

Adoptionplus Limited

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Rosie Dancer
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Adoptionplus is a Voluntary Adoption Agency that provides domestic adoption and adoption support services, birth relative counselling and training services. The agency specialises in recruiting, assessing and preparing adoptive families for children with a history of trauma and attachment difficulties. All their adoptive families have access to a multi-disciplinary team of therapists until their child is 18. Families' therapeutic needs are regularly monitored and they are provided with individually tailored packages of therapeutic support, when they need it.

In addition, the therapy service is commissioned by local authorities, children and adolescent mental health services and by individual families who require pre- and post-adoption support. Adoptionplus also provides therapeutic counselling to adults in connection with adoption, the majority of which are through service level agreements which are in place with four local authorities.

Since registration in the summer of 2008 the agency has placed 13 children with 12 adoptive families. It currently has four adoptive families approved and waiting for a placement. Three of these four have been linked with children. The fourth prospective adopter is currently on hold. In the past year the agency has provided therapeutic support to 11 of its own adoptive families and a further 32 families through spot purchase agreements with local authorities. Since 1 January 2015 the agency has worked with 45 birth relatives through services commissioned by local authorities and has worked with three self-funded adoptees.

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**

Children placed with the agency's adopters have complex needs. They live with exceptionally well-prepared and committed adoptive parents who nurture them and love them unconditionally. Adopters fully understand how their child's past experiences have disadvantaged them emotionally and physically and they work effectively with the agency to successfully counteract the effects past trauma has had on them.

Adoptive parents are highly nurturing and children thrive in their adoptive families and develop healthier attachments than they have ever been able to in the past. Placements are very stable; there have been no adoption breakdowns since the agency opened.

The agency takes an evidence-based and integrated approach to preparation, assessment and support. Excellent attention is paid, by very knowledgeable and skilled workers, to the linking and matching processes. The approach to planning for placement support is proactive and informed by children and adopters' needs. The quality of support provided to children and adoptive families is outstanding. This is in relation to both social work and clinical support. The support and the safe and secure environments children are living in mean that children progress far better than had been expected. The exceptionally high quality support provided has undoubtedly contributed to the stability of placements.

The managers of the agency are highly motivated, ambitious and influential in developing innovative practice and services within the agency and nationally. Innovative practice among the staff is positively encouraged by managers and the board.

Staff are of a high calibre and exceptionally well supported in their roles. They have been provided with mindfulness therapy and use this in their practice. They are highly ambitious for children and adoptive families and their professional practice is of the highest of quality. Their practice thrives on the training and other learning opportunities available to them and due to the enthusiasm and encouragement of the manager.

The agency has excellent working relationships with other agencies and professionals and the work they do is held in wide regard.

There has been a significant downturn of children waiting for a placement for adoption nationally and this has impacted on all voluntary adoption agencies. However, this agency has risen to the challenge and is developing in the area of most need currently, adoption support.

Three minor shortfalls were found. These relate to the records maintained of supervision sessions and the recording of decision making and the information contained within the statement of purpose. None of these have any impact on children.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

In making her decision the decision maker should record:

- the key arguments
- if they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel has properly addressed the arguments
- whether any additional information now available to them that was not before the panel has an impact on their reasons or recommendation
- the reasons given for the relevant recommendation that they do or do not wish to adopt; and state

(a) the adopted reasons by cross reference or otherwise and

(b) any further reasons for their decision. (Adoption Statutory Guidance 2013 1.51, pg 25)

Ensure the statement of purpose clearly sets out the stages prospective adopters will need to progress through. (NMS 18.1)

Ensure a written record is kept by the agency detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. (NMS 24.5)

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

Judgement **Outstanding**
outcome:

The experiences and progress of and outcomes for children and young people

Children progress exceptionally well. They settle quickly and feel safe and secure in their adoptive family. They develop healthier attachments than they have been able to previously, confide in their adoptive parents and develop a clear sense of belonging within a family that loves and nurtures them and meets all their needs. An adopter said, 'through our understanding of the training and, in the early stages, daily support from our social worker, we have seen momentous changes in the relationship.' Another adopter said, 'our son has been with us 12 weeks and you would never know he is not ours.'

Children's emotional well-being improves significantly. Through the therapy provided to them they begin to understand their histories and how these have impacted on them, and most importantly they have grown to realise that nothing that has happened to them has been their fault. They learn to live with their pasts and look forward to their futures. They are more in touch with their thoughts and feelings and what these mean and are able to deal with these in a more constructive way. Their anxiety has lessened and they are now able to allow their adoptive parents to show them love and to nurture them. An adopter said, 'he has many quirks that stem from his early trauma but he is comfortable now that he can ask questions (thousands of them!!) and talk about his old life.' Children said they find therapy 'fun!' and said their therapy had made them less worried and scared and how now they know they are safe. They described how they can now differentiate between their past, present and future. One child when asked about the therapy simply gave a thumbs up sign with a big smile on her face.

