment and vetting system of both staff and adopters is well organised, with all necessary and relevant references and checks in place. Staff files are also subject to a regular audit process to ensure that all statutory checks are kept up to date.

Prospective and approved adopters, adopted children and adopted adults can all express any concerns through the use of an accessible complaints procedure. The branch demonstrates a desire to learn from any feedback, including complaints, and responds in a positive way to improve the service. There has been one complaint received from a prospective adopter since the last inspection which was responded to within clear timescales, it was handled appropriately, promptly and sensitively and in sufficient detail. The branch collates all complaints and adopters' survey responses from training courses and support group meetings, so that it can identify any emerging themes and provide appropriate resources to improve practice.

During specific sessions which form part of the preparation and assessment process, the service provides information to prospective adopters about signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect. There is a detailed programme of training in place, which happens both before and after approval. Adopters say training is helpful and well organised. There is also lots of further training related to safeguarding available to adopters, which ensures that they acquire an understanding of child protection, feel prepared to protect and support children and have an understanding of the potential long-term impact of any previous abuse or neglect. Staff demonstrate an awareness of the safety issues in relation to social media, which they pass on to adopters to increase their knowledge and understanding so they can safeguard their children. Training also includes reference to recent research in brain development.

The service uses regional child protection procedures and receives regular information from the Local Safeguarding Childrens Board for the area in which the branch is situated. Social workers who work for the service all have regularly updated mandatory safeguarding training and supervision is structured with a fixed agenda item to ensure there are regular opportunities to discuss safeguarding matters.

Adopted children or children waiting to be adopted in permanent placements are aware that they can contact social workers if they have any anxieties and worries. There is information available for them in the children's guide about this, which if required can be translated into their home language or in other formats. This ensures that children can access a variety of people to share any concerns.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

At the present time there is no overall manager of branches of the agency, which impacts on the support to this branch manager. Nor has the national agency consistently informed Ofsted of changes of managers. Despite this situation, the new

branch manager says she remains well supported and values meeting with other managers in the organisation, to discuss practice issues.

Converse to this leadership situation nationally, the current branch manager, who has only been in post for several months at the time of the inspection, is transformative, enthusiastic, highly motivated and possesses a vast depth of experience and knowledge of adoption. This knowledge is highly visible throughout the agency and commented upon very positively by the staff team. The performance and delivery of the branch is closely monitored, tracked and reported to the wider management of the organisation in various forms.

There is a development plan and other actions plans in place that identify areas the service wants to enhance, for example, recruitment. The Statement of Purpose is written clearly, regularly reviewed and details the aims and objectives of the service. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities. Prospective adopters can access a variety of information through the charity's website. There are separate guides available relating to adoption and adoption support, designed for children, birth families and adult adoptees. These contain all the required information to enable people to make informed choices or obtain further advice when required. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities.

High levels of support from management ensure that children receive a good quality of care from well-prepared and supported adoptive families. The social work and administrative staff appointed are highly competent, well trained and regularly supervised. Appraisals of staff and the manager's competency takes place at least once a year. The actively involved manager of the service is a professionally qualified and registered social work practitioner with several years' experience in adoption management and holds the appropriate qualifications.

Feedback from commissioners and stakeholders confirm that the service is well regarded. Adopters value the support provided to them. Numerous well-attended social events for adopters and their family members occur throughout the year.

Managers of the service have developed positive and close working relationships with placing authorities and health and education authorities. Staff are highly committed to supporting adoptive placements and demonstrate a wide range of experience and knowledge necessary to deliver an empowering and meaningful service.

The adoption service's premises are accessible and welcoming. There are rooms available for meetings, staff supervision and training. The service benefits from sharing the building, which is a regional centre for the charitable organisation, with a variety of other services for children and families, which helps improve communication between different aspects of the organisation.

No recommendations or requirements were made at the last inspection. The branch manager and responsible individual are aware of the areas highlighted for development at this inspection and they are highly committed to improve outcomes

for children.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.