

SSAFA Forces Help Adoption Service

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC049105
Inspection date	05/12/2016–09/12/2016
Inspector	Christine Kennet
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Voluntary organisation placing children

Setting address	SSAFA Forces Help Enterprises Limited, 4 Dunstons Hill, London EC3R 8AD
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Registered provider	SSAFA Forces Help Enterprises Limited
Agency manager	Stephen Richards
Responsible individual	Michael Dickson
Date of last inspection	22/09/2014

Service information

Brief description of the service

This voluntary adoption agency is part of a registered charity that supports the social care of armed services personnel and their families. It undertakes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters who serve in the armed forces. It provides the same function to United Kingdom (UK) based civilians serving in overseas commands. The charity has a board of trustees that oversees its function. In addition, the adoption service reports regularly to an Adoption Management Committee. This committee oversees the adoption service and reports to the trustees. The service no longer undertakes inter-country adoptions. It provides or arranges for adoption support where a child is placed for adoption within such families. The agency also provides advice and support to service personnel who were adopted. Prospective adopters are recruited who may be serving either in the UK or overseas. The service has approved seven adoption households within the past 12 months and 23 children and young people have been placed within this period, some of whom have been part of larger sibling groups. Three approved adoption households are awaiting placements although two of these have an agreed match. Three birth parents and two birth relatives have received counselling support within the past 12 months and two adopted adults have been supported by the agency in tracing birth records and making contact with their birth families.

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**

This agency places children with the most complex needs and children who are difficult to place due to being part of large sibling groups. The breakdown rate, given the complexity of need, is very low. Experienced social workers are proactive in ensuring timely support to prevent placement breakdowns. Regular reviews and discussions in team meetings help the team to focus on each family individually, where children are in placement. This helps the team to ensure that tasks are completed by the placing authority, for example later life letters, life-story books and agreements for family contact. Where greater needs and or therapeutic needs arise, there is a good level of support planned and provided. For example, setting up therapy where a family live in another country. On occasion, where delays for therapy are unavoidable due to moves or distance, the team seeks alternatives. For example, psychologist assessment and therapy via skype sessions.

An experienced and committed social work team focuses on children's needs. The quality of assessments is high and these are completed quickly to avoid any unnecessary delays to adopters or children waiting for placement. For example, where adopters agree to the placement of a younger sibling.

The team has built strong links with placing authorities and broken down myths about what military families can offer. Placing authorities contacted during the inspection all stated that they had good experiences and would use the service again. Placing authorities return and place further children based on their positive experiences of placements. One social worker said, 'The adopters have been fabulous. I'd like to clone them if it was possible.'

This agency places safeguarding at the centre of its practice. Where safeguarding issues arise, prompt and appropriate referrals are made to local authorities to ensure that children are kept safe and protected. Alongside this process, the team offers good support and makes referrals to other agencies who can continue to offer support with parenting.

Children benefit from careful planning when the team are thinking about the assessment, matching and placing of children. For example, they advise prospective adopters to time their applications carefully, take a break or delay the assessment process if a move is imminent. They also think about the timing of placements to ensure that children can be as safe, settled and as secure as possible with the correct support when introductions and placements take place. For example, one

adoptive parent said, 'Our social worker advised a two month break before starting phase two, due to moving house.'

Since the last inspection, there has been uncertainty within this adoption agency from senior leaders and managers about its future and continuation. This has affected the stability of the agency, for example staff have moved and left and reconsidered their positions. Leaders and managers did not proactively seek funding due to uncertainty. In recent months, the future of the agency has been resolved. This has enabled decisions to be made about its future, which has allowed staff to feel more confident. Leaders and managers have been able to make successful applications for funding and the agency has received donations. All this has given a new confidence and certainty to the continued work and future of the agency. Operational leaders and managers are very aware of their strengths and weaknesses. Changes in senior management led to a review about the future of the agency, which did have some impact on the work of the agency. Despite this, the team has 'got on with the job' and continued to work in the best interests of children.

The agency takes into account the views of adopters, children and adults receiving adoption support and uses these to influence strategic thinking. For example, during the review of the future of the agency, senior leaders and managers contacted service users direct to seek their views. The agency also makes changes to the preparation courses following feedback from prospective adopters.

This inspection found no breaches of regulation. The agency is good at self-regulation, which has helped its continuous improvement. Minor shortfalls include ensuring updates to the regulator in regards to notifications, improving opportunities for children and young people to provide feedback and ensuring that the child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) and to the local authority designated officer for child protection.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that a written record is kept which includes details of the action taken and the outcome of any action or investigation following a notifiable event.