As children become aware of their feelings and how to deal with them they progress in the development of their social skills. Their self-esteem and confidence improves. They are able to better take up the chances available to them and enjoy and learn from new and exciting activities and experiences. Their educational aspirations and achievements improve significantly and they have begun to enjoy life and take part in a range of fun and educational activities.

Children, where appropriate and possible, benefit from maintaining relationships with brothers and sisters. This is achieved either through placement with siblings or through contact with them. Contact is catered for in an exceptionally sensitive way. For example, the arrangements for one child placed alone and who has a brother and sister placed together have been well thought through. He leaves the contact session before them so that he does not again experience feelings of rejection.

Birth parents who use the service have achieved some excellent outcomes. For

example, some of them have kept subsequent children others have managed to progress so well that they have got employment and others have gained the confidence to leave violent partners; their lives have changed significantly.

The agency has worked with adults affected by adoption who have self-funded counselling for specific issues around their adoption. A user of this service said that it had had a significant impact on her life. She described how she was struggling to develop a sustainable relationship with birth family members and through the work carried out she has now achieved this. She said of the worker, 'I am fortunate to have found him, he "gets" (understands) everything.'

Quality of service

Judgement **Outstanding**
outcome:

Quality of service provision

People feel highly valued and welcomed by the agency and are provided with clear and comprehensive written information. They say they chose Adoptionplus above other agencies because of: the welcome they received; the non-judgemental approach; and the guarantee that support will be forthcoming. An adopter said 'Adoptionplus offer therapy and support to our son until he is 18 at a time when the trauma of his early years might surface.'

Preparation is based on research into attachment and trauma and adopters are extremely well prepared for the complex and often challenging task ahead of them. They rise to the challenge with enthusiasm and learn about the impact trauma has on children. An adopter stated, 'Adoptionplus offer insightful training about attachment and the alternate interpretation an adoptive child might have of seemingly normal approaches/phrases and activities that effect normal daily life.' Adopters are very proactive in their own learning. They source additional learning resources that complements and builds on the agency's training.

Of particular note is the insight prospective adopters have about how stress impacts on them on a physiological and emotional level. This has been achieved because the agency has provided them with mindfulness therapy. Through this they have developed effective strategies to cope with day-to-day pressures and the stresses adoptive parenting can bring.

The agency takes an individualised approach to undertaking rigorous assessments of each applicant that inform the linking and matching processes. The assessment report is analytical and clearly sets out areas of vulnerability that are addressed through additional training or support. A panel member said, 'the assessments are always very full with specialist elements within the report informing the panel how best the adoptive parent(s) are able to meet the complex needs of the children they are likely to adopt.'

This is a small agency and the adoption panel meets at a frequency that suits the needs of the agency. It is effectively chaired by an experienced chair, has good diversity among its members and detailed minutes are made of the proceedings. The panel is meticulous in its approach to making recommendations to the agency decision maker. The decision maker takes all information into account when making her decision about applicants' suitability. The recording of this does not fully document how she has reached her decision or the reasons for it.

The agency encourages people to consider children whose needs they may not have initially felt they could meet. It does not, however, stretch people beyond their assessed capabilities. Excellent attention is paid to ensuring that adopters have all available information about a child they are considering. Social workers read children's files and develop a nurture trauma time line; this provides a visual account of the past experiences of children. The therapy team are consulted about the viability of a match and prospective adopters are very well supported in attending meetings with all professionals involved in a child's life. The excellent attention to getting the linking and matching right ensures that there is an accurate and clear view about a child's needs and the support that will be required is planned for proactively. Adopters are extremely positive about how they have been helped to fully understand their child. An adopter stated, 'they focused heavily on the nurture trauma timeline and spent a great deal of time analysing us and ensuring a good match was made particularly in terms of the therapeutic needs.'

Support for prospective adopters through the introduction process is of a very high quality, social workers are reported to 'go over and above' to ensure that placements are made as smoothly as possible; they offer daily emotional support to prospective adopters. A social worker spoke about how the support had, 'helped them through the transition to placement very effectively.'

Following placement there is a range of flexible support. For example, support is provided over the phone and was reported as being invaluable. An adopter said their social worker's approach with them and their child had been, 'faultless, he is relaxed and interactive and hugely pragmatic, which is a godsend in troubled times. You don't want a pat on the back and reassurance; you want insight and ideas and action.'

