

SSAFA Forces Help Adoption Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This Voluntary Adoption Agency is part of a registered charity which supports the social care of armed services personnel and their families. It undertakes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters who serve in the armed forces and to United Kingdom based civilians serving in overseas commands. The charity have a board of trustees who oversee its function and there is an Adoption Management Committee who oversee the adoption service and who report to the trustees. The service does not undertake inter-country adoptions. It provides, or makes arrangements for adoption support where a child is placed for adoption within such families. The agency also provides advice and support to service personnel who have been adopted. Prospective adopters are recruited who may be serving either in the UK or overseas.

The service has approved 17 adoption households within the past 12 months and 19 children and young people have been placed within this period, some of whom have been part of larger sibling groups. Seven approved adoption households are awaiting placements. Three birth parents have received counselling support within the past 12 months and 10 adopted adults have been supported by the agency in tracing birth records and making contact with their birth families.

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**.

The overall effectiveness of this voluntary adoption agency is good.

The agency attempts to provide adoption families for those children and young people who may be difficult to place and they have been largely successful in this regard. The agency has clear recruitment targets for the numbers of adopters it hopes to approve and the numbers of children it hopes to find adoptive families for. These targets are met.

Potential adopters receive good, timely and comprehensive assessments which are further scrutinized by an effective adoption panel. Adopters receive good preparation and support for the adoption task which is ongoing and which helps to sustain stable placements. There has been one disruption of placement within the past 12 months and this is currently subject to a review by the placing authority and internal review. The agency provide good access to therapeutic and educational support which helps to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

The agency effectively consult all stakeholders in its service monitoring and review and are rigorous in making service improvements.

There have been no breaches of regulation identified and no breach of the National Minimum Standards.

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The experiences and progress of, and outcomes for children, young people and service users are good.

Children are carefully matched with families who can best meet their needs. Adopters are well trained and prepared for the adoption task by undertaking preparation courses and receiving specialist social work support which introduces them to both the positive and negative realities of adoption work. Additionally, adopters are subject to rigorous assessment by social workers to ensure that they are able to fulfil the adoption task and fully support children whose life experiences may mean that they will require skilful care and ongoing support and understanding.

The assessment of potential adopters is further undertaken by an adoption panel which is made up of skilled and experienced practitioners and people with personal experience of adoption. This ensures that children are placed with families who have a good knowledge and understanding of the needs of adopted children. Adopted children and young people spoken to felt happy and safe with their adopted families. There has been only one adoption disruption within the past 12 months and the agency is currently conducting a review of the circumstances of this event.

Children are helped to settle in with their adoptive families through a carefully planned introduction period and the construction of a full support plan for adopters which identifies all aspects of children's needs. The agency have fully endorsed the recommendation of the previous inspection to inform adopters about the availability

of post adoption support. Specialist post adoption social workers in the team support adopters by an annual follow up, on-line newsletters and periodic national events where they are made aware of available adoption support. When necessary, post adoption support plans will be put in place and reviewed. This helps children and adopters to have access to ongoing support services. The agency may access the Ministry of Defence educational support service which gives additional educational support to children in service families. This helps children to achieve their educational potential.

Adopters are committed to assisting children to maintain contact with their birth families when this is in children's best interests. Adopters are aware of their responsibilities in ensuring that letterbox exchanges are kept up, that life story work is ongoing and that later life letters are safely kept for when the time is right to share this information with their children. Several adopters spoken to describe how they support face to face contact between their child and birth family members. All of these measures help to ensure that adopted children maintain an awareness of their identity and personal history.

A member of the social work team has specialist skills in birth parent counselling, in helping adopted adults trace their birth family records and will conduct intermediary work if adopted adults wish to make contact with birth family members. This service allows birth parents and adopted adults to be helped and supported in what may be a difficult and emotional period in their lives.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The quality of service in this voluntary adoption agency is good. Information about the agency states that they aim to recruit adopters who are able to offer adoption placements for those children who are more difficult to place due to them being older, or who are members of larger sibling groups. This has been achieved, as well as developing considerable skills in this area of work.

Adopters at all stages of the adoption process report that they have been well received and provided with comprehensive information material in a timely manner. They have easy access to social work support and are kept fully informed at all stages of the assessment. The overwhelming number of Stage One and Stage two assessments and approvals have been conducted within the necessary six month period and this means that the agency have achieved the recommendation of the previous inspection that stated that assessments must be conducted within appropriate timescales. This means that potential adopters are not lost due to delays in the system and that there are more available adoption families for children who might otherwise wait.

