

Adopt Together

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Ros Chapman
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Adopt Together is a voluntary adoption agency which operates from premises in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire. It is provided by the registered children's charity, Faith in Families. The agency is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption and adoption support, including birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents. It works with local authorities to place looked after children with its approved families and provides a range of adoption support services to children, adoptive parents, adopted adults and birth relatives.

The agency approved 25 adoptive families in the year ending March 2015, and provided placements for 33 children within that same year. At the time of the inspection there were 39 approved adoptive families, of whom 18 had children placed with them, pending an adoption order, 11 were linked to children and 10 were waiting for a placement. There was a total of 57 open adoption support cases, 21 of which related to historical adoptions.

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: **Outstanding**

This is an outstanding adoption agency in all respects. The ambitious and inspirational leadership at all levels is underpinned by a child-centred ethos. This, coupled with the committed, knowledgeable staff team who deliver high quality work, results in exceptional progress, outcomes and positive experiences for children

and young people placed for adoption and adopted.

The agency demonstrates a proactive approach to learning and improvement and welcomes feedback from all sources to inform its further development. There is a high level of satisfaction from people who use the service. For example, one adopter said: 'We had an amazing service, I can't fault it.' Another commented: 'Our social worker goes above and beyond. She is fantastic.'

A significant strength is the placement of children who may otherwise not have the opportunity of a legally permanent family. This is an area which has developed since the last inspection, in terms of placement numbers. Adopters are exceptionally well supported to enable these placements to be sustained. This is another area in which the agency has invested heavily, both in terms of increased staffing numbers and high quality training. Adopters are provided with prompt and life-long adoption support of a high quality, which has been enhanced by staff training in theraplay and dyadic developmental psychotherapy. To quote a trustee, 'adoption is not an event, it is a life-long commitment', which exemplifies the ethos by which the agency operates.

The agency is creative and innovative. It has formalised a partnership with a local authority, which has enabled that authority to place some of its children with the most complex needs in a far more timely way than it may otherwise have been able to do. This is currently being expanded to provide some adoption support for this local authority's families, which is testament to the quality of work they have experienced and the trust they place in the agency.

The agency has fully embraced the two-stage process for the preparation and assessment of adopters. It has not compromised on the quality of this, while keeping to timescales, unless out of its control or at the choice of the applicants. Adopters fully demonstrate that they have benefited enormously from the workshops and assessments and have an in-depth understanding of the needs of adopted children and how they require a more therapeutic parenting approach.

Children's and young people's involvement with the agency is very positive. They enjoy a range of groups and activities, which provide them with friendships and help develop their skills. They also benefit from high quality direct work when this is needed. They feel listened to and involved, for example, in preparing questions to be asked at the adoption panel, and making suggestions for the activity groups.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people make outstanding progress and have exceptionally positive outcomes and experiences as a result of being placed with adopters from this agency. Of particular significance is the placement of children who are deemed 'harder to place', which is carried out in a timely manner with adopters who are fully prepared to meet their needs. Therefore children who may otherwise not benefit from an adoptive family do so, and they are therefore far more likely to have better outcomes and life chances than they otherwise would have had. In the year 2014/15 100% of the 33 children placed were under this definition, as are all but one of the 33 children linked, matched or placed so far this year. This includes children with really complex and significant needs. The agency also facilitates siblings living together, as over half the adopters last year had more than one child placed with them. A really positive development is the foster to adopt placements which enable babies to be placed with adopters as soon as possible and therefore start to develop attachments without delay.

The high quality preparation, assessment, matching and support enables these placements to last. Although there have been a small number of disruptions last year, approximately 6%, this is below the national average and is in the context of placements which are higher risk. The agency takes measured risks to enable children to have the opportunity of a permanent family life.

Children develop secure attachments and flourish. Given their previous life experiences, this is, for some, exceptional progress. Because of the emphasis on therapeutic parenting, adopters understand how best to respond to children with attachment issues and resulting behaviour, and this enables them, over time, to begin to attach and feel more secure. Comments from social workers include: 'The adopters provide excellent standards of care', and, 'the child is doing incredibly well.'

Social workers and adopters have remarked on the progress children have made, such as 'coming on in leaps and bounds' educationally, catching up 18 months of schooling in a year, being much calmer, more settled, and having fewer behavioural outbursts. One social worker said: 'I've seen such a difference.' An adopter commented of his child: 'He is doing fantastically well. I've seen a big change. His self-esteem has increased and he more confident and secure.' Children make friends, which again for some is significant, and they have positive experiences with their families, such as birthday parties, holidays and access to a range of activities such as swimming and dance.

Children and young people also have some excellent experiences provided by the agency, as well as family social events, of which one child said, 'it was really fun.' They make friends with other adopted children and young people, which improves their self-image, and they take part in a range of varied activities which are not only

fun but provide them with opportunities to develop their social and other skills, confidence and self-esteem. They feel listened to and know their views are important, which benefits their emotional well-being, confidence and sense of self.