(Adoption: National Minimum Standards, page 81, paragraph 29.2)

- Ensure that adoption panels meet at least every six weeks to consider suitability of a prospective adopter to adopt a looked after child or the termination of approval of a prospective adopter. (Adoption: National Minimum Standards, page 50, paragraph 17.3)
- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency and adoption support agency in monitoring and developing its service. (Adoption: National Minimum Standards, page 11, paragraph 1.6)
- Ensure that the child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) and to the local authority designated officer for child protection. They are consistent with the local policies and procedures agreed by the LSCB relevant to the geographical area where the prospective adopters live. Any conflicts between locally agreed procedures and those of other placing authorities are discussed and resolved as far as possible. (Adoption: National Minimum Standards, page 64, paragraph 22.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency, by virtue of its remit, only works with military families or families with close military connections. Due to this remit, it is working with and supporting service users from a much smaller pool than usual. The demography of the military immediately limits the scope of the agency in terms of ethnicity and culture as the majority of service users are from white UK backgrounds. Despite this, the agency is very open to being as inclusive within this demography as it can be. Age, ability, faith, gender, gender identity, religious belief and sexual orientation are not barriers to services. The agency has assessed several same sex couples, single carers and couples with diversity of background and language. Carefully thought through assessment processes ensure that these needs are taken into account, for example, use of a French-speaking worker to interview French referees. The agency challenges discrimination regarding mixed ethnicity couples and bases matches on ability to meet most of the children's needs rather than all of them. The agency ensured that several same sex couples were on the same preparation course together to enable them to feel comfortable and get the most out of the experience. One couple said when asked about the preparation course, 'We were both very apprehensive, but found it really useful. There was no prejudice and it was very inclusive.'

Children placed, live in safe, stable and secure families who are well prepared for the task. Children receive support to progress in all areas of their development and workers work hard to ensure that the necessary supports are in place to facilitate this. For example, assessments and support offered to schools to understand attachment needs of children placed for adoption.

The agency is robust in its pursuit of later-life letters and life storybooks from placing authorities and on occasion has completed these on their behalf to ensure that children have an understanding about their background identity and adoption. Regular assessments and updates take place both prior to and early on in placement to ensure that all adoption support needs are considered and emerging needs reassessed. Where placing authorities have been slow to provide support, the agency has completed these assessments on their behalf and supported until support plans are in place.

The agency actively promotes contact with birth parents and relatives where it is in a child's best interests. The importance of such contact is covered within preparation

groups. One social worker said, 'The original plan was no direct contact, but the adopters have been very flexible, chatted through direct contact and supported this.' The agency ensures that letterbox contracts are in place and have also supported some letterbox contact themselves. Adopters are encouraged to have open views and relationships with birth relatives. There are many examples of positive contact and adopters are prepared to change their views to support individual needs around sibling, grandparent and birth parent contact. Many adopters met birth family members and felt that this was a very positive step forward for their adopted children.

The agency has seen a decline in the work undertaken to support adult adoptees since the last inspection. However, it holds the knowledge and expertise to support adults in this area when approached.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

All adopters and prospective adopters spoken to felt welcomed and that the initial response from the agency was extremely positive. They had often received rejection, or what they perceived as prejudice, from other agencies and felt that this agency understood their way of life and the strengths that they had to offer. One prospective adopter said, 'They have seen that military couples can create and sustain family stability, despite moves. Military families have the skills to manage change well. From our perspective they have been outstanding.'

Information provided to adopters is of a very high standard. Excellent reading information and website links are given and it is obvious by reviewing files and profiles that adopters have read widely on the subject. All prospective adopters are offered a slot to speak on the telephone with a duty worker or have a direct face-to-face meeting as an introduction. Information events do not happen due to the agency working throughout the UK and in foreign posting areas.

Preparation of prospective adopters is excellent. All those spoken to enjoy the residential aspect of the course and benefited from the topics raised. Adopters are well prepared and this is evident by comments from them and social workers who have placed children. Prospective adopters are prepared to consider a wide range of children and have knowledge, skills and ongoing support to deal with the complex needs arising from early life trauma and experiences. One social worker said, 'They have been very well assessed and prepared for the task.' Excellent preparation is given to adopters to prepare them for contact within adoptions and inspectors found

that birth family contact is widely embraced.

