

Action for Children - Adoption and Permanency Service Midlands

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Sue Young
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Registered manager	Debbie Bradley
Responsible individual	John Downing
Date of last inspection	04/10/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

Action for Children is a voluntary adoption agency. The Midlands branch, located on the outskirts of Solihull, is one of three branches operating in England. It provides a range of services including the recruitment, assessment, approval and support of adoptive families who live within a 50-mile radius of its operation. The agency also provides birth records counselling and an intermediary service to people adopted through Action for Children via its London Branch. The Midlands branch provided placements for 23 children with adopters in the year between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015, including seven sibling groups. During that same year it approved 12 adoptive families, three of which were single applicants.

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: **Good**

The Adoption and Permanency Service Midlands is a good branch of Action for Children. They have strong leadership and an experienced and committed staff team. There is a high level of scrutiny and monitoring by managers which demonstrates continuous improvement and development of the service.

Outcomes for children are good. They are making significant progress in all aspects of their development within their adoptive families. Children experience good placement stability. This is because they are well matched to their new families. The agency has had no placement disruptions.

There is a high rate of satisfaction among adopters. They are positive about the

branch and feel valued by the manager and staff. Comments from adopters include, 'Everything they do now is brilliant' and 'They were great from the first meeting right through to approval.' A particular strength of the branch is the stability of its staff team.

Children are safe in their adoptive families. This is because there is a good focus of safeguarding within the agency throughout the assessment of adopters, the level of training provided to both staff and adopters and in the support provided to adopters post placement.

Individual adoption support provided by social workers is effective and valued by adopters. The agency is in the process of developing its adoption support service to provide a more inclusive service to adopters post placement and post order.

There are no breaches of regulation made as a result of this inspection. One recommendation has been made. This is with regard to the monitoring functions of the adoption panel and does not have an impact on children's experiences, outcomes or progress.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure that adoption panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to panel. (NMS 17.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are settled and feel safe. They are making progress from their starting point and are having good experiences in their new families. One adopted young person stated, 'I think they do an amazing job. They have managed to give us a family.'

There have not been any disruption to placements. This is because there is careful matching to ensure children are placed with adoptive families. Children feel secure which helps them to develop attachments to their new family. They are increasing in confidence and are making good progress in relation to their health and education. For example, children who previously did not regularly attend school and were very quiet and withdrawn are now taking part in school plays and enjoy dancing. They are now attaining expected levels in school. They are developing emotionally and are reported to be 'blossoming' within their new families. One placing social worker commented, 'The children have made massive progress.'

Children enjoy good health. Adopters register their children with healthcare professionals and access any specialist services when this is needed. Social workers from the agency continue to support adopters after placement to further promote children's development. For example, social workers support children to access therapy and liaise with schools regarding behaviour issues. They support adopters by giving them advice and strategies to deal with anger outbursts and self-harming behaviour and help them to develop their knowledge and understanding of children's behaviour. One adopter stated, 'We had a challenging time at first with our eldest boy. Our social worker was absolutely fantastic. She believed we could do it and kept telling me this.'

The manager and social workers promote the placements of brothers and sisters together and support children to have contact with their birth families and others who are significant to them through 'letterbox' contact. This helps children to gain an understanding of their background and maintain a positive sense of identity.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Information packs ensure prospective adopters receive clear, information about the process and what to expect. Initial visits and subsequent contact from social workers are welcoming. As a result, prospective adopters feel highly valued. One adopter commented, 'The agency made us feel welcome and totally understood our needs.' Another stated they had, 'Fantastic consistent support.'

The preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters are effective. Adopters feel that preparation training is good and informative. Managers listen to prospective adopters and develop their service as a result. For example, the preparation training following feedback now include direct experiences from existing adopters. One adopter stated, 'We attend prep meetings and prior to panel we talk to other adopters.'

The assessment and decision on suitability of prospective adopters are made within expected timescales unless there are good reasons for delay. Any delay in assessments are out of the control of the agency and are adopter-led. Prospective adopter reports (PARs) are clear and analytical. This supports the matching process.

The adoption panel is robust and provides effective challenge to the agency. There is a good skill mix and experience among panel members. The administration of panel is efficient and the minutes are clear. Panel members receive annual appraisals and appropriate training, including recent safeguarding training. The panel chair provides an annual report on the quality and timeliness of the agency's work. This oversight, however, has not been provided on a six monthly basis which limits the effectiveness of panel feedback and monitoring to the agency.

The agency decision maker makes considered decisions about adopters' suitability to adopt within appropriate timescales. Prospective adopters are positive about their experience of the assessment process and the adoption panel. One adopter stated, 'I feel the whole experience has been very cathartic and has possibly made me feel happier than I was before.'

Branch social workers generally work very well with other professionals, including local authority social workers, to support the matching and introduction process. They support adopters through introductions and planning. They attend matching panels, linking meetings, children's looked after reviews and also court hearings when required.

