

Centre for Adoption Support and Education

Inspection report for adoption support agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lloyd
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This adoption support agency is a registered charity whose work is overseen by a board of trustees. It has taken over and is operating from the premises of an already established adoption support agency. The agency has a Registered Manager and a Responsible individual. There is a small staff team of professionals who work on a sessional basis. The agency provides support to adoptive families and to long term foster families who self refer or are referred by adoption agencies, health professionals and local authority children's services. The agency provides education and training to adopters and professionals. It does not undertake birth records counselling or intermediary work with adopted adults or provide counselling support to birth parents who lose their children to adoption.

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 **outstanding**.

The agency is highly effective in providing positive experiences that promote the development of strong bonds between adopters and their children. Adoptive families recognise the value of the support it provides. They report that it has been extremely influential in building attachment and preventing family breakdown where children have complex and challenging needs. The agency is particularly responsive to, and works extremely well with partner agencies and adopters, using their views to develop and improve the delivery of the service.

With strong and effective leadership, the service has grown significantly during its first year of operation so that it provides a growing, dynamic service where experts deliver innovative and up-to-date research-based training and workshops for adoption professionals and adoptive families.

The agency's development plan clearly sets out its direction of travel and is based on a very good understanding of the life-long needs of adoptive families and messages from research. The agency has made significant progress in meeting its targets to provide a centre of excellence where adopted children and their parents can access

the help they need, when they need it.

With recently awarded Expansion Grant 3 funding from partner agencies, the Centre has begun work to expand its workforce and set up a database of regional resources, including information, education and expert practitioners. It aims to provide a reliable, up-to-date one-stop shop which signposts adopters and professionals to the expertise they require.

The agency intends to develop its services for adopted teenagers and their families further and to secure long term funding through the development of service level agreements. Work has begun in both these areas. The agency does not currently have systems in place to advertise its services to those adopters in the region who no longer receive adoption support or to ascertain the long-term impact of its interventions on individual children and families.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- make adopters aware of the adoption support services at the Centre. In particular, develop systems to reach already established adoptive families in the region who are no longer receiving a service from their approval agency (NMS 15.4)
- seek feedback from service users on the success of the service provision. In particular, maintain a record which shows the impact of adoption support on individual children and families and seek feedback on the long term impact of interventions (NMS 15.6)
- demonstrate from written records that the agency consistently follows good recruitment practice, including the telephone verification of written references, checks to confirm relevant qualifications and photographic identity checks. Ensure that all personnel responsible for the recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (NMS 21.2)

Outcomes for service users

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Service users are extremely influential in the development and delivery of the service. This ensures the service is child and adopter focused and that it meets their needs. Feedback from support sessions and training events is always gathered and carefully analysed and forms the basis for planning future events. Professionals and partner agencies contribute their views about the type of adoption support that is beneficial for themselves and for adoptive families. For example, partner agencies and staff made valuable contributions to a service development day and their views

contributed significantly to the current development plan for expanding the service.

Feedback gathered following training events and support groups is exceedingly positive and clearly demonstrates the value of the workshops. For example, an adoption social worker commenting on the whole brain child course said it was, 'excellent and thought provoking'; and about the theraplay training, one said, 'It has given me renewed vigour and motivation for my work in adoption support; affirming of the things we already do and inspiring me to do more.' A parent who attended the workshop on internet and social media safety reported it was, 'most beneficial, interesting and valuable, it was useful to learn how to deal with scenarios, if and what could happen. It made me recognise the need to embrace technology rather than being terrified of the consequences.'

Service users are routinely asked for ideas for development and these drive improvement in service delivery. For example, the timing of sessions aimed at supporting children who are moving from primary to secondary school has been altered as a result of feedback from service users. The structure of the toddler group sessions has also been altered at the suggestion of adoptive parents so that children and parents have even greater opportunity to interact positively with other families. This shows the agency listens to children and adoptive parents and takes their views into account in designing the service.

