

Action for Children - Adoption and Permanency South West

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Paul Clark
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Setting address Horner Court, 637 Gloucester Road, Horfield, BRISTOL, BS7 0BJ

Telephone number 0117 9580158
Email swaafp@actionforchildren.org.uk
Registered provider Action for Children 04764232 1097940
Agency manager Ann-Marie Paddison
Responsible individual John Downing
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA) has been registered since 2003. It is one of three registered VAAs run by Action for Children, which is a large children's charity that undertakes a variety of work with children and young people. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters. It provides post-adoption support to these families. During the 12 months prior to this inspection 18 children from local authorities were placed with Action for Children adopters, and 10 were subject to final adoption orders. There are currently seven approved adopters awaiting adoption placements. There are currently seven adoptive families actively receiving adoption support. Adoption support is provided to adopted persons seeking to access their adoption records. The agency also undertakes intermediary work between adopted people and their birth families. The agency does not conduct birth parent counselling. The agency does not conduct inter-country adoption.

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 overall effectiveness of this voluntary adoption agency is good. This is achieved by:

- The identification and recruitment of adoptive families who are able to offer homes to those children and young people who may be more difficult to place, including children from diverse ethnic backgrounds, older children, children with a disability or developmental uncertainty, and sibling groups.
- The provision of accurate and analytic assessments of potential adopters which are produced in a timely manner, and which are further scrutinised by an effective adoption panel before recommendations are made to the agency decision maker.
- Sustaining placements through the good preparation of adopters which informs them of the realities of the adoption task, and effective adoption support, including the provision of therapeutic services.
- The careful matching of children and young people with adoptive families who can best meet their needs. This is done in effective partnership with placing authorities.
- The provision of good quality management, supervision, training and support of social workers and panel members.
- The provision of a good quality service and support to adopted adults seeking their birth records, and the professional and sensitive intermediary work conducted with birth families and adopted adults.
- This small voluntary adoption agency needs to ensure that adoption panels meet at least every six weeks.
- The manager of the service needs to gain the appropriate management qualification within three years of appointment.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

19: Fitness to provide or manage

Ensure that appointees to the post of manager who have no management qualifications must enrol on a management training course within six months, and obtain a relevant management qualification within three years of appointment. NMS 19.4

17: Adoption panels & decision-maker

Ensure that adoption panels of a small adoption agency meet at least every six weeks. NMS 17.3

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The experiences, and progress of, and outcomes for children matched and placed with adopters within this agency is good. This is due in part, to the agency recruiting and preparing adopters who can provide a positive family experience for children from all ethnic backgrounds, ages; for children with a disability or developmental uncertainty, and sibling groups. One placing authority social worker commented, 'These adopters were totally prepared and supported by the agency. Communication from the agency has been fantastic and they have really supported the transition for the boys in every way possible. It couldn't have been better.'

Adoption disruptions are rare within this agency. When these do occur the agency undertakes a thorough analysis and review of the event that has taken place, any learning points are disseminated to the managers and practitioners and enshrined in policy and practice. This promotes adoption placement stability and helps children to live in secure families.

The preparation of adopters includes making them aware of the importance of developing children's positive identity. This is achieved by supporting contact with birth families where appropriate, ongoing development of life story work, and giving children a clear understanding of their background, including the sharing of later life letters at the appropriate time. The agency also works as an advocate for children and adopters by ensuring that life story work and later life letters provided by placing agencies are of the appropriate standard. This gives children a clear understanding of their background and enhances their sense of self.

Adult adoptees receive good support from the agency in tracing their birth records. These records are shared with adoptees in a professional and sensitive way. One adult adoptee who was supported by the agency in tracing their birth records commented, 'Very good support. The Action for Children social worker was very patient, sensitive and knowledgeable.' Intermediary work between adoptees and birth relatives is also conducted in a professional and sensitive way. One birth mother who used the service commented, 'The support I have received in contacting my daughter has been superb and I couldn't fault it.' This confirms the agency's commitment to the provision of life long support for adopted people and their families.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The quality of the service provision in this agency is good. People expressing an interest in adoption are provided with comprehensive information early on. There are regular information events, and potential adopters receive home visits at an early stage. Assessments are conducted by supervising social workers who are permanent members of staff of the organisation, rather than external assessors, and in this instance this enhances the relationships between adopters and the agency.

Adopters report that the preparation courses are detailed, informative and introduce them to the negatives as well as this positives of adoption. This includes making them aware of the possible manifestations of attachment and loss, and the importance of their role in maintaining birth family contact where appropriate. This ensures that those applicants who are eventually approved are fully aware of the realities of the adoption task.

