

Cornerstone

Inspection report for adoption support agency

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Inspector	Mr Stephen Smith
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Registered manager	Mrs Pamela Birtle
Responsible individual	Mrs Janet Lancefield
Date of last inspection	28/11/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Cornerstone (North East) Adoption and Fostering Service is a registered Christian faith based charity located in the north east of England. The agency operates a fostering agency as well as adoption support services. This inspection relates to the adoption support elements of the service only. The agency provides adoption support services including birth records, counselling and intermediary services to those families who previously fostered through the agency and who went on to adopt the young people they fostered. The agency comprises the Registered Manager, an administrator, a part time social worker and a part time therapist. At the time of the inspection visit the agency was not undertaking any adoption support work but agreements were in place to provide adoption support to five children in two families as soon as their adoptions have taken place. It remains available to support families who have already adopted.

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**.

The agency provides adoptive people and their families with good adoption support. The desired outcomes of adoption support work are clearly identified along with the work to achieve these. Agency staff clearly understand the lifelong implications of adoption and maintain excellent relationships with adoptive families and young people. This means that they know their needs and how to help meet these well. This helps to maintain the stability of adoptive families and helps adopted people to make good progress and achieve positive outcomes.

The agency's foster carers foster young people with a view to permanence, either from adoption or long-term fostering. The good support provided to the agency's foster carers and fostered children continues without change after adoption proceedings have taken place. One adopter, who has received adoption support from the agency said, 'We have always found them excellent, they were very supportive when we fostered through them and the support has continued since we adopted'.

The Registered Manager and staff are highly experienced in adoption matters and continue to update and develop this experience on an ongoing basis. However, the agency has, despite its efforts to do so, not succeeded in securing updated training in birth records counselling and intermediary services which was a recommendation from the last inspection.

Formal adoption support plans are clearly set out and agreed. The agency does not yet have a system for reviewing the success of support interventions incorporating the views of service users that is well enough developed. This was a recommendation from the last inspection. Little formal adoption support work has taken place since that inspection. The agency has developed a specific children's guide to adoption support but this is not yet well enough developed.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

develop the children's guide to adoption support services to include a summary of what the service sets out to do for children. (NMS 18.6)

ensure that staff are equipped with the skills required to meet the needs of service users and kept up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments. Specifically, that updated training in birth records counselling and intermediary services is undertaken. (NMS 23.1)

develop a system to seek feedback from service users on the success of the service provision. This feedback should be recorded centrally and on the case record of the service user. (NMS 15.6)

Outcome for service users

Outcome for service users are good.

The agency provides its services only to the families who fostered children through its fostering agency prior to adopting them and to the children or adults they adopted. Adoptive families and staff regard the agency as a 'family' that is 'always there when we need them'. The service remains professional but provides support that is based on a detailed knowledge of the families and their needs.

At the time of the inspection the agency was providing on-going informal support to adoptive families only. In the few cases where formal adoption support has been provided since the last inspection, clear plans were developed and interventions were monitored and reviewed appropriately. Support is provided in a way that recognises service users' opinions and wishes. For example, a carer explained that although support is always available 'whenever we need it' the agency is sensitive to families' situation by not being 'too intrusive' and accepting that we 'just want to get on with our lives'.

The agency has developed a young person's guide to adoption support since the last inspection. It produces three versions of this for children and young people of different ages and personalises each based on the needs and capabilities of the young person concerned. This document provides very good information to young people about how to keep themselves safe and who they can contact if they have any concerns or worries. This is strong practice in helping to ensure young people's safety. However, the guide does not provide young people with a description of the adoption support service, the support they or their family may receive or the limits to the service. As such, young people do not have full information on which to base their views of the service and whether it is helping them in the way it should.

The support provided to adopted young people and adults and their families is individualised and non-judgemental. The effectiveness of this adoption support is demonstrated by the fact that the agency has not experienced a breakdown of any its adoptive families since it was registered.

Quality of service

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

The agency provides on-going support which helps to support the whole adoptive family. Support events take place and agency staff retain regular contact with families to advise and support. Adoptive parents have access to training in matters appropriate to them. For example, one carer reported undertaking recent training in managing children's contact with their birth families.

