

Action for Children - Mosaic Adoption and Permanency Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC051814
Inspection date	13/02/2015
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Unit 12/A, Hackford Walk, 119-123 Hackford Road, LONDON, SW9 0QT
Telephone number	02075823687
Email	blackfamilies@actionforchildren.org.uk
Registered person	Action for Children
Registered manager	Christine Allen
Responsible individual	John Downing
Date of last inspection	07/10/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Mosaic is one of three branches of a voluntary adoption agency operated by Action for Children, a national charity which provides a range of services for children and families. Mosaic recruits, prepares, assesses, approves and supports adoptive families to provide placements for children who have adoption as a plan, particularly those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. It also provides birth records counselling and intermediary services for adults who were placed for adoption by the agency and for whom it holds the records, and their birth relatives.

In the year 1 April 2013 to 31 March 14 it placed 12 children from local authorities for adoption and had 31 approved adoptive families, of whom 25 were waiting to be matched to children. It approved 22 adoptive families in that year.

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: **requires improvement.**

This branch requires improvement to be good. It is able to demonstrate a number of strengths but the shortfalls have had an impact on the quality of service provided. Senior managerial arrangements have, until recently, been inconsistent and therefore this area also requires improvement until the changes to the service are fully implemented and embedded.

Despite shortfalls in the quality of service, outcomes are good. Children make good progress in their adoptive families. They have their needs fully met, they thrive, develop appropriate attachments, and experience positive family life. Adult service users are also satisfied with the outcomes of the service, some of which exceed expectations. There have been recent significant increases in the number of children placed. This year 27 children have been placed for adoption, compared with 12 last year. Sibling placements have also increased significantly, meaning children are able to live with their brothers and sisters in safe, secure adoptive families.

Children and adult service users experience a safe service. Children are placed with suitable and safe adoptive families. The disruption rate is low, which results in secure placements. The agency as a whole, and staff in this branch, have a robust understanding of how to safeguard children and adults and take their responsibilities seriously.

Other strengths include a well-considered recruitment strategy, the quality of the work with adult service users and the preparation training. Staff are well thought of. One adopter commented: 'It was a good experience; we had a great social worker who was very professional and committed to the welfare of children.' Another said: 'My social worker has been very supportive, I can't fault her.' The recently appointed leaders and managers demonstrate commitment and passion to adoption. They have a realistic understanding of where the service needs to improve and have already developed a comprehensive service improvement plan to address the shortfalls.

The branch requires improvement because there are insufficient staff to meet the needs of the service; adoption support is minimal and the use of independent social workers has led to some work being inconsistent, of poor quality and not in line with agency policies, standards and regulations. There are breaches of regulation in relation to the timeliness of adopter reviews and adopter case records. The adoption panel has not produced a feedback report to the agency, which limits the information on which to base monitoring and evaluation. Staff supervision records do not detail the time or length and are not signed by the supervisee. Record keeping is poor, adoption support is not underpinned by a written plan, so the extent and purpose of the intervention are therefore unclear, and managerial oversight of records has not brought about the required improvements and is therefore ineffective.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
13 (2003No367)	ensure a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the	26/06/2015

	purposes of the branch (Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003 Regulation 13(a)(b))	
29 (2005No389)	ensure the review of the approval of each prospective adopter takes place at intervals of not more than a year (Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 Regulation 29 (2))	24/04/2015
Other	ensure the prospective adopter's case record includes all the information required by this regulation. (Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013 Regulation 23 (1) (a-j))	24/04/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure the service users know, and receive 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)
- ensure the adoption panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes whether the requirements of the restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met and whether there is a thorough, rigorous consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of the suitability of prospective adopters (NMS 17.2)
- ensure there is a written record detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)
- ensure all staff's work and activity are consistent with adoption regulations and National Minimum Standards and with the service's policies and procedures (NMS 25.3)
- ensure staff understand and follow the agency's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files. There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 27.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children have good outcomes, good experiences and make good progress as a result of being placed with their adoptive families. Since April 2014, over half of the placements have been sibling placements, which is a considerable increase on the placements the previous year. This enables brothers and sisters to stay and grow up

together and therefore benefit from a shared history while experiencing stable and secure family life. Where children are placed separately, adopters support both indirect and direct contact as they understand the importance of the sibling relationship. They also demonstrate empathy towards other birth family members and support appropriate contact with them. This ensures children grow up knowing their heritage and understanding their past to enable them to move on with their present and future.

Placement stability is good. There were no unplanned endings of pre-adoptive placements in the year April 2013-March 2014. Thus children thrive in stable and secure adoptive families which meet their needs. Adopters and children are well matched to each other, and where there are differences, adopters work hard to ensure needs are well met. For example, one way adopters may promote the child's identity and culture is through the food they eat.