Prospective adopters reports (PAR) are clear, concise and analytical. They address all key areas and are excellent tools for the process of matching children. Observations of children and encouragement of adopters to gain experience of children is fantastic. Excellent detail in assessments about the needs of existing children helps them to understand what it might mean to have an adopted sibling.

PARs give thoughtful and robust analysis and thorough assessments, identifying strengths and weaknesses. Updates for panel, post placement, show good progress for children in placement and thoughtfulness about individual needs and planning. Further help and support is available post adoption, including informative days. For example, this year adopters enjoyed a 'Theraplay' day and a residential weekend. These further skills and knowledge help adopters to manage complex needs and raise awareness of what resources they can ask for.

The agency decision maker is experienced, knowledgeable and autonomous. Decisions are made within timescales. Where there are delays, these are for good reasons and represent children's best interests, for example a pending move for families. Matching for approved adopters happens quickly. The team excels at family finding and often has potential matches ready by the time that they reach panel. The placements made over the previous year have been outstanding and the team has worked extremely hard to achieve this despite the uncertainty that they have been working under.

The team is relentless in ensuring that placing authorities provide detailed information about children. They read about children themselves and fully support the process of decision making in matches. They support and counsel prospective adopters to ensure that no assumptions are made about children. Careful discussion and planning takes place, rather than adopters feeling rushed into decisions or pressurised to agree to inappropriate matches.

This agency panel is excellent. It is well-qualified, well-run and has an extremely experienced chair. The panel is reflective, supportive, quorate and very experienced at what they do. They have access to good, regular training and they take time within their meetings to reflect on their practice and discuss any issues arising. The panel gives good feedback to the agency, which is reflected in the panel minutes. The panel has not met every six weeks as recommended in the national minimum standards and would benefit from doing so. Despite this, they are an extremely well-functioning and cohesive panel.

Adopters understand their right to an assessment of their adoption support needs. The agency has learned from a 'grumble' in respect of providing support. In response, the agency changed practice to ensure that families feel supported. Good adoption support is offered, for example, ensuring that needs are assessed and that regular contact and emotional support are provided before, during and post placement. The agency proactively gains expectations from placing authorities and insists on all work being completed for children as well as contact agreements being in place prior to withdrawing their service. Adopters receive informative support packs, which provide excellent information about how to access a wide range of services and information including the adoption support fund. The agency provides short-term support post placement until placing authority adoption support plans are in place. It advocates for more specialist services for example therapeutic interventions such as psychologists and 'Theraplay' if needed. The agency has an open door for adopters wishing to approach them for ongoing support at any stage, even if this is to signpost and provide information and emotional support while further services are arranged and put in place.

The team excelled during the last year to match 14 families with children who fall into the category of being difficult to place due to emotional and/or behavioural needs and/or being part of a sibling group. Workers have attended exchange days, shared prospective adopters' profiles, followed up with expressions of interest to specific children and generally worked beyond expectation to secure matches for families. This work is impressive particularly given that numbers of children available for adoption have nationally decreased over the last year.

All prospective adopters have support to prepare a portfolio all about themselves, their family, life experience, pets, skills, likes and dislikes. These portfolios offer a wealth of information about prospective adopters' experience of parenting and preparation for the adoption task. They are an extremely valuable resource, which really gives this agency's adopters an edge when matching is being considered.

The agency offers good access to records, although the post adoption worker has recently left her post. Another worker is due to start in January 2017. Despite this gap, other team members have covered this work, and have kept it going. The social work team ensures that the voice of the birth family is heard via discussions with prospective adopters at preparation groups.

Birth record counselling and intermediary work continues despite the vacant post. Summaries of ongoing work provided by the previous worker are in place. Good signposting to other agencies is also provided. All staff are extremely knowledgeable about the lifelong implications of adoption and understand this need.

Military personnel have excellent access to housing provision, which is an enormous benefit to sibling groups of children waiting for adoption. Social workers can work effectively with employers to ensure moves to bigger or more appropriate housing. Workers and panel assess families leaving the military to consider their reintegration into the civilian community well ahead and ensure smooth transitions for families.

There is an excellent support team backing up the social work team. The support team is organised, committed and enthusiastic and provides fantastic support, which enables the team to do their work.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency demonstrates good and effective knowledge about issues of child protection and the roles of the agency and the local authority. Appropriate actions and referrals are taken where any safeguarding or child protection concerns arise. This ensures that children remain as safe as possible and prompt actions are taken where there are concerns.

