

Action for Children – Mosaic Adoption and Permanency Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Christine Kennet
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Agency manager	Christine Allen
Responsible individual	John Downing
Date of last inspection	13 February 2015

Service information

Brief description of the service

Mosaic is one of three branches of a voluntary adoption agency operated by Action for Children, a national charity that provides a range of services for children and families. Mosaic recruits, prepares, assesses, approves and supports adoptive families to provide placements for children who have adoption as a plan. In particular, it places those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, brother and sister groups or those with complex needs. It also provides birth records counselling and intermediary services for adults who were placed for adoption by the agency, and for whom it holds the records, and their birth relatives. In the year 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, it placed 13 children from local authorities for adoption and had 29 approved adoptive families, of whom 12 were waiting to be matched to children. It approved 14 adoptive families in that year.

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**

Leaders and managers have worked hard since the last inspection to improve services and address the shortfalls identified. Where these are not addressed, a clear service improvement plan is in place. Leaders and managers show good capacity to listen and act on advice to change. Senior managerial arrangements have remained consistent since the last inspection, allowing the implementation of changes to the service. The head of adoption and the registered manager will soon be leaving the service. However, the agency has a suitable succession plan in place.

Improvements include the agency's phasing out the use of independent social workers to assess prospective adopters at stage two of the process. Since March

2015, all new assessments are allocated to permanent social work staff. This has created better stability and continuity of process for prospective adopters along the journey of adoption. The employment of additional staff allows assessments to remain in house. A caseload weighting system has been introduced. This allows work to be balanced and fair to workers, and indicates to senior managers the staffing levels needed.

The agency specialises in placing children and young people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, brother and sister groups, and children with complex needs. The agency is inclusive and approves carers from a wide range of backgrounds, including same-sex couples, and those of different religious and cultural beliefs.

The agency arranges careful and appropriate matches with adoptive families. Placements are successful, and adopters often return to adopt for a second and third time. Children make good progress in their adoptive families. Basic needs are met well. Educational and health needs are given priority by adopters, and children thrive. Support for children early in placement helps the development of attachments. Adult service users express satisfaction with the service that they receive. One said, 'They have been absolutely fantastic, from start to finish.'

There is good working in partnership with other agencies to meet individual children's needs and good challenge to placing authorities. Home support and therapeutic support are facilitated by this agency.

Safeguarding is central to practice in this agency, ensuring suitable and safe adoptive families. The disruption rate remains low but, where there is disruption, the agency takes time to understand and learn from this. Staff receive effective training on safeguarding, including historical abuse. Staff understand their responsibilities, and show good awareness of processes to protect children.

The agency gains feedback and has learned from requested improvements, disruptions and complaints. It has sought feedback on how services operate and arranged training on service provision in response. A number of complaints are being resolved that stem from practice prior to changes. These have informed the process of change seen since March 2015.

The recruitment of adopters remains a strength. A marketing and publicity officer has established an effective strategy for publicity and recruitment. She has also built up named contacts at placing authorities to market prospective adopters during a time when fewer children have been available for placement. Training and continued development are comprehensive and are another strength of this agency. This inspection found no breaches of regulations. Two areas would benefit from improvement. Panel members' training meets requirements. Some additional development days would ensure continuity over a period of change. Communication with prospective adopters has improved. However, processes to ensure that they are updated when there are unavoidable delays would further improve services.

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 each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development, and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation, regulation and guidance (National minimum standards 23.16).
- Ensure that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents, and prospective adopters, are treated without prejudice, openly and with respect. They are kept informed, on a regular basis, of the progress (or lack of progress) of their enquiry/application throughout the adoption process, in a manner which meets their individual communication needs. They are given regular opportunities to raise any specific concerns or questions, which are then answered as directly and fully as possible (National minimum standards 10.2).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency places children with complex needs and when there is often uncertainty in future development and outcomes. The agency assesses a wide range of suitable adopters, who provide a diverse mix of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds and experiences in placements. The agency has a good record of placing brothers and sisters together, and seeks to do so whenever possible. A group of three brothers and sisters under three years was placed recently and has been supported successfully. The agency also has brothers and sisters placed with separate adopters who are committed to maintaining close contact to enable them to grow up knowing each other.

Given the high level of children with complex needs who are placed, placement stability is good. There were two unplanned endings in the past year. Disruption meetings were called to consider these endings, and the agency has taken learning from these unplanned endings. Support plans were put in place alongside placing authorities in attempts to stabilise the placements.

Children and young people are making progress in all areas of their development. Support has been accessed for children and young people, for example via therapeutic services for young people. Additional practical support has been available, and the agency has taken a good advocacy role for adopters with placing authorities to ensure that children's needs are met.

Children make good progress, both socially and emotionally. Stronger attachments are developed and children settle well, following well-planned transitions.

