

Coram Cambridgeshire Adoption

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Lincoln House, The Paddocks, 2nd Floor, Cherry Hinton Road, Cambridge CB1 8DH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This stand-alone voluntary adoption agency based in Cambridge was registered on 24 March 2014. It is unusual in that it works in collaboration with Cambridgeshire County Council to provide its adoption service. It therefore provides a greater volume of post-adoption support than a traditional voluntary adoption agency, and it holds responsibility for family finding and matching for Cambridgeshire children.

The work the agency undertakes includes: the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters; pre- and post-adoption support to adoptive families; support to adults affected by adoption, including birth records counselling and intermediary services; and family finding for Cambridgeshire children who have adoption as their permanency plan. It also works with other local authorities to place children with its approved adopters.

During the year 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the agency placed 42 children and approved 31 adoptive families. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 41 approved adoptive families, 27 of whom have children placed with them. Of the remaining 14 families, 11 are either matched or linked with children. The number of people receiving post-adoption support includes 101 adoptive families, 22 adopted adults and 26 birth family members.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 January 2018

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account **good**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The voluntary adoption agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 30 January 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- Children make good progress in their adoptive families. They start to form positive attachments and their outcomes improve as a result of stable and secure care.
- Prospective adopters are welcomed. They undergo a thorough assessment to ensure that they are prepared fully for the task of adoptive parenting. They are supported well during the matching and introduction of children to their families, and as a result, placement stability is good.
- Adoption support is a strength. Adoptive families are able to access a variety of support, including therapeutic interventions, from a committed team of professionals. This helps children and young people understand and manage their emotions while being supported by parents who are guided to use therapeutic strategies in response.
- Adult service users receive a good service that has positive outcomes for their lives.
- Safeguarding has a high priority. This is promoted through rigorous assessments of adopters, good support, multi-agency working and strong managerial oversight.
- Leaders and managers are ambitious and committed to improving the lives of children, young people and adult service users. They inspire and support the staff, who are similarly committed and passionate about their work.
- Partnership working is embedded into practice to ensure that adoptive families receive the services they require to support their children's educational, emotional and health needs. The collaboration with Cambridgeshire County Council is particularly effective in supporting prompt and good adoptive placements for its children.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The agency has not been clear about when stage two of the adopter assessment process begins. Prospective adopters have not been asked to notify the agency of their intention to commence stage two. Timescales for this stage have therefore not been accurately recorded.
- The appraisals of panel members are limited in scope as they have not identified the panel members' training and development needs or evaluated the progress on previously identified targets. This makes it difficult to plan their ongoing training effectively.

What does the voluntary adoption agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>Ensure that all persons employed by the agency receive an appraisal. (Voluntary adoption and the adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 15(2)(a))</p> <p>This relates specifically to adoption panel members and the quality of their appraisals.</p>	30/03/2018

Recommendations

- Stage two starts when the agency receives notification from the prospective adopters that they wish to proceed with the assessment process. (Draft statutory guidance on adoption July 2014, page 39, paragraph 2.46)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Children, young people and adult service users benefit from the high-quality services delivered by this agency. The emphasis on early permanence affords children the opportunity to be placed with their adoptive family at the earliest stage possible, prevents delay and unnecessary placement moves and thus enables the children to start to form attachments. The agency promotes concurrency as a placement option, although it has also made placements on a foster-to-adopt basis. There has been a decrease in early permanence placements in the last year (from 13 to three), which the agency attributes to a reorganisation in the local authority, but placement numbers are now increasing again and there have been four placements made this inspection year to date.

Children make good progress once they are placed with their adoptive families. From troubled early lives they begin to settle, form positive attachments and improve their health and general well-being. A social worker said of a child, 'He is doing brilliantly. He has really flourished.' An independent reviewing officer commented about another child, saying, 'He is doing fantastically in placement.' His social worker confirmed this saying, 'He is a little star. He has grown physically, he is speaking more, his attachment has grown and he is relaxed and happier. He is flying.' Children improve the self-regulation of their emotions and make progress educationally because adopters receive the support they need. This includes multi-agency support and strong partnership working. An independent reviewing officer said of an adopter, 'She has done a terrific job.'

Most adoptive parents speak highly of their social workers, and comments include 'brilliant' and 'very approachable'. A young person talking about her experience said, 'It has been a big process, and they [the agency] did great. They were very child-friendly, took it step by step and made sure I was OK.' A small minority of adopters have expressed some dissatisfaction about the service they received. The agency responds well to any issues raised and does its best to put things right, apologises for any deficits in service provision and amends its practice to prevent a reoccurrence.