Assessments of potential adopters are analytic rather than overly descriptive, and are comprehensive in content and detail. The assessments are timely, and are conducted in two stages which allow ample time for potential adopters to reflect and consider their application. Social worker's assessments are presented to a well-constituted adoption panel, which has members with personal experience of adoption and which has access to medical and legal expertise. Panel recommendations of approval and adopter status are considered by an agency decision maker in a timely way, and this helps to ensure that children waiting for an adoption family do not have to wait for unnecessarily lengthy periods because of delays in the adoption process. However, there have been some issues with the frequency of panel meetings which needs to be addressed.

All children recently placed in adoptive families have clearly written adoption support plans in place which fully describe how the needs of children and adopters are to be met. Ongoing support and training is available for adopters for as long as they need it. Adopters spoken to during the inspection felt well supported by the agency. One adopter said, 'We were extremely well prepared for adoption by this agency. The ongoing support is terrific. There are monthly adopters support groups and two annual events. We were told that life-long support will be given when requested.' The support includes access to numerous therapeutic resources such as play therapy, and psychotherapy. Adopters also have access to adoption support from a local

adoption support agency that is part of the adoption consortium to which the organisation belongs. All of these measures are indicative of a good quality service.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The safeguarding arrangements for children and young people within this agency are good, and the safeguarding of children and young people is central to what the agency does. All potential adopters and staff are subject to rigorous vetting and recruitment measures before appointment, and this helps to ensure that unsuitable people do not have contact with vulnerable children and young people.

There are effective health and safety checks on potential adopter's homes, and adaptations are made whenever necessary. Risk assessments are conducted in relation to any particular risks there might be for individual children and young people and these form part of the adoption support plan.

All management, staff and potential adopters undertake the appropriate level of safeguarding training for their role, and this training is regularly updated. The agency arranges to have adoption specific training which is led by a national adoption charitable organisation. Issues contained in this training relate to those matters which may particularly affect adopted children and young people, such as the impact of early-childhood abuse, and the impact of social media, and this helps to keep children and young people safe.

The agency works closely with local authority safeguarding teams in formulating policies and practice in safeguarding children. Information documents given to children and young people clearly advise them of the contact details of helping agencies and how they may raise complaints. Placing authority social workers regularly visit children and young people who are living with potential adopters and are subject to a placement order. Children and young people are seen on their own and asked if they are happy and feel safe in their placement. This documentation and the liaison with local authority social workers and safeguarding children teams ensures that any concerns or disclosures raised by adopted children and young people will be effectively investigated.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The leadership and management of this voluntary adoption agency are good. A professionally qualified and experienced national adoption agency manager is now in place and they supervise an adoption team manager. The adoption team manager has recently been appointed and has many years of adoption practice experience and has the appropriate professional qualification, but is yet to enrol for the management qualification course which must be completed within three years of appointment.

A team of 3.8 full time equivalent senior social workers identifies this as a small voluntary adoption agency. All have the appropriate professional qualification and are members of the appropriate professional body. Members of the team have additional qualifications in therapeutic practice including play therapy, theraplay and psychotherapy, and these skills are used effectively in supporting adoptive families. Social workers report that they have regular supervision and team meetings and they describe their access to ongoing training as 'Incredible.' All managers, practitioners and panel members undergo an annual appraisal which identifies their training and development needs and these needs are effectively acted upon. One panel member stated, 'I have really good access to all the training I require.' Social workers and managers support adoptive families by the provision of a 24 hour a day duty system. These measures help to ensure that adoptive families are well supported by a team of well-managed and trained professionals.

A clearly written and comprehensive statement of purpose is in place which is reviewed annually. Among its aims and objectives it identifies the recruitment of adopters who can provide a positive family experience for children from all ethnic backgrounds, and ages, children with a disability or developmental uncertainty, and sibling groups. A national marketing and recruitment manager implements a recruitment strategy which identifies those potential adopters who, in line with the agencies statement of purpose, are able to provide adoption households for this range of children. The agency produce a children's guide which is available in suitable age appropriate formats and which informs children about the agency and where they can go to get help and support, including information about the agencies complaints procedure.

The agency works closely and effectively with placing authorities and partnership agencies in the matching of children with adoption families who will provide stable and secure homes. As previously stated, adoption disruptions are rare and when they

do occur, are subject to analytic review and learning points are acted upon.

The service is effectively internally monitored and the manager produces reports on the quality of care in consultation with adopters, children and young people and relevant stakeholders. The adoption panel also conducts six monthly reviews of its practice and both these reviews make recommendations for service improvement. The agency has a system in place to notify the regulatory body of any significant event occurring, in line with regulation.

The agency has fully implemented the recommendations of the previous inspection and there is now a national manager in place who has overall management responsibility for all three registered adoption agencies within this organisation. Panel minutes now clearly indicate that panel member's individual views are now recorded and the reasons for recommendations are given.

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.