

Adopters for Adoption

Malvern View, Saxon Business Park, Hanbury Road, Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove,
Worcestershire B60 4AD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency has been established since March 2014. It recruits, prepares, trains, assesses and approves adopters to provide homes for children, from a range of local authorities, who need new families. The agency approves adopters for domestic adoption. It provides adoption support to the adopters whom it approves, children placed or adopted by them, and other adoptive families requesting support.

In 2017, it approved 24 adoptive families and placed 29 children with its adoptive families. Of those, 42% of children placed are aged four years old and above and 64% of children placed are brothers and sisters. There are 23 families waiting for placements at the time of the inspection.

Inspection dates: 9 to 15 January 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and parents are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers requires improvement to be good

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

Date of previous inspection: 20 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:

- Staff are passionate about their work and committed to providing an individualised service across both adoption and adoption support services.
- Adoptive families and children are positive about the services that they receive from this agency.
- The agency has an inclusive ethos. Applicants are positively welcomed to contact the service, regardless of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.
- Staff support careful matching of children with adopters. As a result, despite the complexity involved in many placements, there are few adoption breakdowns.
- Children thrive in stable homes where they make good progress and develop a strong sense of identity.
- Leaders and managers are committed to supporting staff to ensure that they provide a high-quality service. Staff and managers are ambitious to develop and improve the service.
- The adoption panel provides robust oversight of the agency's work. Agency decisions are timely and well evidenced.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The staff training plan is not effectively evaluated or reviewed by managers.
- Staff's knowledge of radicalisation, child sexual exploitation and e-safety are limited. As a result, they are not able to give up-to-date safeguarding guidance to their adoptive families.
- The manager does not effectively ensure that all staff are appropriately trained and experienced to undertake their roles.
- The quality assurance of assessment reports is not always thorough.
- The manager's arrangements for monitoring and developing the service are underdeveloped.
- Staff supervision records contain insufficient detail.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that prospective adopters are prepared to become adoptive parents in a sensitive way which addresses and gives them the skills, knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter. (National minimum standard 10.9)
This is with particular reference to e-safety, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation awareness training.
- Ensure that the adoption team manager checks that the prospective adopter's report is accurate, up-to-date and has evidence based information which distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information, before it is submitted to the adoption panel. (National minimum standard 10.12)
- Ensure that the learning and development programme is evaluated for effectiveness at least annually and if necessary, is updated. (National minimum standard 23.2)
This is with particular reference to e-safety, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation awareness training.
- Ensure that the assessment and appraisal of all staff involved in adoption takes account of identified skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning and development needs. (National minimum standard 23.5)
- Ensure that a written record is kept by the agency detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. (National minimum standard 24.5)
This is with particular reference to ensuring that records fully describe professional discussion and decision-making.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records and staff activity to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and identify patterns and trends. (National minimum standard 25.2)
This is with particular reference to monitoring children's progress.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Adopters said that they felt welcomed from the outset of their contact with the agency. They feel that they receive individual support which enables them to engage fully in the preparation and assessment process. The agency's adopters are prepared and supported to care for children who are deemed 'harder to place' because of their age, level of need or because they are part of a brother and sister group. This provides those children with the opportunity to experience family life from a secure and permanent base. There is a history of good placement stability. This promotes the development of good attachments, self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Enquirers feel welcomed and respected when they contact the agency. They receive a prompt response, and they are given time to talk. The quality of written and verbal information is good. This enables enquirers to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to proceed. One adopter informed inspectors that it was their initial phone call with the agency 'that made them to decide to apply'. The agency is very open to consider applicants who, at first glance, may present with more complex issues, as staff understand that complexity also builds resilience, which is an essential quality in adoptive parenting.

Adopters feel well prepared for the challenges that adoptive parenting can bring. Training provides applicants with information about the complex needs of the children waiting for adoption and the skills and support that they will need to parent them effectively. Staff facilitating the preparation groups ensure that a comprehensive evaluation of participants' contribution is shared with assessing social workers. This evaluation is then reviewed during the assessment process. Adopters value their preparation. One commented, 'Great to get detail as well as experiences from those who have been through the process.' Another said, 'I really liked that we could talk about how the process would affect our birth child as well.' In July 2017, the agency introduced a training day for family members and friends of prospective adopters to give them an understanding of the adoption process and how they can best offer support. This is now extended to approved adopters' family and friends.

Staff work collaboratively with prospective adopters throughout their assessment and their attendance at panel. Prospective adopters feel well supported and value their individual relationships with staff and the agency. They feel able to contact the agency at any time and advise that they always receive good support. The agency is clear on the two-stage process for assessment, and it endeavours to complete the process within the recommended timescales. The agency and the adoption panel monitor these timescales, which are usually met unless outside of the agency's control or where further exploration is warranted. The agency promptly informs prospective adopters regarding their suitability following their attendance at panel. The recommendation made at the last inspection about this is now met.

Staff and adopters help children to build trusting relationships with their new families. In the last year, staff matched most adopters with a child within four months of their

approval. Staff go to great lengths to ensure that they match children appropriately with adopters, including organising medical adviser meetings and carefully planning children's transitions. As a result, the number of adoption breakdowns is very low. Since the last inspection, only one child's placement has ended prior to the adoption order being made. Staff learn from their experiences and ensure that they are proactive in ensuring that introductions meet adopters' as well as children's needs. They also ensure that they are meticulous in securing all possible information about the children prior to placement. This includes attendance at life appreciation days, where all professionals involved with the child meet to share information about the child's life.