Adopters report that they receive a warm and prompt welcome when they first contact the agency. They are happy with the information that they receive and say that social workers are available to answer any questions. The agency has tried to address delay in the assessment process by reorganising how the service is provided. This has been effective in reducing delay, although stage one generally takes longer than two months. The delay is usually unavoidable and out of the control of the agency. The agency has not been starting stage two on receipt of the notification from adopters that they wish to proceed. This means that timescales for stage two are inaccurate. Most adopters feel that the assessment took the right amount of time and did not feel there was undue delay.

The preparation training and assessment process results in adopters who are equipped to undertake the task of adoptive parenting. It is thorough, and assessments are analytical and reflect accurately the prospective adopters' strengths and areas of vulnerability. This enables the adoption panel to make sound recommendations and the agency decision-maker to make good decisions. The timeliness and quality of decision-making are good.

The agency decision-maker takes the role very seriously, and there has been at least one occasion when her decision has differed from that of the panel recommendation. This demonstrates that the checks and balances that underpin this process are effective in practice.

Matching children to adopters is carried out well. Family finding starts at a very early stage, and children's plans are regularly reviewed to prevent drift and delay. Adopters receive as much information about the children as possible to enable them to make an informed decision about whether they can meet the child's needs. Full information sharing is supported by child appreciation days so that adopters can hear first-hand about the child's early experiences. Adopters speak very highly of the medical adviser, describing her as 'amazing'. She provides a full written report after a face-to-face consultation with the adopters so that they can consider the health implications for the child whom they are considering. Good matching promotes placement stability as adopters are prepared for the challenges that adoptive parenting can bring and the relevant support can be identified at an early stage. Placement stability for the year 2016–17 was 3%, which correlates with the national average. Once a match has been approved, introductions are well planned and well supported so that the child or children move into their adoptive home in a way that enables them to settle as soon as possible and adopters feel confident about the transition.

The agency provides a significant amount of adoption support because the local authority has delegated its responsibilities to this agency. This includes work with adopted adults and their families, current birth relatives and adoptive families. It produces adoption support assessments and plans and is able to apply to the adoption support fund for assistance. Adoption support is an area of strength for this agency and the team has grown and developed since the last inspection. It operates as a unit model, which includes two clinicians. There is a strong evidence-based therapeutic approach to all its interventions. In addition, the team runs children's activity groups, adopter support groups and operates the postbox on behalf of the local authority. The team also supports a number of direct contact arrangements. It ensures that these are carried out safely, reviews them regularly, and where necessary, staff supervise these arrangements. Consequently, children and young people are able to maintain a sense of their identity and sustain relationships with people who are important to them.

The agency has identified that it could improve user involvement in shaping its services. There are currently no formal mechanisms for engaging with adopters or children. Children's views are gained informally, and when they are of an age to do so, they contribute to their statutory reviews. They are always asked for their suggestions about the children's activities.

Birth relatives are offered a counselling service that is independent of their child's social worker. They speak highly of this service and the impact it has had on them. For example, one birth parent said, 'It's been brilliant. I wouldn't be where I am today without it.' Another birth parent commented, 'I realised that I needed to make changes and I saw myself from a different view. I have made changes. I have got more from this than any other counselling and I have found ways of dealing with things.' The agency has recently established a support group for birth parents to give them a safe venue where they can

discuss issues, talk to staff in private and receive assistance with letter-writing to their children. Although in its early stages, birth parents have been positive about this development.

Work with adopted adults and their family members is undertaken sensitively and well. One service user said, 'I am absolutely thrilled with the response I got from the agency. I am really satisfied with the service and really, really pleased.'

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected: good

Children, young people and adult service users receive a safe service from this agency. Prospective adopters are only approved following a thorough assessment that has a strong focus on safeguarding. If an applicant's pre-assessment checks indicate that there is a potential safeguarding issue, there is a thorough decision-making process to consider whether the application should proceed. This ensures that unsuitable applicants are not allowed to continue but also that applicants are not ruled out unnecessarily without a full consideration of the issues and risks.

Adopters are well prepared to understand the impact of abuse, trauma and neglect on how children may present and behave. This is covered by a clinical psychologist in the preparation training, throughout the assessment and reinforced by further post-approval training that has a strong emphasis on therapeutic parenting techniques. This ensures that adopters respond appropriately to the needs of the children placed with them.

The adoption social workers have had recent training in female genital mutilation, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. They have started to incorporate this into the adopters' preparation training as they realised this area needed more emphasis. When there have been concerns about possible radicalisation, these have been followed up appropriately by the agency, with good liaison with other relevant bodies.

Staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding. The agency responds appropriately to safeguarding concerns and continues to work with adoptive families, even if the child subsequently becomes looked after. There are good links with the local authority multi-agency assessment hub (MASH) and children's services. This facilitates prompt and effective decision-making to protect children and young people from harm. Adoption social workers and managers attend professionals' meetings and contribute fully to risk assessments and safety plans.