Where more formal and structured support packages are required, the agency develops clear adoption support plans and agrees these with the recipients of the service and, where necessary, with the local authority responsible for placing the children for adoption. For example, good agreements are in place with commissioning local authorities to provide formal adoption support packages to a

number of families as soon as their adoptions have taken place. These clearly set out the support to be provided and by whom. Clear feedback is provided to commissioning authorities about the work done with families which ensures that commissioners are fully aware of the work being done and the outcomes it achieves. The excellent relationships between the agency's staff and its adoptive families are noteworthy. This means that, where needed, support plans can be developed and provided in a responsive and timely manner.

Members of the agency's small staff team are highly experienced in adoption, both as professionals and as adoptive parents. They are involved in a number of national adoption groups and advisory bodies. They apply this knowledge and understanding to the strong advice, guidance and support they provide to families and ensure they keep up to date with developments in the field. This knowledge also translates into good quality training in matters such as contact and attachment for the agency's foster carers who may be preparing to adopt and families who are already adopting young people.

The agency has not undertaken any birth records counselling or intermediary work since the last inspection. At that inspection a recommendation was made that agency staff undertake updated training in this area. Despite work by the manager to access this updated training in this work, the agency has not been successful to date. This means that, should this work be required of the agency, staff members are not sufficiently well equipped to deliver it.

Safeguarding

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

New staff members recruited and appointed by the agency since the last inspection have been subject to a thorough and careful recruitment and checking procedure. Additionally, the agency ensures that criminal disclosure checks and social worker's registration their professional body are updated as necessary. This helps to ensure the suitability of the people employed by the agency to work with children and vulnerable adults.

A comprehensive safeguarding policy and procedure is in place, which includes a procedure for allegations against carers. Since the last inspection, the agency has developed a similarly comprehensive and detailed policy relating to historic abuse. Staff receive regular safeguarding training. This training is also provided to the agency's carers and is available to their adoptive parents. This helps to ensure that staff members, foster carers preparing to adopt and adoptive families understand what action to take should they be concerned that a child is being, or has been, harmed.

The agency provides children and young people with very good information in the children's guide to adoption support about safety matters. This information includes internet and on-line safety, bullying, misuse of substances and exploitation. The guides also make clear who young people are able to speak to and how to contact

them should they have any worries or concerns. Staff members know young people and their families well and develop positive relationships with them. This helps them to reinforce this information and to be readily accessible should a young person wish to speak to them with a concern or worry.

There have been no allegations or complaints. However, there are procedures in place for handling these if they were to occur.

Leadership and management

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

The agency's Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and sets out the aims and objectives of the agency. It is supported by a children's guide which, although giving young people good information about how to stay safe, does not detail what the agency sets out to provide for them.

At the last inspection four recommendations were made. These related to the development of a children's guide specifically for the adoption support service, updated staff training in birth records counselling and intermediary services, the development of a policy covering allegations of historic abuse and a system for recording service users' views of the adoption support packages provided to them. The agency has fully addressed two of these matters. It has developed a good policy relating to historic abuse and produced a developed a young people's guide to adoption support although this still lacks some of the information needed. Although it has attempted to address the remaining two recommendations they have not yet been met and are referred to elsewhere in this report.

The agency has sufficient staff to manage its current workload. Staff are well qualified practitioners. They demonstrate the skills and knowledge required to provide effective post adoption support. The manager and staff are involved in a range of local and national bodies relating to developments in adoption. Staff members receive regular supervision and appraisal and the manager benefits from an effective system to ensure that she receives the supervision she requires. Efficient administrative support is in place and ensures the smooth running of the service. This ensures that adoptive families receive the support they need.

The agency's records of the work it carries out are maintained in good order. Records are clear and comprehensive and reflect the work that has been completed. They are kept up-to-date and subject to regular monitoring and audit to ensure their quality. The agency has not yet implemented an effective system of recording feedback from users of the service about the support they receive as recommended at the last inspection. So little formal adoption support work has been done since the last inspection that the agency has had limited opportunity to implement such a system. However, this means that the effectiveness of interventions cannot be monitored as effectively as they should be.

The agency has well-developed systems for monitoring the running of the agency and reporting to trustees about the work of the agency. This good monitoring and reporting allows the agency to have a good understanding of the work it does, its

operating state and areas for future development. The agency's accounts are formally audited and with these its financial viability. The agency has a detailed development plan in place.

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.