The activities provided in both the toddler group and the after school group are selected from a wide range and are clearly focused on enabling opportunities for parents to bond with their children through supporting their enjoyment and skills development. Activities also take account of individual children's needs and wishes. For example, ukuleles have been provided in response to a young child's particular interest in the guitar and children are enjoying playing these as part of the music sessions. By responding positively to children who ask for particular songs, the service promotes the development of confidence and increases children's feelings of self-worth.

Very young children are enabled to give their views in imaginative and creative ways. This ensures that even the most vulnerable have a voice. Older children who attend the after school group choose how to spend their time constructively. They often choose to play board games with staff and each other and enjoy the relaxed and welcoming environment. Children's ideas are acted upon wherever possible. For example, one suggested a zoo creation activity during school holidays and this proved to be an enjoyable day out for those who participated.

Adopters recognise how support sessions are aimed at promoting attachment between the parent and child. They speak with enthusiasm about how valuable this is in helping them to establish secure bonds at an early stage and how they are able to reaffirm those bonds during later years when children present additional challenges. One parent explained, 'The songs chosen are fun and help to reaffirm attachment for example in one there's a verse about giving your mummy a cuddle. The music promotes bonding as do the craft work activities because we do them together. We help our children and support them to achieve something.'

Children and adopters enjoy a wide range of educational and fun activities where they meet other adoptees and their families. The family well-being days held at a local specialist venue are particularly successful. The activities help new adopters to develop confidence in their parenting skills and a sense of belonging as it reduces their isolation. One parent's comments demonstrate how valuable the sessions are and echo the views of other parents, 'This is a great place. They are very welcoming and friendly and we know the routines; my child really likes it. It's good to come somewhere where I can feel at ease because people are not talking about the birth and stretch marks and I don't have to explain myself, where people understand the issues for adoptive parents.'

Both children and their parents look forward to and enjoy the support sessions. They feel welcomed and accepted and unanimously report the services provided are extremely beneficial to their families, having a 'massive' positive impact on their lives. For example, one said, 'I've been coming for 18 months. We love it. My child has grown in confidence. She loves the sessions. The routines are very good and the activities are varied. They promote bonding and socialising because the groups are small and children benefit from mixing with the same children each week.' Another said, 'Coming here has transformed my life.' She described how the Centre enabled her to build friendships, access advice and reduce the isolation she had previously experienced as a new adoptive parent.

Adoptive parents report positive, beneficial changes to their lives and the lives of their children as a result of attending workshops, joint family friendly sessions and children's support groups. A teenager spoke very positively about a series of group-work sessions she had attended to support her transition from primary to secondary school and promote social inclusion: 'It really helped me because it was a big move from junior to secondary school and it helped me to get my feelings onto paper and to let everything out -all my anxieties. It helped me because I made friends at the centre and I was not as stressed because I knew other people were moving on to secondary school, like me.'

A parent explained how her child's anger and aggression has significantly abated and almost disappeared since they have put techniques they learned at the Centre into place. She says he is 'going from strength to strength at school' and has made huge strides in his social skills because he is learning to self-regulate his emotions.

Adoptive parents report this is an excellent service, which compares extremely favourably to other support services they have received. One parent said, 'A lot of agencies are now directing their adopters to the Centre. It's absolutely fantastic. They have a different approach and are very children-centred and attachment centred.' Another said, 'Support is better than in other agencies because it is homely and that's really helpful for children and parents to feel relaxed. The focus is on working together as a family to make things better.' Adopters speak very highly of the personal support they receive that enables them to keep going through difficult times. They particularly appreciate the way they are made welcome, not judged and taken seriously. They know that they and their children are accepted, valued and

understood. One said, 'I think this is a model of support that should be copied so it's available for all adoptive parents.'