The more formal clinical support is easily accessible to Adoptionplus adopters and to adopters whose local authority has agreed to spot purchase the service. This multi-disciplinary service is led by a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and includes play therapists, therapeutic social workers, teachers, paediatric occupational therapists and mindfulness therapists. The team provides clinical assessments of families that include Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Theraplay®, Mindfulness and Sensory Integration. The whole family is involved and from assessments a tailored package of support is developed. Work is exceptionally skilfully undertaken and leads to extremely positive changes that are sustained and built upon. Parents described the support and therapy work as 'amazing' and having made a significant difference to the child and their lives; one called it a 'life line' and

an another adopter stated, 'they (the agency) have a deep understanding of the science behind attachment and are so child focussed and efficient that the services they provide are refreshingly pragmatic. I would recommend them to anyone.'

The integrated approach taken to the clinical work extends to providing advice and guidance to schools and this has greatly benefitted children. For example for some children the classroom has been made an 'attachment friendly' environment that has aided the child's emotional well-being and impacted positively on their ability to learn. Other examples include the work carried out with teachers to increase their knowledge and understanding about how to support traumatised children effectively.

The service to birth parents, commissioned by a local authority, is successfully and flexibly delivered. For example, some birth parents find it difficult to engage in counselling. To try and encourage their engagement the agency has introduced a 'pending service'. This means that they are contacted by the agency periodically to ask if they are ready for support. A commissioner reported that birth parents really like this as it makes them feel that someone cares about them, values them as individuals and remains interested in them.

The agency has secured a two year contract working with a local authority in carrying out therapeutic life-story work. This is an innovative project and early signs are that it is having a positive impact on children. The manager for the local authority said, 'feedback from social workers so far is that it is an excellent innovative piece of work that we are very excited about.'

The agency has also just completed delivering a nurturing attachment programme to adopters across four locations in England. This was funded by the Department for Education and while this has not yet been fully evaluated signs are that it has had positive impact on families. A person who had attended one of the groups said the experience had been 'fantastic' and went on to say, 'it has brought everything together. Other courses are stand-alone but this one started at the beginning and worked through in a structured way...it has given me confidence and hope.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement **Outstanding**
outcome:

Safeguarding children and young people

The agency's safeguarding practice is firmly rooted in evidence based research into child protection and safeguarding children. Good attention is paid to ensuring that staff and adopters have high quality training, including in safeguarding children. There is also training in recognising and dealing with child sexual exploitation and promoting safe internet use and social networking.

The recruitment and assessment of prospective adopters has a strong focus on safeguarding. The excellent attention to using evidence-based research, for

example to carry out assessments throughout the process, lead to a clear picture of any areas of risk. Areas identified are very well catered for in a planned and proactive way. The excellent attention paid to matching also ensures that placements are made and maintained in a safe and supportive way. Contact is effectively planned for and managed by adopters, with support from the agency when required, to ensure it is safe and in the best interests of all involved.

Adopters are exceptionally knowledgeable about the impact trauma has had on their child's emotional well-being. They demonstrate they fully understand how these past experiences impact on their child's safety and emotional well-being and they support children exceptionally well in sometimes difficult and demanding situations. They are excellent advocates for their children. Children say they feel safe and they are safe.

Potential safeguarding matters are dealt with swiftly and effectively through the use of the safeguarding procedure. Issues are handled fairly and quickly and support is provided to adoptive families when a concern has been raised. There is a strong culture of openness and trust and this is demonstrated through adopters coming forward and asking for help, for example when they have slapped their child. The safeguarding procedure has been submitted on two occasions to the local safeguarding board but no response has been received. The manager is reviewing the procedure and when complete will submit it to the local authority designated officer for his consideration and comment.

Birth relative counselling and work with other adults affected by adoption is delivered in a way that ensures the safety of all those involved. Allegations of historical abuse or current concerns about a vulnerable adult are effectively dealt with. For example, concerns about a birth parent's mental health were referred, with their permission, to their GP.

There is a robust approach taken to recruitment of staff that ensures staff and panel members are suitable people to be working with adoptive families and their children.

Leadership and management

Judgement
outcome:

Outstanding

Leadership and management

The manager is suitably qualified and experienced, highly motivated to change the lives of children through the work of the agency and through her involvement in the national developments in adoption. She delivers an ambitious and high quality service that is grounded in evidence-based research and she is held in high regard.