Children with additional needs have made progress over and above what was expected, improving their communication and motor skills, because of the care and support they receive, both from the adopters and the agency staff.

Children develop a positive identity because adopters are made aware of the importance of this in their preparation and assessment. The agency staff also pursue local authorities for life story books and later life letters where necessary. Adopters also engage in indirect and direct contact to support the maintenance of children's heritage and relationships. There are times when the agency has directly supported these arrangements to enable them to take place at short notice, demonstrating the importance and commitment they have to supporting this area.

High quality post adoption support, which is delivered promptly, ensures children and young people remain with their adopters when they may otherwise have had a placement breakdown. One adopter said: 'They helped keep us together.' This enables children and young people to have better outcomes and a more positive transition into adulthood.

Work with adopted adults and 'historical' birth relatives is exceptionally positive and they feel really well supported by the sensitive, positive and can-do approach of the social workers. One said: 'I'm over the moon, ecstatically happy.' Other feedback from these service users is similarly positive, for example: 'It met all my expectations and needs so I can move forward with my life in a more positive way.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

There is a really high standard of social work practice which permeates throughout the agency, and this results in very high levels of customer satisfaction. All aspects of the quality of the service, from the first contact with the agency, are outstanding. One adopter said: 'It's been brilliant from day one.' Many adopters cite the friendliness and the welcome they received at this point as the reason they chose Adopt Together. One said: 'We felt we were in a safe pair of hands.' There is a monthly 'First Thursdays' information evening at the office, where enquirers can meet adopters and staff to discuss any queries. This is supplemented by professional and comprehensive written information and an in-depth telephone conversation with a social worker. Consequently, both the agency and the enquirers have a good understanding of each other before they decide to progress further.

The agency welcomes anyone who has the potential to provide a good adoptive family, and its inclusivity is positive. There are a number of same sex adopters,

single adopters and adopters from a variety of communities. This provides a greater choice for family finding. The two-stage process has been fully embedded into practice and refined as a result of feedback and evaluation. Timescales are met, unless there is a good reason, such as it is out of the agency's control or at the request of the applicants. The workshops, which are based on recent research, provide excellent information about attachment, safeguarding, contact, identity and therapeutic parenting. This, coupled with an in-depth and analytical assessment, ensures that prospective adopters are exceptionally well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and are fully aware of the challenges which a child who has been subject to abuse and trauma may bring. One adopter commented: 'I can't praise them enough; they have been wonderful.' Another said: 'We get it because we got amazing training.' This was reinforced by another adopter who said: 'The training has a significant impact on what we do and how we parent the children.'

Birth children of adopters have their own group where they can share their thoughts and feelings in an independent and safe setting. This is a recent development, and two groups have taken place so far. As birth children's role is vital in ensuring a successful placement, this is an excellent initiative. Close family members and friends are also invited to attend a supporters' group which provides them with information about adoption so they have a better understanding of their role and can support the adopters appropriately.

The prospective adopter report provides an accurate account of the adopters, with good analysis of their strengths and vulnerabilities. This forms the basis for a good match. Where further work is identified, for example, to ensure the prospective adopters have the capacity to meet the needs of a particular child, this is carried out effectively and has resulted in excellent placements, including that for a child with very complex needs.

The adoption panel provides an independent, robust oversight of the work of the agency. It has a diverse membership and includes people with personal and professional experience of adoption to enable it to consider a variety of perspectives. It is well administered. The panel adviser provides an excellent quality assurance function, so by the time the information is presented to the panel, it has been thoroughly scrutinised by both the manager and the panel adviser, and any shortfalls or queries have been addressed. All panel members receive the electronic information in good time so that they can give it their full consideration. The minutes provide a full and accurate reflection of the meeting and are produced in a very timely way. Therefore the agency decision maker is able to make her decision within timescales, having taken account of all the relevant information. The decision is well documented and shows a thorough and considered approach to this important task.

Family finding and matching are very well supported, and the development of the home finding team has enhanced this. Home finding seminars have been introduced so that adopters understand the post-approval process. This development was based on research findings which showed adopters did not process this information in pre-approval training. The close links with local authorities, and the formal partnership arrangement with one, ensures that most adoptive families are matched promptly,

but more importantly that children are offered families without delay. The agency home finders attend the local authority home finding meeting and have access to information about all that local authority's children, which is unusual and innovative practice. This has resulted in excellent and prompt matches. The agency uses a variety of means to assist with the placement of children, which has played a significant role in supporting the development of the activity days.

