

An Independent Social Work/Play Therapy Service

Inspection report for adoption support agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a small agency, based in Surrey, which provides adoption support services to children and adults through play therapy. The agency does not work with birth family members, nor with adopted adults who are seeking birth records counselling or intermediary services.

The service is operated by a sole provider who offers therapy to adults and children in adoptive families. The provider has contractual arrangements with several local authorities to provide adoption support and staff and adoption panel members' training.

Currently there are 16 children and their families receiving a service through this agency. Over the 12 month period 2013 to 2014, 62 families from two local authorities received a service. Demand is increasing and the provider is currently considering developing the service further to respond to this need.

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 service with some outstanding features. The outcomes and the quality of care for children and young people are outstanding because the service provides a unique, tailored package of adoption support for each child and their family, based on their individual needs.

Families and social workers confirmed that there have been some exceptionally positive outcomes for children who have received therapy. A social worker said, 'Carol (the provider) has been a tremendous asset to our work here; I cannot say enough good things about her.'

Children and families are fully involved in the development of the service. The therapeutic work is dynamic and responsive to changing needs. The provider ensures that children and their parents define the objectives of each piece of work, and that

they are closely involved in reviewing progress. Targets are agreed and recorded at the outset by rating the challenging behaviours on a scale and then repeating the process at the mid-point and again at the conclusion of the work. This produces measurable progress against achievable targets. When cases are closed, there is a review of the work with the social worker and the family.

Parents are extremely positive about the work with their children. One parent described the provider as 'professional, confidential, understanding and incredibly experienced.' Parents have recommended the service to other adoptive families.

The provider is closely involved with her professional body and attends regular conferences and other training events to ensure that her practice reflects the latest research. She is a published author and has established exceptionally good networks with other professionals in her field, as well as with the local authorities who commission her service. External clinical supervision and regular meetings with colleagues ensure that the provider's practice is reflective and up to date.

The provider has a good understanding of her strengths and areas for development. She identifies her main strength as dynamic, professional and highly competent practice. This has been enhanced as a result of her experience as her professional body's complaints officer over a 10 year period. This has given her strong skills in assessing practice and she has learned and reflected on mistakes made by other practitioners over the years. Another strength is the provider's passion for her work and engaging with children and their families to bring about positive change.

The main challenge for this service is managing sustainable growth to respond to increasing requests for therapy. For example, there is currently no administrative support because it has not until now been cost effective for the provider to employ an administrator. Although case records are always kept up to date, service users are always the priority, so the provider has not always found the time to develop and update policies and procedures to meet regulatory requirements. Although there were significant shortfalls in two key policy documents at the start of this inspection, by its conclusion, these were fully rewritten to meet regulatory requirements. The provider is now actively considering commissioning some administration time to allow her to focus on direct work with children, so no recommendation has been made on this occasion.

The requirement regarding the Children's Guide raised at the previous inspection is now met. Two out of the three recommendations made at that inspection were actioned. The third recommendation, regarding the need to include provision for reporting historical abuse within the child protection policy, was addressed during this inspection. Two new recommendations have been made to support continuing work on policies and procedures.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- submit the child protection procedures for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) and to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for Child Protection. Ensure that they are consistent with the local policies and procedures agreed by the LSCB relevant to the geographical area where the adopters live (NMS 22.4)
- ensure that the written policy and procedural guidelines on considering and responding to representations and complaints complies with legal requirements and relevant Government guidance. (NMS 26.6)

Outcomes for service users

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Outcomes for children and young people are outstanding because the majority of families report exceptional changes in their circumstances as a result of receiving therapy. Many families interviewed reported considerable progress, and this was supported by examples of Carol Platteuw's own service evaluation seen during the inspection. Progress reviews include feedback from other professionals and the large majority show significant improvements in children's outcomes over time. One example stated that a school's special educational needs coordinator 'informed me that X's behaviour had improved in all areas in school.'

Families define the service they receive. If children mention a problem during their therapy that was not mentioned at the outset, the work is adapted to take this into account. For example, it may emerge that the child is having nightmares and that they need some strategies to cope. Social workers confirmed that feedback from their families is extremely positive. One social worker said, 'Carol has given the family the tools to support their child emotionally; she has raised his self-esteem and his self-confidence. This has helped him to settle in his adoptive placement, forming attachments to both parents. He has told me that he enjoys seeing Carol.'

One parent, whose family has suffered a major bereavement, said that their daughter 'has benefited hugely from seeing Carol – she is very, very good and it has been invaluable to us.' The provider's work has helped this child to develop coping strategies to manage the complex emotions surrounding loss. She has developed a good relationship very open communication with the child and her whole family, helping the young person to grieve and manage practical matters, such as making the difficult transition to secondary school. The provider's work with this family has been very flexible and sensitive, adapting to their changing needs over time.

A local authority social worker said, 'Carol is pleasure to work with. She is methodical, very succinct about what she can and can't do....our families are very happy with her work and they understand what she is trying to achieve. She uses family-friendly language. One mother told me, 'she really gets it, she really

understands'. She can handle anything she is given. We are really happy with the service Carol provides.'

The provider has helped to bring about many positive outcomes for individual children. One local authority manager gave an example of a child who was struggling with feelings about being adopted and was not allowing her adoptive parents to parent her. The provider worked very gently with this child and her family and after receiving therapy, the child had made significant progress in allowing her parents to nurture her.

Quality of service

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

The quality of care is outstanding because children receive excellent quality, individualised play therapy, informed by active professional learning and current research. This produces exceptionally good outcomes for children and their families.