Adopters are supported to ensure that children's health needs are met. There is good

support to understand health needs prior to placement. Assessments appropriately identify children's needs and link them into more specialist health services, if required.

Children's educational needs are supported early on. Adopters support education through play and early nursery support, for socialisation and learning.

Work with adopted adults and their birth relatives results in good outcomes and positive experiences. Good systems support this work, and skilled practitioners support adults to understand situations and manage their expectations in this process.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Prospective adopters contact the agency because they are aware of its speciality of placing children with complex needs, brother and sister groups, and children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. Many adopters are second or third time adopters, and return to the agency. The agency is inclusive and has a range of adopters, including same-sex adopters, single adopters, and adopters from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. One adopter said, 'They presented well in terms of our mixed heritage.'

Adopters receive prompt responses on first contact and are sent clear information packs. Adopters are invited to information events, and the agency undertakes a home visit, pre-stage one. Adopters feel that this early stage was positive. For example, comments included, 'felt more informed about the process', 'engaged adopters and told us how it is' and 'gave a realistic approach'.

Preparation training and groups are a strength of this agency. Adopters value the opportunity to meet and talk to others, and to stay in touch to offer each other support. They enjoy hearing from those who have already adopted, and learn much from the training and from one another. One adopter said, 'Agency is good at keeping us informed on training/development days. We learned a lot about children's behaviour and history.'

Since the last inspection, the branch has made changes to the way that it assesses adopters, cutting the use of independent social workers and providing a more consistent service to adopters. This approach is bringing about more consistency, as one worker takes adopters right through the process from start to finish. Some adopters, who were in the assessment process before these changes occurred, described changes of workers throughout their assessments. This creates some confusions and frustrations about the process.

Despite this, the quality of assessments has improved, with no missing information and good analysis of data. Where there have been delays, these are clearly recorded in the assessment with the reasons. Adopters receive many reminders throughout the process about the adoption task and the wide range of needs that children

looked after have. Parenting assessment reports, seen as part of this inspection, are well written, give good analysis and make appropriate recommendations. The assessment process challenges issues arising prior to panel. This avoids delays at panel from further questions or assessments being required.

The manager's capacity to oversee practice has increased. Since the last inspection, various changes mean that her focus has been on the adoption task. Auditing and close supervision of this process has improved its quality. The agency is more selective of prospective adopters. With fewer children available, the agency wants to ensure that approved adopters have a fair chance of success of securing placements. This means that the number of assessments is down, but the quality is improved. The manager has introduced a system which ensures that reviews of approved adopters take place at the required intervals. This ensures their suitability to adopt.

The agency panel is functioning well, with an experienced and appropriately qualified chair. The composition of the panel is appropriate and comprises a diverse range of people, all of whom have considerable experience of the adoption task. The chair has improved the function of the panel. She has encouraged panel members to contribute and ask questions that are more challenging. She feels that the panel members are working more closely together, but is concerned that some experience being lost (two experienced members have resigned) the impact will mean further changes. Despite this, panel members remain committed and make robust recommendations. The chair recognises that there is currently no permanent male representative on the panel. Further recruitment will consider this. An area for improvement, and with changes imminent, is further training and development days. These will support the panel to gel with new members and learn to work together. The panel has provided good challenge and feedback to the agency in its six-monthly reports on the quality and timeliness of work.

Preparation for panel is good. An organised administrator books panel dates for the year and ensures that paperwork is sent out in a timely manner. Minutes are clear and include reasons for recommendations. Panel members attend well prepared, and are encouraged to participate fully and prepare questions.

The agency decision maker gives good challenge, understands the work and is realistic about the work of the agency. The panel and agency decision maker provide robust and effective challenge to the agency, and have driven improvements in assessment and reviews.

Post-adoption support is more evident in this inspection. The agency has responded to adopters' needs to provide packages of support. Individual social workers are supportive of adopters, who value this emotional and practical support. Direct work is provided for children via support plans. The adopters' understanding of their right to assessment of their adoption support needs is clearer. The information packs are excellent, and an adoption support flowchart makes the process much simpler and helps understanding. Referrals to this service are beginning to be made, since adopters have been better informed about this process.

Adopters receive full information about children who they are considering. The social workers are described as good advocates, and adopters have felt fully supported in this process. One adopter said, 'I feel that they can stand up for us and are advocates for ongoing support from the placing authority.' When adopters have expressed concerns about the processes, the agency is taking appropriate steps either informally or through the complaints process, to consider these. One prospective adopter said in response to a complaint, 'We both felt so at ease, listened to and valued. Thank you for that. Its value cannot be underestimated.'

The access to records and intermediary services are of high quality. The processes and responses are good, and adult adopters have highly valued this service. One service user said, 'It was all good, fantastic. There is nothing that they could have done better. They have guided me really well.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has very experienced staff who understand and hold a deep and effective knowledge of safeguarding. There have not been any recent safeguarding allegations. However, managers and staff are aware of what to do if they need to refer, and understand the processes well. The agency has a safeguarding lead who ensures that all staff are kept up to date with any changes.