Adopters report that the preparation groups inform them about all aspects of the adoption role, both positive and negative and give them a clear idea of the children they would be best matched with. Adopters spoken to had received training, and had

a full awareness of the effects of attachment and loss in children and many had received additional training in this area of work, as had supervising social workers and adoption panel members. Assessments are conducted in a sensitive manner and the Prospective Adopter Reports show that assessments have a degree of depth and will ensure that only appropriate people will be approved as adopters at the same time as supportive 'counselling out' is conducted.

The adoption panel has an experienced and well qualified chair and panel members have the appropriate expertise and experience. Potential adopters benefit from a well organised panel experience where they are given personal profiles of each panel member. This enables them to have confidence in the panel's decision making ability. The panel reviews its functions within appropriate timescales and a report is submitted to the Adoption Management Committee and board of trustees. Individual panel members training and development needs are identified and appropriate support and training given when necessary. The service has identified that the panel membership would benefit from having a member from a black or minority ethnic group, and that the newly appointed panel administrator should be appropriately trained.

Approved adopters are given free membership of a national adoption registration service and assisted by supervising social workers in using this register to make appropriate matches with children needing adoption, both by reviewing on line information and attending adoption events. An adoption support plan is put in place before a child is adopted and adopters are made aware of their right of access to post adoption support. This means that children waiting to be adopted can be quickly linked to a potential adoptive family.

The preparation of adopters is highly focussed on supporting birth family members with contact arrangements when this is in the best interests of children, and in providing adopted children with full knowledge of their historical background. Additionally, the agency has a worker with expertise in birth parent counselling and in supporting adopted adults wishing to access their birth records and in intermediary work when they wish to make contact with their birth family members.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The arrangements for the safeguarding of children and young people within this voluntary adoption agency are good. The service has a good relationship with the local authority designated officer who stated that they have no safeguarding concerns about this agency.

The agency have a comprehensive and clearly written policy on the safeguarding of children which is regularly updated and there is also a clear complaints policy. No complaints have been recorded since the time of the previous inspection. Social work staff and adopters spoken to were aware of the content of these policies.

The safeguarding of children is a central feature of the preparation course for adopters and all of the social work team and panel members have received training in safeguarding which is regularly updated. This training includes the risks to children posed by social media. All of these measures help to ensure that any safeguarding issue which may come to the attention of adopters or social workers will be swiftly dealt with, and this will help to keep children safe. Preparation courses also include training for adopters on the impact of abuse and how this may affect children's behaviour. This allows adopters to have a better understanding of children's needs.

The vetting and recruitment of all adopters, staff and panel member is rigorous and this helps to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and young people.

The agency have a clearly written complaints policy and procedure and adopters and children are made aware of the way that any complaint may be progressed and know how to complain if they need to.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The leadership and management of this voluntary adoption agency is good. A professionally qualified and experienced registered manager supports and supervises an effective social work team who themselves are well qualified, trained and experienced. All management and staff undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. Social workers report that they have good access to training opportunities and that they receive regular, high quality supervision. Having a well qualified and trained team of professionals helps to ensure that children's needs will be best met.

The work of the adoption service is overseen by a management committee who report to the board of trustees of the charity. The manager ensures that monitoring reports to these managerial groups are timely and give an insightful review of the agency function. The charity has also recently commissioned an external consultancy agency to conduct a service review of the adoption service and the managerial group are applying the findings of this review. These measures help to drive continuous improvements which benefit children and adopters.

Effective systems are in place to ensure that all stakeholders are able to express their views about service provision.

The service is effective in reaching set targets for the numbers of adopter approvals and children placed. The service focuses on recruiting adopters who are able to offer places to those children for who finding adoptive families may be more difficult. For example, older children or larger sibling groups. This helps to reduce the time that these children may wait for an adoption place. Assessments of adopters are timely and the adoption panel conducts scrutiny and quality monitoring of these assessments which are properly reviewed. This helps to ensure that the adopters who are approved are suitable and that adoption placements are stable and will offer

children the best opportunities. There has been one placement disruption within the past 12 months and the agency is working with the placing authority to review the circumstances of this.

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.