Once prospective adopters receive information about children, their social worker plays an active part in ensuring they really understand the implications and can meet the child's needs. They attend life appreciation days, provide questions, chase up missing documentation and help the adopters fully consider everything. A child's social worker said of one of the agency's social workers during this process: 'She was fantastic. She did a really good job and advocated for the adopters, making sure they asked questions. She did a brilliant job in supporting them.' An adopter said: 'My social worker kept me very grounded.' The importance the agency places on matches is demonstrated by the fact that the team manager also makes a full assessment of the viability of the placement. The agency has also amended its procedures as a result of the learning from the recent disruptions. Thus placements have every chance of success before they are agreed. Families are well supported prior to the adoption order; one child's social worker said: 'I am impressed with the support the carers have from the agency.'

Post adoption support is an area which the agency has developed further since the last inspection. It has expanded the team and has invested in training for all the staff. Adopters know the agency promises life-long support and express a high degree of confidence that it will deliver on that promise. There are clear procedures which inform all the work. A post-adoption visit lays the basis for any future work. Families who call the agency receive a prompt response. One adopter said of the agency's social worker: 'She was the first person who took time to listen and hear us out, offering us the support we needed.' Staff benefit from consultation with a psychotherapist so they can work more effectively with the families.

The agency works in partnership with other services, or undertakes direct work itself. This has included some very positive life story work. Staff are highly skilled and knowledgeable and are able to deliver work of an extremely high quality. They have also provided training to another agency's adopters on this subject, including contact and identity. This high quality work was recognised by a child's social worker who said: 'You really helped him understand his story better, and he is now more secure and emotionally equipped to manage contact better.' An innovative project on the link between neuroscience and dance is being delivered in the new year, to support adopters with younger children.

All the work is underpinned by a thorough assessment of the support needs and how these are planned to be met. One adopter commented: 'From day one the help was always there. I can't fault them, the support is brilliant.' Other than direct work, the agency also holds social events, support groups, including one for adoptive fathers, children's groups, and a whole raft of post-adoption training. There are plans to provide a support group for same-sex adopters, now the agency has approved a

number of these. There is also an education adviser who delivers training and provides support to adopters who are having difficulties with educational issues. He empowers adopters to be able to advocate effectively for their children, but will also become involved directly where necessary. He has also produced user-friendly materials to advise teachers how best to manage children with attachment issues, as well as advice for adopters on how to decide on the most appropriate school. As many placements struggle due to difficulties in school, this service is extremely beneficial. One adopter said: 'Thank you for the hard work and support; it made a difference to the level of understanding at the school.'

Work with adopted and birth relatives is also carried out to a very high standard. There is a short wait for a service, but service users are informed of this immediately so they know when to expect further contact. The staff who carry out this work are trained, sensitive and skilled, as demonstrated by the very positive feedback which is provided. Comments include: 'Thanks for the wonderful report. I can see you spent a lot of time, effort and care in preparing it. You clearly know what you are doing', and, 'it more than met my needs, and it was courteous and empathetic.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency places safeguarding at the centre of its practice, and as a result, children, young people and adult service users receive and benefit from a service which protects them from harm. The agency lead for safeguarding ensures that staff are kept up-to-date on all developments and research in this area. For example, staff have had information about radicalisation and extremism, and formal training is imminent. Everyone connected with the agency has annual safeguarding training delivered by an external trainer. This includes panel members and trustees as well as staff. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to ensuring everyone is aware that safeguarding is their responsibility and is furnished with the knowledge to exercise this as necessary.

All staff understand their roles and responsibilities and when they should refer concerns to the local authority. The safeguarding lead monitors all concerns raised to ensure the relevant people are taking appropriate action and situations are not allowed to drift.

There are rigorous systems to ensure that children are placed with people who are suitable and in an environment that is safe. These include robust preparation and assessment of potential adopters, appropriate checks and references, health and safety and pet assessments and the provision of information on, for example, safe gardens and electrical safety.

Adopters demonstrate an excellent understanding of the impact of abuse, neglect and trauma, as a consequence of the emphasis placed on these areas in the workshops and further training. Therapeutic parenting is a thread which runs

through the whole preparation, assessment and approval process. This ensures they are well equipped for the challenges which adoptive parenting can bring, and have appropriate and effective strategies to manage the difficulties without taking things personally. This is reinforced by the agency's written policy on safeguarding and behaviour management which adopters receive at an early stage. Adopters are also very aware of how to minimise the risks that social media may pose. Additional post-approval training, for example, on the impact of sexual abuse, reinforces learning to further promote a safe service.

Everyone connected with the agency receives a complaints information leaflet at the start of the service. Children and young people receive this information as part of the children's guide, which also provides details about other independent agencies which offer support. They have a number of opportunities to share any concerns with people outside of the adoptive family. This includes their own social worker and the agency social worker. Children say they find the agency staff easy to talk to. There are examples when children have raised worries with staff during or after an activity or outing, which demonstrates that they feel comfortable with, and have confidence in, the staff to listen and act on their concerns. This provides an additional layer of security.