Staff have received high-quality training on the issue of child sexual exploitation and safeguarding, including historical abuse. There is a comprehensive safeguarding policy which helps to guide staff to keep children as safe as possible.

Prospective adopters also have good safeguarding training through their preparation and assessment. All appropriate checks are undertaken to ensure that the adopters recruited are thoroughly vetted and checked.

Adopters are well prepared to manage complex needs and behaviour arising from children's experiences. Training focuses on trauma, attachment and loss, and the impact that these can have on children throughout their lives. Adopters are helped to understand the ongoing need for contact with birth family members and are given support to ensure that this is managed safely.

Adopters, adult service users and children are aware of their right to complain. They receive the written procedure and feedback forms at each stage of the process. There have been a number of complaints over the past year, which mainly refer to a time prior to the recently implemented changes. These relate to inconsistencies in working practice and communication. This inspection finds that many of these issues have driven improvements and that things have moved on considerably. Most complaints are concluded at stage one. An independent person is investigating one appropriately at stage one. The agency has managed these complaints within its procedural guidelines. The agency has made good progress in improving communication, although it is not yet completely effective in ensuring robust processes to ensure this.

The recruitment of staff and panel members meets statutory requirements and ensures safe vetting for all roles. Suitable checks of prospective adopters prior to stage two of the process ensure that they are suitable, prior to further assessment.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders and managers show strong commitment to the adoption process and to continuing to provide the best services possible. This past year has seen changes in how adoption agencies are expected to think and organise themselves, going forward with the regional approach. They have also seen fewer children available because of court rulings in respect of family placements. This has had an impact on testing some of the improvement that the agency has clearly made.

There is good evidence of professional working relationships in both adoption and post-adoption work. Established networks made by longstanding and experienced staff are evident. Good use is made of the exchange events/activity days, where social workers accompany and promote their adopters.

Good strategic planning is evident through the adoption marketing and publicity officer, who has responded to changing times and trends to plan campaigns and target more 'smartly' to gain positive results.

Regular reviews take place of the service. Feedback is used regularly to inform this process. Over the past year, the agency has undertaken much work on improving services to meet the national minimum standards. A helpful service development plan is in place and is reviewed regularly.

Leaders and managers took on board the last Ofsted inspection requirements and recommendations. The agency recruited an assessment coordinator. This freed up the manager to manage the staff and to ensure better processes for assessments. This assessment coordinator has now moved into a social work role, as the work of the agency has changed. The management and oversight of the post-adoption and intermediary work were transferred to the head of adoption, which again helped to free up the manager.

The recruitment of adopters has changed. The agency is being more careful about recruitment, trying to ensure that adopters are not taken through the process unless there is a good chance of securing placements for them. Fewer adopters are required at present, and this is reflected in the numbers approved over the past year. The agency has ceased using independent social workers for assessment at stage two. The overall objective is for one social worker to take adopters from the initial enquiry through to matching. This is helping to improve consistency, and workers know their adopters better when it comes to the matching process. The agency is beginning to achieve consistency and better processes. Unfortunately, there are further changes ahead as the agency manager and head of adoption are both leaving the service. Senior managers have made an achievable succession plan, which is a good platform

to take the work forward.

Systems are in place to monitor and review recording. Much work in supervision and training has improved how staff record information. During the past year, all case records were transferred to an electronic database. Staff received training and support to embed this change and managers continue to offer plenty of support and training for staff in this area. Case recordings are found to be improved at this inspection, and the whole service has thought carefully about the importance of these records for adopted children and adults.

Appropriately qualified and experienced social workers feel well supported to do their jobs. They describe the training as one of the 'big pluses'. Targeted training ensures the needs of children are addressed, and staff say that it makes them feel confident to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Supervisions are regular and good records are kept of these sessions. All staff and panel members receive annual appraisals. This helps to address practice issues and to ensure staff development and training needs.

The agency has an up-to-date statement of purpose which is easily accessible on the website. The children's guide gives clear information, and the minor amendments made during the inspection ensure its accuracy. Both these documents help service users to understand what is available and what to expect.

The agency retains good links with partners. In addition, the agency has expressed an interest in voluntary sector funding, and is lobbying very hard on behalf of voluntary agencies and working closely with regional structures. The wider agency and charity remain committed to adoption and support branch functions in London regions. Placing social workers speak very highly of joint working with this agency. For example, comments included, 'really good communication', 'been able to support and give input', 'they have been good advocates on behalf of carers', and 'social worker has been excellent, very easy to work with'.

The agency has thorough systems for monitoring, including regular reports to the board of trustees. Monitoring has improved at a local level, specifically on the quality and timeliness of reports.

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 supports 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.