The provider explained that she attends the annual British Association of Play Therapists' conference, and a week-long residential international play therapists' event. This is a demanding commitment which brings multiple benefits in terms of learning and development, which the provider passes on to her clients. She also subscribes to relevant professional journals. As a result, she is up to date in her learning and has developed exceptionally strong networks with colleagues. These networks have helped the provider to keep in touch with practice and these positive contacts have led to her being invited to contribute a chapter to a book on narrative play therapy.

The provider produces a clear, individually-tailored plan of work with each child and their family. The families identify their own targets. The service is flexible and adaptable to meet changing priorities and needs. The provider works extremely effectively with local authorities to ensure that they receive the service they have commissioned. The service is regularly reviewed in order to meet commissioning criteria and ensure value for money.

Social workers and team managers were full of praise about the provider's approach, her knowledge base and skills in bringing about positive change, sometimes in challenging circumstances. The provider is fully involved in training social workers in several different local authorities. She has also delivered training for an adoption consortium. This helps to disseminate her exceptional knowledge and skills.

One local authority manager said, 'we throw so much at Carol...grief, attachment, life story work, families at the brink of disruption...Carol has been incredibly supportive and has taught the team a lot about developmental trauma. She is such a core thinker and very generous with information. Carol keeps in touch with research and disseminates this to our teams.'

Safeguarding

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

The service has an open and inclusive ethos and works with children and families from all walks of life and any cultural or ethnic background, valuing and welcoming diversity. This ethos underpins the provider's practical approach to keeping children and young people safe, because she keeps the child at the centre of her practice at all times, irrespective of that young person's gender or social, economic or cultural background.

As a qualified social worker who has worked in child protection, the provider is acutely aware of safeguarding issues. She uses her experience to help children and families to understand the impact of abuse and neglect on child development. The provider explains her safeguarding policy to families at the outset and if any child protection concerns arise during her work, she is clear and transparent with them about how she will respond. Any safeguarding incidents are reported immediately to the local authority to help ensure that children are protected. The strong links between the service and local authorities ensures that there are ready channels of communication to convey any concerns.

The strength in the provider's day-to-day child protection practice has not always been matched by regularly-updated safeguarding policies. For example, at the start of the inspection, the safeguarding policy required some amendment because it did not include the regulatory requirement to notify Ofsted of child protection enquiries. It did not mention the local authority in whose area the service is situated, and one recommendation from the previous inspection, to include provision for historical abuse, had not been addressed.

Some years ago, the provider submitted the safeguarding procedure to the local authority designated officer (LADO) for scrutiny and comment, but this has not been repeated each time the policy was updated. Following discussion with the inspector, the provider updated the policy and sent it to the LADO during the inspection visit. A recommendation has been made.

There have been no complaints. The service had a complaints procedure that was based on the protocol used by a professional body. During the inspection, it was found that some web site links that were integral to this procedure had not been checked and were no longer working. This would have made it frustrating for someone who wished to complain about the service. During the inspection, the provider updated her complaints procedure to ensure that it met the relevant regulations. A recommendation has been made to ensure that the policy continues to reflect the regulatory framework.

Leadership and management

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

Leadership and management of this service are good. Parents and children

contribute their views and these are accepted and valued. The provider has developed very effective working relationships with local authorities and other agencies and professionals. This helps the provider to meet contractual arrangements and ensure effective collaboration to improve outcomes for children.

As a sole provider agency, this service has no staff, other than the provider herself, working in the field of adoption support. The provider receives regular clinical supervision from an external professional to ensure that there is sufficient opportunity for challenge, scrutiny and consultation. The provider also ensures that her own training and development needs are met in order to promote good practice.

The provider monitors targets and her own performance in helping children and families to achieve positive changes. At the start of the work, families are asked to rate their most significant concerns on a scale of 0 to 10. This process is repeated at the mid-way and final reviews, but families are not reminded of their initial rating for each type of behaviour. This helps to ensure that their assessment of progress is as objective as it can be. Families also complete a strengths and difficulties questionnaire. This enables the provider to assess progress against a range of targets defined by the families themselves.

The provider has plans to develop the service to meet the increasing national demand for adoption support work, because she is herself working at capacity. She is aware of the service's strengths and vulnerabilities and has plans to employ administrative support as her own workload increases.

Almost all the matters raised in the last inspection have been fully addressed. The agency was asked to produce periodic reports on service delivery, and the provider has ensured that this takes place. At the previous inspection, the service did not have a disaster recovery plan. There is now an effective plan in place to help ensure service continuity. The third recommendation, to incorporate historical abuse into the safeguarding policy, was not addressed prior to this inspection, but was improved during the inspection and meets regulatory requirements.

The business is financially viable with good cash flow and a steady flow of requests for services. Accounts are submitted annually through a qualified accountant to ensure that they are correct. The completed accounts for the last available financial year show a healthy re-tax profit. The service produces an annual report detailing progress and evaluating continuing viability. The provider produces reports for commissioners at the end of each piece of work.

The service has a clear and effective Statement of Purpose, which reflects the nature of the work and what children and parents can expect. There is also an effective children's guide to the service which explains to children exactly what a play therapist does and what they can expect.

Recording is securely stored, very clear and all reports are typed. The provider explained that due to having no administrative support, this work sometimes took three or four weeks to complete after the conclusion of the therapy. This matter is

being considered as part of the provider's plans to develop the agency further.

The building is attractively adapted from former industrial premises and is light, modern and secure from intrusion. It provides an attractive and relaxing space for children to receive therapy. There is a business continuity plan in place in case of unforeseen interruptions to the service. There is adequate insurance cover in place.

There has been only one safeguarding notification since the last inspection. This was made in a timely manner.

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.