Children settle well and start to make attachments. They make good progress in all areas of their development because adopters are attuned to their needs. Adopters ensure children's health needs are met by registering with the appropriate services and supporting any appointments. They ensure children make educational progress by supporting nursery and pre-school provision, exploring an appropriate choice of school and encouraging good attendance.

Children make good progress socially and emotionally. They take part in play appropriate to their age and development, engage in leisure pursuits such as swimming and dance and benefit from family life. Comments from stakeholders include: 'She is a different child', and, 'They have settled in, are making progress, doing really well, have developed social skills and are really engaged with school.' Adopters also recognise the progress the children are making both behaviourally, socially and physically.

Work with adopted adults and their birth relatives results in good outcomes and positive experiences. Adopted adults are enabled to understand the circumstances around their adoption and where contact is requested, this has been carefully supported. One service user commented: 'It was beyond my expectations, a marvellous experience.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Although some aspects of the service are strong, there are a number of shortfalls which have resulted in the branch requiring improvement to be good. The first contact with the branch is positive. Enquirers are clear about the specialist nature of the service and they approach it because they wish to adopt a child from a minority ethnic background. They feel welcomed and are given appropriate information promptly. Adopters comment that the branch is inclusive, as demonstrated by the number of same sex adopters, single adopters and adopters from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Preparation training is another area of strength, with adopters saying it is 'excellent', and, 'I felt enlightened and aware of the challenges.' This gives them a good understanding of the role of an adoptive parent and the likely needs of the children placed for adoption.

Assessments are variable. Stage two of the application process is usually undertaken by independent social workers, due to the small number of permanent social workers employed in the branch. The assessments are not of a consistent quality and some are not good enough. Not all have a stage two plan, they do not conform to a house style, some have had missing information, including the recording of the assessment visits, and some are not analytical. This has resulted in delays and deferrals of approval. Although the branch manager usually supervises these assessments, due to the large number of assessors and the other aspects of the management post quality assurance has been ineffective. Some adopters who have waited over 12 months for a placement have not been reviewed within 12 months of their approval, or subsequent review. Thus their suitability to adopt remains in question.

The adoption panel comprises a diverse range of people with differing experiences, both personal and professional, of adoption. It is chaired by an experienced, knowledgeable and appropriately qualified chairperson. The panel members take their responsibilities seriously; all members are well prepared and ask appropriately probing questions. Although the panel provides challenge to the agency, it has not provided a six monthly report on the quality and timeliness of the work. This limits the effectiveness of feedback and monitoring. The administration of the panel, including the timeliness of paperwork and quality of the minutes, has improved in recent months. This enables panel members to give proper consideration to their recommendation, and the decision maker to have full information about the panel meeting. The agency decision maker adopts a very thorough approach to making the decision, which she does in a timely way. This, and the adoption panel's operation, have provided good quality assurance when the assessments of applicants have not been adequate.

The branch social workers are rigorous in their approach to ensuring prospective adopters have full information about the children they are considering. One adopter commented of his social worker: 'She was like a steam train.' They appreciate the support which the branch gives in working with the local authority in relation to matching and support, to ensure they have full information to make an informed decision about their capacity and resources required to parent the child or children.

Post adoption support is an area of weakness. The branch does not have sufficient staff to carry out its duties in providing a full adoption service. Adopters are not clear that this is a role of their agency once they are approved. They have limited information about their entitlements as adoptive parents and are anxious that once an adoption order is made, they will not be able to access support, particularly as many children are placed from local authorities some distance away. When support is provided, this is welcomed and adopters comment positively about it: 'She was quick to respond and is very supportive.' However, it is not based on a written assessment,

so adopters are not clear about the length, purpose or system for review and evaluation. Managers are aware of the shortfalls in relation to adoption support and are putting plans in place to try and improve this aspect of the service. This includes specialist training in attachment, a parenting programme, and a service level agreement with two adoption support agencies.

Access to records, including the intermediary service, is an area of strength and very highly thought of by its users. The work is carried out promptly, sensitively, professionally and with full regard to the welfare of all involved in the adoption triangle. One service user commented, 'I could not have been better looked after', and another said, 'the support, advice and guidance have been extraordinary.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children are safe in their adoptive families because the agency has well-developed safeguarding policies and procedures which are implemented in practice by the branch, although there have been no recent safeguarding allegations. Action for Children has a safeguarding lead who ensures all staff are kept up to date with any changes. Staff demonstrate a strong understanding of their roles and responsibilities to safeguard children, and most have had recent training. Further training is planned for all staff in the very near future. Staff who work with adults are acutely aware of issues relating to historical abuse, and because this is a specialist area, have organised specific training so they are up to date on current practice.