Quality of service

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

The agency's development plan and Statement of Purpose clearly set out the aims and objectives of the agency and the services to be provided. Each support session, training event and workshop has defined aims so that those delivering the service and those in receipt of the service clearly understand the desired outcomes. All participants attend freely and select those support packages that best suit their own needs and interests.

The support provided in children's groups is individually tailored to meet the needs of the children who attend. This enables them to get the most benefit from engaging. A manager-led evaluation of each support session takes place immediately following the session and this ensures staff have the opportunity to share any concerns, reflect on parents and children's engagement, their level of need and progress. Further sessions are adapted to take account of each individual's needs. For example, where staff observed a child struggling to take turns, they included fun activities which involved taking turns in the next session, successfully modelling how to encourage turn taking. This helped the child to develop this important social skill and parents to learn an effective behaviour management strategy from skilled, specialist support workers.

Children and adopters who access the Centre's services are at different stages of their adoption journey. Prospective adopters have the opportunity to attend the children's support groups before they are matched with a child. This gives them beneficial insight into the challenges of adoptive parenting and enables them to see the importance of interactive play in promoting bonding. It also enables them to socialise with other adoptive families who understand their situation. Developing a link with the Centre at this early stage helps to reduce their anxieties about seeking support services when they have a child.

The agency has a high number of adoptive families on its electronic mailing list and regularly sends out a quarterly bulletin that outlines future workshops and events. This enables adoptive families to stay in touch with the agency and to be aware of the adoption support packages on offer. Families dip in and out of the services as they wish. A challenge for the agency is to reach established adoptive families who are no longer receiving a service from their approval adoption agency.

Within the first year of operation, the Centre has provided a very good selection of relevant courses and workshops. These help professionals and adopters to gain insight into and understanding of the challenges faced by adoptive parents. They provide good advice about how to support adopted children through difficult periods in their lives. For example, education events have included workshops about the impact of nutrition, helping children with transitions, understanding the pupil

premium, using and revisiting life-story books and the whole brain child. Adopters and professionals value these courses enormously and have provided very positive feedback about them to the agency and to their own adoption agencies.

Adoptive families also value the yoga sessions, as illustrated by a young adoptee's comment: 'The yoga session was good. It helped with bonding between me and my mum. We trust each other more now and can rely on each other even more than we did before.' An adoptive parent explained how the yoga sessions are helping to strengthen the bond between her and her adoptive child: 'It's fantastic and promotes physical contact and bonding. After the session my child wanted me to wrap her in a blanket and rock her like we did at the session'. This was a breakthrough for this parent and child and enabled close contact where attachment difficulties were delaying the development of strong and secure bonds.

Support services for teenagers include holiday activity days that promote the development of relationships between children who are adopted. This helps to combat feelings of isolation as children recognise there are others in similar situations to themselves. A core group of children access these events. The Centre recognises the particular vulnerabilities of adopted adolescents and their need for support services, in particular for guidance to these families around safer caring, reaffirming attachment and managing challenging behaviour. This is an area for service development following the future move to new premises from where it is planned to provide evening and weekend groups to support adopted teenagers and their families.

Working with partner agencies, the Centre has arranged a course on Non-violent Resistance, in recognition of the increasing evidence of child to parent violence in adoptive families and its role in family breakdown. This course is available to professionals as well as to adopters. It aims to provide useful information and strategies to help adopters of children, who are violent and aggressive, reduce their children's anti-social behaviour.

Staff who support children at the Centre are very experienced, long-standing members of staff with a range of relevant, previous experience and a good knowledge of child development and adoption. They benefit from accessing the training events on offer at the Centre and this is increasing their understanding of the complex and diverse difficulties faced by adoptive families.

Staff recognise the long-term impact of developmental trauma on children and their families and they support children in a therapeutic parenting style that helps children to deal effectively with peer conflict and benefit from a relaxed, non-judgemental environment. Parents describe the Centre as a 'safe haven' and report that children look forward to attending the support groups. One said, 'Our children struggle massively socially but here they are more relaxed. My daughter gets hyper, but that's ok here. They often refuse to go places because social interaction is hard for them...this is the only place where they don't say, "I don't want to go". They are never bored. They always have a good time.'