The agency's safeguarding policy and procedures have been reviewed in June and November 2017 to ensure that they remain relevant and compliant with statutory safeguarding guidance. Senior managers in the wider organisation meet regularly to discuss safeguarding issues and review and revise safeguarding training. There are also safeguarding audits. This ensures that this area is highlighted as one of significant importance.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

This is a child-focused agency. Leaders and managers are committed to providing a service of the highest quality so that children, young people and adult service users achieve the best possible outcomes. They are constantly evaluating the service, using rigorous monitoring processes and feedback from stakeholders and service users to drive improvement. Learning from complaints and disruptions of placements is also used effectively to improve practice. Trustees demonstrate a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities and have systems to support a robust additional tier of oversight. In addition to considering regular reports about the operation and functioning of the agency, one trustee observed a panel meeting, and trustees have also met the agency staff at team meetings and visits to office premises.

Leaders and managers have had a significant involvement in the development of the regional adoption agency (RAA) in order to shape the proposed adoption service for the region. This has had an impact on the extent to which they have developed their own service as they have delayed the implementation of some of their planned improvements in anticipation of a regional model of service provision. Work on the RAA appears to have lost momentum currently and this will enable leaders and managers to concentrate on their own service development.

The agency is currently engaged in a project funded by the Department for Education in relation to the placement of siblings. Although not fully completed, it has piloted training for social workers and obtained feedback from adopters. Early indications suggest that the training and information will lead to improved practice in this area.

Staff are enthusiastic, child-focused and committed. They enjoy working for this agency because they feel well supported by their managers. New staff receive a thorough induction to the service and all staff have individual supervision on a regular basis. This enables them to reflect on their practice as well as their development needs. Team meetings are regular and alternate with practice meetings, which provide staff with the opportunity to discuss and reflect on cases in detail. Further opportunities for reflection include professional supervision in relation to theraplay and discussions with the clinical psychologists. Annual appraisals are detailed and clearly identify successes and areas for further development.

The agency has worked hard over the last year to ensure that the three discrete teams (recruitment and assessment, adoption support and family finding) feel part of the whole agency and work together as one. Staff report that this is the case and that there are mechanisms for sharing information and learning. Access to training is good and most staff have benefited from undertaking theraplay training to enhance their work in supporting adoptive families. This, in conjunction with the opportunities for reflective practice, ensures that they remain effective and competent staff members.

The agency has a very good understanding of the needs of the children for whom it is recruiting adoptive parents. There are regular meetings between the local authority and the head of family finding, and these inform the dynamic and detailed recruitment

strategy.

The agency works very closely in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council. The agency provides the local authority's adoption service and there are regular meetings between the two agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of the provision. These meetings are also used to challenge the local authority's practice where shortfalls are identified, an example being the provision of life story work. The agency offers consultation, training and advice to children's social workers to help them develop their practice. Children's social workers speak highly of the communication with the agency and this enables everyone involved in the child's life to work together consistently. The relationship between the agency and the county council has also resulted in an effective interface between children's social care and the adoption agency, particularly in relation to safeguarding concerns. This facilitates prompt referral and response and good communication to keep children and young people safer.

There are very good partnership arrangements with education providers. The agency offers training to school staff to enable them to enhance their understanding of the needs of adoptive children. The virtual school is another effective partner. Adoption social workers attend education meetings so that they can support adopters to improve educational outcomes for the children for whom they care. One education professional commented, 'Communication from the agency is excellent. They listen to our concerns and are really helpful. I went on attachment training with them a while ago; it was very helpful. I can't speak highly enough of them. Working together is brilliant.'

The agency has a positive response to difference in all its forms. Staff understand the implications of cultural differences, and the agency has an inclusive adopter recruitment policy based on the needs of children. This ensures that it meets the stated aims and objectives that are outlined in its statement of purpose.

The adoption and permanence panel is properly constituted and the two panel chairpersons are experienced and knowledgeable. The members of the central list offer a variety of personal and professional experience of fostering and adoption. The panel is well administered and the minutes are detailed and provide an accurate reflection of the discussion to aid effective decision-making. The panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function and it takes its role in promoting safe and secure placements very seriously. Panel members are well prepared for the panel meetings and their contributions are relevant and child-focused. They have access to annual training and their performance is subject to an annual appraisal to assess and develop their competency as panel members. However, the notes of these appraisals are brief, they do not identify whether last year's objectives have been met and they do not identify panel members' training and development needs. Consequently, appraisals do not inform the panel members' training development plan.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and

young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the voluntary adoption agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

Voluntary adoption agency details

Unique reference number: SC476782

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