Adopters have a robust understanding of child protection and the impact of trauma and neglect on their children's behaviour. Adopters are encouraged to develop safe care policies which reflect the experiences the children have had and provide appropriate safeguards. Safeguarding is thoroughly explored during the preparation training and assessment, including the risks from social media, and adopters are given good written information. Child sexual exploitation is being added to the training of adopters, for although children placed are of a young age, staff recognise the importance of increasing awareness of indicators of this issue.

Adopters, adult service users and children are made aware of their right to complain through the written procedure which is given to them. The children's guide also outlines other sources of independent support. There have been a small number of complaints from adopters in the last year. These have been responded to, but not always as promptly or professionally as they should have been. However, the agency manager, appointed in October 2014, has addressed the approach to complaints to ensure complainants receive a full and prompt response. She has also started to alter practice as a result of issues raised, such as timeliness and quality of assessments and overseas checks.

The recruitment of staff and panel members is comprehensive and complies with current guidance in relation to checks and references. Similarly robust procedures are in place to assess the suitability of adopters prior to stage two of the process.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The branch has until recently had inconsistent managerial support at agency level. The agency manager took up her post in October 2014, and the responsible individual in March 2014. They have been assessing the service and have a robust and comprehensive service improvement plan based on the shortfalls identified. Leaders and managers in the agency as a whole are committed to adoption and want to provide a good and effective service which meets the needs of all service users. They have successfully applied for two grants to enable them to deliver a more ambitious and challenging service. They are committed to increase the number of placements across the agency, including this branch, and to place children for whom it is more difficult to find adoptive families. This is a very recent development and one which has not yet been implemented.

Recruitment of adopters is an area of strength, albeit relatively recently developed. There is now a marketing officer dedicated to adoption who demonstrates a significant breadth of understanding of the issues and a passion and commitment to find the right adopters for children. She has prioritised the recruitment strategy by making contact with local authorities to gather information about the needs of children requiring placements. She has also run a focus group for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender adoptive parents, and made contact with Faith groups and Church leaders to find the best ways of attracting enquirers to the service. There has also been an improvement in the recruitment materials so that the agency as a whole is more accessible, professional and attractive. However, the emphasis is on quality rather than numbers, so that only the adopters who can meet the needs of children waiting are recruited and approved.

Social workers are appropriately qualified, trained and supervised. However, the records of supervision do not detail the time and length of the supervision, nor are they signed by the supervisee. Thus it cannot be confirmed that the record is accepted as accurate and that appropriate time was given to this important aspect of staff support. Staff and panel members are appraised annually to highlight any areas for development and reflect on their performance. Team meetings occur regularly and are an important forum for updating staff on changes to legislation and practice.

The branch has an up-to-date Statement of Purpose and children's guide which give comprehensive information about the service to those who use it. Adopters and children therefore know what to expect. This is supplemented by other written information about specific aspects of the service such as birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The branch has good links with partners. It is an active member of the local consortium to share information and utilise resources, such as support groups. It is also able to use the wider agency to support its functions. Local authority social workers report cooperative working in relation to matching and introductions.

The branch is under resourced, with only a small number of permanent social workers to carry out the business. The result of this has been the use of independent social workers to undertake assessments of adopters, which have been of variable quality, and limited provision of adoption support.

Record keeping requires improvement. The branch is currently transferring records to an electronic system. Some records are incomplete and do not reflect the work undertaken with children and families. Although files are audited, the systems have been ineffective in sufficiently improving this shortfall. As a result, records do not give a complete picture of the adopter's and child's journey in placement. Administrative systems generally have improved; file storage is safe and secure, and there is appropriate insurance cover and a business continuity plan to ensure the continued operation of the service at times of crisis.

The agency has thorough systems for monitoring, which includes regular reporting to the board of trustees so they are kept fully informed of the work of each branch. There is also regular reporting on the financial aspects of the service to ensure the agency remains financially viable and any reparatory action needed is identified and taken. This assures the continuity of the service for adoptive families. Monitoring at local level has been less effective, as identified in the shortfalls in the quality of service and record keeping.

One requirement was made as a result of the previous inspection. This related to timescales of adopter approval which have since been superseded by changes in legislation. Timescales have improved in adopter assessment and approval and most delays are now out of the branch's control or adopter led. Therefore this recommendation has been met. Other improvements recently implemented include a baseline tracker to monitor children's outcomes, a dedicated marketing officer for adopter recruitment and a commitment to the growth and development of the service.

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.