Staff and adopters have access to good training in child protection processes, which keeps safeguarding as the highest priority and ensures that everyone understands the processes in place to protect children. Child protection procedures do not include the contact information for the child protection team and designated officer for the area in which the agency office is based. The agency has not shared its procedures with the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) and it would be good practice to share these with the LSCB in their area.

Despite this shortfall, there is good evidence of the agency reporting issues where even minor safeguarding issues have arisen. Prospective adopters sign an expectation that physical chastisement for children is unacceptable and the reasons for this are fully explored during preparation training. In addition, there is also good preparation within the course for adopters to consider how developmental trauma impacts on children and young people.

Safe recruitment processes are in place for staff, panel members and prospective adopters. The operational manager has noticed a potential shortfall in the verification of employee references and put in place a process to manage this.

Adopters are encouraged to understand that children need to take age-appropriate

risks and learn how to self-protect in a safe way.

Children and adopters know how to complain and receive accessible information, which guides them through this process. Children receive a guide, which explains what the agency does, how to complain and how to get appropriate advice and support via an advocate if needed. There are two documents targeted at specific age ranges that are shared at the point of placement. These documents are informative, but would be more accessible if they were also on the agency website.

Notifications are made appropriately and the agency has shown evidence that it follows up any issues appropriately. Once a notification is made about a child protection investigation or incident, it would be good practice to complete a follow up notification to conclude this process. This would allow the regulator to understand that correct procedures are followed and the investigation is concluded.

Staff are very knowledgeable in safeguarding and have a good awareness of historic abuse. In addition, they receive regular update training and support to strive to improve safeguarding practice. Case files show that safeguarding concerns are raised and reported appropriately.

The agency learns from complaints and changes practice, for example, adopters receive better adoption support, following feedback and grumbles made about how this could improve. Feedback responses in previous years have shown a good response from service users. The survey information was not sent out this year due to the uncertain future of the agency. All feedback received on inspection was good from placing authorities and adopters. The agency must ensure that it regularly seeks feedback and evidences better how it informs practice particularly for children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Both the team leader and the operational manager have excellent knowledge and experience of adoption practice and this raises confidence in the team and with prospective adopters. Leaders and managers have developed excellent working relationships with placing authorities and social workers and with wider community services for the positive outcomes of the agency.

Senior leaders show good commitment to the adoption process. Historically, they placed the agency under some considerable uncertainty while a review of the future

of the agency took place. The adoption management committee and trustees show excellent commitment to the delivery of a unique service. The committee and trustees have promoted the service, advocated for its continuation and been instrumental in ensuring that senior managers have listened to the need for which they provide a service.

The operational manager is new to the service but has already undertaken an audit and provided a good position statement to advise what the service has achieved and where its areas of weakness lie. The manager knows the service well and keeps it under close review. The team leader has a strong knowledge of the working of the agency and the operational side of the work and staff have confidence and feel supported by this. One staff member said, 'We have good support and supervision and informal contact with managers all the time. We do get praise for going the extra mile and feel valued.'

Quarterly reviews provided for the trustees are informative and helpful and show a good insight into the work of the agency, its strengths and weaknesses. Staff feel comfortable enough to raise issues and have challenged senior managers, which shows a great confidence and commitment to their work.

The agency is in a great position through hard work and commitment to the service. It has secured funding via The Department for Education practice and improvement grant, from the BBC Children In Need and from an individual private donation. This is an opportunity to develop and promote the uniqueness of the service. The agency also promotes good development with the regional adoption agency plans. Due to its national footprint, it is engaging in two regional groups, London and Yorkshire and Humber where it is involved in a comprehensive matching service, which has brought the application to the Department for Education grant.

The agency has an excellent adoption administrator and a new business support and development officer. The panel administrator has systems in place to ensure panel paperwork and administration runs smoothly and there are no delays in getting prospective adopters to panel. Since the last inspection, the agency has transferred all its client files to an electronic system, making a more secure and paperless service for the future. The agency is slowly overseeing the transfer of information on to the electronic system. There is secure storage for paper files on site, in fireproof cabinets, and an external storage system where archived files are securely stored.

The new business support and development officer incorporates business support with a more strategic role. This role will develop, oversee and report on the funding initiatives and their progress. The role will also develop the marketing and

communications strategy and ensure that the agency is promoted in both the military and wider community.

The agency has good connections in the community and uses these to maximise and secure progress for the agency to meet children's needs. The adoption management committee has a vast range of experience, knowledge and connections. Finances have vastly improved following decisions reached about the continuation of the agency and funding is secure over the next three to five years. The agency embraces the regionalisation agenda.

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.