It is very evident that this is a learning organisation; complaints and all forms of feedback are taken very seriously and used to improve the service. This includes minor comments. For example, an adopter commented that they had mentioned something about one of the workshops, and when they next attended, it had been altered. Stakeholders comment that the agency is not defensive but open and honest, which gives them trust in working with them.

Staff and panel members' recruitment is robust and well documented to ensure that only those people who are suitable to work with children, young people or adult service users, or have access to sensitive information, are employed.

The work undertaken with adults also keeps their welfare and safety at its centre; before a service is offered, comprehensive risk assessments, which take account of everyone's welfare, are completed and agreed by a manager. This ensures that the safety and well-being of vulnerable people are not compromised in any way.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Leaders and managers, including the trustees, are exceptionally committed and passionate about improving outcomes for children who are placed for adoption. They provide inspirational leadership to the staff team, who respond with equal enthusiasm, commitment and passion to the challenge.

A significant strength, and one which has had, and continues to have, an important

role in improving outcomes for children, is the formal partnership with a local authority. The commissioner for this service said: 'It is a really embedded partnership which means we can place more quickly and find families for harder to place children.' This has been seen as an exemplar of effective and innovative partnership working in the sector and a good precursor for the regionalisation agenda. A commissioner said: 'I like their creativity and innovation. They think outside the box.' This builds on less formal, yet highly effective, relationships with other local authorities, adoption agencies and partners. One social worker commented: 'They are easy to communicate with.' The agency plays an important role in the Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies and demonstrates that it shares information and expertise for the benefit of the sector. For example, it played a significant part on the steering group for adoption activity days, showing a desire and willingness to embrace innovative practice.

Effective and thorough monitoring is carried out at all levels. The agency is governed by a highly effective board of trustees who bring a wealth of varied, yet relevant, personal and professional experience to provide constructive challenge and support. They receive training and annual appraisals to enable them to understand their role and carry it out effectively. The child is at the heart of the service, which is value driven, and this ethos permeates throughout the governance and oversight as well as the ambition for the agency. One trustee commented: 'I feel privileged to be a trustee of this agency.' Financial matters are also well considered to ensure the agency remains financially viable. There is a strategic plan for deficit reduction, which is being implemented effectively, and the agency has generous reserves to ensure the continuance of the service for an appropriate time period.

Feedback from children, young people, adult service users, adopters and stakeholders is regularly sought at all stages. This is always considered and acted upon to bring improvements. For example, the children's group is now split into two age ranges as a result of consultation. The development plan is a working document which is kept under constant review. All staff feed into this through the away days, giving them both ownership of the tasks and pride in their achievements.

The agency has made a number of significant improvements since the last inspection, when they were judged outstanding, showing that it is not complacent and is ambitious for constant re-evaluation and positive change. There has been a significant investment in adoption support, and the team has grown considerably. They have been able to improve and develop the service as a result. All staff have had training in therapy and dyadic developmental psychotherapy in order to be able to provide specialist support to adoptive families based on tried and tested methods. The recommendation from the last inspection has been addressed through the development of a comprehensive adoption support assessment which is shared with families, children and young people so they know what is being offered and what it is hoped to achieve.

The recruitment of adopters is underpinned by research in what makes successful conversions from enquiry to application. This results in an effective use of time and resources. There is an impressive recruitment and marketing plan which is subject to regular evaluation to ensure it is delivering results. The agency has a robust

understanding of the needs of children who require an adoptive family, assisted by the formal partnership, and this is reflected in all their very professionally presented literature, posters, and leaflets, as well as the website.

The staff team is a real strength of the service. Staff are exceptionally knowledgeable, skilled, passionate and committed to providing a service of high quality. They come from a variety of backgrounds in order to offer different strengths and knowledge bases. Adopters and stakeholders speak highly of them. One adopter said: 'My social worker is brilliant and goes above and beyond.' Another said: 'We feel really cared for.' They are enabled to provide a high level of support to adoptive families because they are supported by the agency through good quality training, regular supervision, practice development days and appraisal. Leaders and managers place a high value on the staff and invest in them, and they, in turn, value the service they provide. Learning from research and practice underpins the work of the agency, particularly research on trauma and attachment. The agency is also involved in research and delivers a module on improving adoption outcomes on a local social work course.

The statement of purpose is readily available and provides comprehensive information to anyone who wishes to know about the service. The children's guide is individualised to the child or young person, is written in an appropriate way and also provides good information so that a child or young person knows the purpose of the service and who they can contact for support or advice.

Record keeping is underpinned by clear practice guidance so staff know what is expected of them in terms of content, quality, storage and access. The files are regularly audited to ensure their content is appropriate and useful, should they be accessed in the future.

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.