The agency is developing its relationship with local adoption agencies and these share information about the Centre's services with prospective adopters during their approval process. This is an effective way of raising awareness among new adopters and a number of new service users report this is how they found out about the Centre. It has enabled new adoptive families to benefit from being able to access the specialist support services as soon as a child is placed with them. The value adopters place on the services provided at the Centre is illustrated by the long distances many are prepared to travel, which for some is up to 20 miles. Increasingly, local authority or voluntary adoption agencies are including support provided through the Centre in their adoption support plans.

By pooling their resources, partner agencies enable their staff and their adopters to access workshops at the Centre that they could not otherwise afford to run. Partners see it as a regional hub that can provide advice and information about adoption related matters, as well as a database of therapists, experts, learning packages and training events. This is a new and developing aspect of the Centre's work.

Experts who run workshops are fully qualified and very experienced professionals. They receive professional supervision outside of the agency. Parents value their expertise and some would like to see this aspect of the service further developed. For example, an adopter who accessed support from the child psychologist said, 'It was really helpful to talk to him without having to go through a formal route or social services. A bimonthly drop-in for parents to talk about behaviour management or other issues they are struggling with, where parents could access the expertise of the psychologist would be of great benefit.' The manager is considering the best way to provide this type of support.

The agency does not hold service user records and although it clearly plans for and reviews all support packages, it does not evaluate the impact of the support it provides on individual families over time. Consequently, it does not assess the long-term value of the services on all but a minority of families who access regular support. In those circumstances, adopters clearly state the service is a 'life-line' without which their families would have split up.

Safeguarding

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

The premises are well maintained and provide a clean, safe and inviting setting. The front door is kept locked to protect children from intruders but can be easily opened by any parent from the inside. This enables service users to exit the premises quickly in the event of fire or emergency. Parents know they are responsible for their own child's safety on the premises and are expected to supervise young children at all times. Older children are allowed to attend support groups without their parents, where appropriate. There are always at least two members of staff with a small number of children. Staff intervene quickly and sensitively when children start to become agitated and use positive methods of control to diffuse challenging situations with expertise.

The agency follows safer caring procedures in all its practice at the Centre. Staff do not provide personal care to children and always direct children seeking comfort and support to their own parent. Staff are very confident about using the whistle-blowing procedures and know what to do if they are concerned about the safety and well-being of a child or parent. Staff are fully aware of how to respond positively and safely to protect children who allege or disclose abuse. There have been no such instances.

The agency has well-established working relationships with safeguarding teams across the region and good relationships with the local authority designated officer. Safeguarding teams and the local police have contributed to the location assessment. The agency does not provide a service from the Centre at weekends and out of office hours in recognition of the dangers associated with criminality in the area.

All staff and experts who provide a service have been vetted by the Disclosure and Barring Service. There are a few small gaps in staff recruitment records which undermine the efficacy of recruitment procedures. For example, up-to-date photographs are not held for every staff member and not all references are verified. The impact of the shortfalls in recruitment records is minimal because these staff do not work alone with children and have provided a good standard of service for many years. However, it is not best recruitment practice and does not demonstrate that the agency has fully vetted all employees and contracted professionals.

Leadership and management

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

The Centre has been registered for 13 months, during which time it has grown significantly, extending its support services to adoptive families and professionals by massively increasing its workshops and training. The children's support groups which were run by the previous organisation are being funded by a private benefactor for a period of three years and this has ensured continuation of a much valued service and consistency for children and families who access this support.