Social workers and the manager appropriately challenge local authorities to ensure children's needs are well met. For example, they have effectively challenged local authorities regarding poor minutes of children's looked after meetings.

Adopters largely welcome the post adoption support provided by the agency although some feel this could be further developed. Managers have recognised this and are developing the agency's adoption support services to enable them to provide a full adoption support service. This includes specialist training for staff, parenting programmes, and service level agreements with other adoption support agencies. On an individual basis, the post placement and post order support provided by social workers are widely valued by adopters. Adopters develop very close working relationships with their assessing social worker who remains with them throughout the assessment, family finding process and post placement. This is a strength of the branch. Some adopters remain in contact with their social workers for many years following adoption orders and feel comfortable contacting the agency whenever they may need to. One adopter commented, 'Without the consistent and high quality

support from Action for Children we would have found this whole process so much more stressful. We have appreciated having the same social worker throughout without any changes.'

Access to records, including the intermediary service, is carried out centrally through the agency's London branch. This was inspected in 2015 as part of the inspection of its London branch and was considered an area of strength.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

There is a strong focus on safeguarding within the agency. Clear safeguarding policies and procedures are developed which are implemented in practice. The agency has a safeguarding lead who ensures all staff are kept up to date with any changes. Robust systems enable managers to monitor and ensure the safety of children placed with adopters. These include quarterly safeguarding audits and annual safeguarding reviews. Any safeguarding concerns are carefully monitored by the branch manager. As a result, these are all acted upon appropriately and swiftly.

There is a clear process for complaints and information is given to adopters and children on how to access the complaints procedure. There have been no complaints made by prospective adopters or children since the last inspection.

Staff, panel members and adopters understand the importance of safeguarding and the actions to take to safeguard children. Training has a strong focus on safeguarding which has been further developed to include recent issues in child protection, such as, the risks from social media. Assessments of prospective adopters are robust with all necessary checks and references taken up. The importance of safeguarding children including the impact on behaviour from abuse and trauma is fully discussed during prospective adopters' assessment process and in their preparation training. As a result they have a have a clear understanding of effective and safe practice.

Adopters develop safe care policies which are reviewed on the placement of children to ensure they reflect their needs and provide the necessary safeguards. Strong partnership and joint work between local authority social workers and social workers from the branch ensure good practice and effective partnership to safeguard children.

Recruitment is robust for all staff and panel members. This prevents unsuitable people having access to children, service users and their information.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Since the last inspection the agency has undergone significant changes nationally resulting in strong leaders who have a clear vision and commitment to develop the service. The branch is well resourced as the manager and staff are very experienced and form a stable team. This is a strength of the branch as many have been in post for several years. Staff are well qualified and appropriately supervised. They receive up to date and relevant training which reflect the new legislation and practice. There is a strong commitment from the staff team who feel valued and respected by the branch manager.

Managers are aware of the fast changing market in adoption and the significant impact of the creation of regional adoption services. They are also aware of the significant drop in the number of referrals nationally of children waiting for adoption. As a result, managers are changing their focus on the harder to place children, such as, those with disabilities. They have developed several partnerships and successfully secured grants to develop their service to meet the needs of this changing market.

The agency has clear strategic plans to recruit adopters. They employ a marketing and recruitment officer who works centrally, is dedicated to adoption and has a clear understanding of the issues. She has identified areas and groups, such as, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities within the region and has focussed recruitment in this area. She is developing brochures and DVD's to target potential adopters and has made contact with various Faith groups to find the best ways of attracting prospective adopters.

The branch and agency as a whole has strong quality assurance systems to manage and monitor service delivery. There are excellent systems with clear accountability and internal audits. These monitor outcomes for children and ensure they meet the needs of adopters and those children placed and waiting for adoption. As a result, they are constantly striving for improvement. Feedback from children and prospective adopters are sought and evaluated throughout the whole process to develop the service. For example, the branch has developed a buddying network, family and friends training and a men's group as a direct response to feedback from adopters. One adopter stated, 'They ask us all the time how they can develop as an agency.'

The manager and social workers develop effective working relationships with various local authorities and work closely with children's placing social workers to match and support placements. Partnership with placing authorities ensures individual children's needs are met without delay. Children's social workers are on the whole positive about their involvement with the agency. One local authority social worker commented, 'My impression and experience of the agency is very good... I have had positive experiences with Action for Children and would use them again.'

The statement of purpose is available and accessible on the agency's website for all

service users and stakeholders. The agency produces a personalised children's guide for each child placed which can be adapted to cater for individual communication needs.

The office environment is pleasant and supports effective administration systems. The branch has clear, secure records which ensure appropriate accessibility and confidentiality. They are moving towards electronic records and have developed systems to support this.

Recommendations made at the last inspection have been met apart from one regarding the frequency of quality assurance reports by the adoption panel. This has been remade.

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.