Her passion is infectious and highly motivating for the staff and it is recognised by adopters. One adopter stated, 'in our opinion the services at Adoptionplus should be held up as an example to all. We have no doubt that their success is largely down to Joanne Alper and her infectious passion to change the lives of children that might otherwise remain in long-term foster care. They will be part of our family forever.'

The managers of the agency are ambitious to develop adoption practice and trial innovative practice such as the use of mindfulness in adoptive parenting and therapeutic life-story work; the latter was described by a commissioner as 'an innovative piece of work that should be available across the country.' The manager and some of the staff have published books about adoption. These are aimed at adults, with topics like parenting adoptive teenagers and preparing for a placement, and children, with books that explain the adoption process and that are targeted at helping them to understand their complex feelings about their histories. The clinical support team has just been involved providing useful information about therapeutic support through a live webcast following an invitation from First 4 Adoption to do so. The agency hosts and delivers a wide range of training for staff, adopters and professionals. Some of these are delivered by world respected specialists in attachment and trauma and range from training in various therapeutic techniques to working with transgender applicants.

The agency demonstrates an excellent capacity for development and continuous improvement and a strong desire to grow and develop adoption practice nationally while being careful to balance this with maintaining the excellent quality of practice within the agency. The board and the staff share the managers' enthusiasm and strong commitment to adoption.

Reports to the board are informative and provide an honest account of where the agency is at any point in time. Through the reports the board is kept up to date with the operation of the agency and national developments in adoption. The board scrutinises the work of the agency and regularly considers the financial situation. It encourages development and innovation within the constraints of using resources effectively. A recommendation from the last inspection has been met and has led to the board benefitting from knowing what the views of children and other interested parties are when making decisions about strategic developments. The agency has been innovative in its approach to obtaining the views of children. They gained these views by the use of a tablet and offering children who participate a gift card incentive; children have fully engaged with this.

There is a well-developed sense of the needs of local authorities in the ever changing national picture of adoption and there are excellent working relationships with other agencies and professionals. In recognition of the national need for adopters who can meet the needs of children with highly complex needs the agency offers placements that are exceptionally well supported by high quality bespoke therapeutic support packages. A social worker said, 'staff have been very good at working in partnership in order to ensure the placement requirements are met.' A commissioner commented on, 'the flexibility and child focused approach' and went on to say, 'working with adoption plus is a very good experience it is better than most others.'

Although there have been no formal complaints made about practice issues, people's views are listened to and used to develop operational practice. An adopter said, 'the manager conducted a face-to-face review with us as part of their process and responded extremely positively to the minor feedback we had on presentation styles of training.' Other adopters and staff also said that suggestions they have made have been listened to and acted upon.

Recruitment of adopters is well planned and successful in bringing in only those adopters that will be able to meet the children with the most complex needs. When people have expressed an interest in adoption two visits are carried out. One is used to explain adoption and the needs of children waiting for adoption and the second to carry out viability assessments using evidence-based tools such as attachment-style interviews and reflective parenting assessments.

The statement of purpose is clear and accessible. There is a useful website and a raft of written information about the adoption process. The statement of purpose could usefully contain fuller details about these processes.

The agency employs staff of an exceptionally high calibre. They are all highly qualified, experienced and skilled in their respective fields. A local authority social worker said that the Adoptionplus plus social worker, 'made things so easy for me, she was so supportive with what work I was doing with the children....in terms of my learning she has supported me to reflect about the children...you can tell they are a specialist agency; very, very, very, impressed.' An adopter said she was, 'overwhelmed by the team from the administrative staff to the director it's an outstanding team'

Support to staff through training and supervision is of a very high quality. The training identified above is available to all staff. This ensures that staff are highly skilled and knowledgeable and up to date in their practice. Regular and good quality practice supervision covering case discussions, developmental considerations and personal issues is provided to staff. Staff and panel members' appraisals are held on time and appraisals clearly link to continuous development. Staff feel incredibly well supported, they feel there is a shared responsibility for their work. They described a very strong ethos of nurture across the agency for staff and service users. One member of staff said, 'support makes you feel nurtured and nourished.' One minor shortfall is that the record of supervision sessions do not all detail the time and length of the session.

Records maintained are clear, up to date, stored safely and provide a clear understanding about the child's past life and progress. The agency has appropriate insurance cover and there effective administrative systems and a business continuity plan in the event of a disaster so that the work can continue.

The premises provide excellent facilities for workers to work in and children and adopters to visit. There are exceptionally well equipped therapy rooms and these

have been designed to include all required equipment, such as cameras and recording equipment, while keeping the rooms child friendly environments that provide a relaxed atmosphere. Many adopters commented on the high quality of the premises and how much their children loved to visit them.

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.