Core staff are seconded from a partner voluntary adoption agency. The Centre has limited funds, which it manages well. It works in partnership with this and other agencies and has successfully secured funding for growth and development. It makes a charge for some specialist services, such as training events and specialist workshops. This has enabled the provision of high quality workshops and cutting edge training delivered by leaders in their field. This benefits both professionals working in the field of adoption and adoptive families.

Two partner agencies have recently secured joint Expansion Grant 3 funding with a proposal to further develop the adoption support services at the Centre. Both agencies have worked collaboratively with the Centre to determine the best use of the expansion grant funding. By pooling their resources, the partner agencies aim to provide the best possible support services for adoptive and long-term foster families

in the region. They endorse the Centre's ambition to develop as a regional hub of knowledge, where parents and professionals can quickly access information about adoption related matters and specialist practitioners who support adoptive families.

The registered manager of the Centre acts as project leader. She is an experienced and competent adoption professional who is extremely well-informed about trends and developments in adoption and is ambitious to achieve excellent outcomes for adopted children and their families. A key strength is her expert knowledge about adoption and the long-lasting challenges faced by children who have been subject to early trauma and separation. She is passionate about the role of high quality adoption support in assisting adopters to provide nurturing, stable and life-long families for disadvantaged children. Planned interventions include supporting children moving from foster care into their adoptive families so that adopters learn how to bond with their children at the earliest opportunity; and supporting schools to meet the needs of adopted children better. Work on these projects is well underway.

The registered manager oversees support groups and workshops for children and adopters that successfully promote the development of healthy attachments and social inclusion. She works tirelessly with other agencies and local authorities to promote and develop the work of the Centre so that increasing numbers of adoptive families are accessing the support and information they need.

The registered manager is always on hand at the Centre when families visit and adopters are confident she will provide a listening ear and will signpost them to the services they need. They value her relaxed and friendly approach that enables a sense of belonging and encourages them to be open about the difficulties they are facing. The manager and staff at the Centre are clear about the boundaries of their service, which does not extend to the provision of social work services for individual children and families. Consequently, they keep no written records about children's progress. Any matters of concern are raised promptly with the appropriate professionals, with whom the manager has very good professional links.

Quality assurance systems are excellent and this ensures the agency continues to develop and improve. The Centre provides regular reports on its activities to the board of trustees and there is careful scrutiny of the agency's work and finances. The registered manager provides excellent leadership to sessional workers so that support groups and workshops are clearly focused on developing strong attachments between children and their parents. Routine quality assurance of every session ensures that children's needs are always at the heart of the agency's work. Feedback from all events is analysed and reflected upon and lessons learned are used to improve and develop service delivery. The registered manager is very well supported and supervised by the responsible individual and together they ensure that ambitious targets for development of the service are met.

Partner agencies are impressed by the service and report that it benefits adopters enormously. One said, 'We have had great feedback from the families; they are doing a wonderful job'. The local authority recognises the valuable work of the Centre, saying: 'The Centre for Adoption Support provides a very beneficial resource

and compliments the adoption support services provided by the local authority. Adopters clearly value the activities provided by the Centre and also some value the independence from their approving agency.'

The website is well set out, user-friendly and contains useful, up-to-date information about the services offered. This helps adoptive families to see the wide range of regular groups and specialist workshops and to select those that suit their needs. It also provides summaries about developments in adoption and links to detailed adoption news, including for example, the introduction of the early years pupil premium and adoption support fund. Feedback about the workshops from adopters and children is published on the website and is extremely positive. The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the operation of the agency and is available on the website. The children's guide is colourful and informative and is suitable for children who can read or for parents to share with younger children.

Plans are in place for the Centre to relocate in 2015 to new premises, which will be more suitable for wheelchair users, have better parking and be useable during the evenings and weekends as well as the working day. Parents and staff have made significant contributions to the design of the new premises.

The vision of the Centre is to provide a centre of excellence, a beacon of good practice where adopted children and their parents can access the help they need, when they need it. The Centre is making outstanding progress towards achieving 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 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 the inspection of adoption support agencies.