Children do well once they are placed with their adoptive families. From troubled early lives, they settle, begin to develop attachments, and improve their confidence and their general health and well-being. They make friends, take part in a range of activities and experience positive family life. One adopter described how the independent reviewing officer commented that he did not recognise the adopter's son, as he had 'really blossomed' and 'looked so well since joining them'. Another adopter said, 'Overall there has been a massive improvement, they have settled beautifully.'

Adopters are committed to maintaining children's identity. Adopters support children to have contact with their birth families, including brothers and sisters and those who have been important to them, where that is safe and in their best interests. This promotes children's emotional resilience and sense of identity.

Staff ensure that adopters have the support available which best meets their needs. The range of support is spread across informal buddying with other approved adopters, support groups and specific therapeutic consultation. In addition, the agency facilitates general events such as activity days, which adopters find offer them and their adopted children valuable opportunities to broaden their support networks. Adopters and professional stakeholders alike value the agency's support. Adopters report that this makes a significant difference to children's lives. One adopter said: 'My social worker has been a superstar. I couldn't have done this without her support... she's done things over and above.' Another adopter said, 'Nothing is too much trouble. We wouldn't be the family we are now without Adopters for Adoption.'

The agency is piloting a new adoption support programme for adoptive families in crisis. The pilot is currently being independently evaluated. Early feedback from families, children and referring social workers has been very encouraging. All the families who had completed the programme felt that it had made a positive difference to how they coped with the difficulties that they faced, and all children reported an average 32.2% improvement in their feelings and behaviour following their completion of the programme. One parent described to the inspector how the intervention has boosted her confidence and given her the tools to find solutions herself. She said, 'It's totally changed how I respond to things now. I'm so much more confident.'

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

Prospective adopters are generally well prepared to understand the potential impact that abuse and neglect has on children. This begins at their preparation training and continues

once they have children placed with them. Staff are proactive in ensuring that adopters receive training to meet the needs of specific children matched with them, for example around foetal alcohol syndrome. Adopters understand the training that they receive and are able to put it into practice to safely care for their children.

Adopters comment that the training that they have prepares them to understand the impact of trauma, abuse and neglect on how children present and the behaviour that they may exhibit. The initial preparation training is supplemented by access to additional online training, for example on understanding attachment. Adopters are therefore able to respond to the needs of their children in a way that promotes positive attachments.

Safeguarding arrangements to protect children are generally sound, with adopters and prospective adopters understanding the need to refer allegations of harm. The agency supports this process promptly, with referrals to placing and hosting local authorities. Most staff recognise safeguarding issues and take adopters' concerns seriously. However, on an isolated occasion this did not occur. The manager, once she was aware of the incident, promptly ensured that the relevant information was shared with statutory agencies. Furthermore, she ensured that the staff member accessed appropriate training to minimise the risk of its happening again.

Staff understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children. However, there has been limited participation of the online training provided by the wider organisation on issues such as radicalisation, extremism, sexual exploitation and e-safety. Consequently, staff's knowledge is limited in these areas and they are not able to give up-to-date safeguarding guidance to their adoptive families. In addition, adoptive parents have access to a range of online training. This includes radicalisation. However, agency records do not show how many adoptive families have undertaken this training. Although the impact of this shortfall at the present time is limited, due to the age of the children in placement, the manager has recognised that it is a shortfall and is making plans to address it in the coming year.

Staff undertake health and safety assessments as part of the assessment process. This includes an assessment on any pet living with the family. This ensures that any matters requiring attention are dealt with prior to a child joining the family. These actions help to ensure that children are living in safe and nurturing environments.

Adoptive parents and children are aware of their right to make a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the actions taken by the agency. Details are readily available in a variety of forms. They receive written information at the onset of the agency's involvement, and details are available on the agency's website and contained in the statement of purpose and children's guides. The agency has received two complaints in the last 12 months. Records indicate that the complaints were taken seriously and thorough investigations undertaken. The outcome was fed back to the complainants, who were satisfied with the actions taken. In 2015 the agency received four complaints linked to breaches in data protection. The agency took swift action to address these and now has robust procedures in place to prevent further incidents. The manager is proactive in promoting a dialogue and investigating the issues raised.

Staff's and panel members' recruitment is robust. A range of vetting and reference checks ensure that only those suitable have access to children and sensitive information about children and adults.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: requires improvement to be good

Since the last inspection there have been two registered managers. The current registered manager was appointed in February 2017. She is appropriately qualified and experienced, and is currently undertaking her leadership and management award. A new responsible individual was appointed in December 2017. Together, they form an approachable and accessible management team. The registered manager and responsible individual are gaining the respect of staff for both their knowledge and management style.

The staff team is mostly experienced and knowledgeable, and all are passionate about ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and adoptive families. Managers strive to develop a culture of high expectations, innovation and ambition for the agency.

Staff feel well supported by the manager in terms of regular supervision, appraisals and access to training to enhance their practice. However, the manager's recording of supervision is very limited and does not reflect professional discussions regarding families or the outcomes agreed. Although staff have access to a wide range of training both through the wider organisation and specialist external courses, the manager does not actively monitor and review staff training records. This has meant that staff training in some areas is deficient, for example in e-safety and radicalisation. The staff training plan is not evaluated and individual skills audits are not undertaken. This has meant that some staff have not received appropriate training to fulfil their role. For example, one staff member, who offers consultation to independent social workers undertaking assessments, had no experience or training to undertake assessments herself.

The agency aims to be a learning organisation, and managers and staff reflect on things that have not gone so well, including complaints, in order to improve practice. The manager uses a variety of monitoring systems to identify strengths, shortfalls and areas for development, but has yet to embed these to achieve sustained improvements. Although the manager has an understanding of ongoing issues for children, her monitoring of their progress is not carried out in a systematic way so that any patterns and trends can be identified and addressed. Feedback from service users has developed since the last inspection. A new app has been developed for prospective adopters to use following preparation groups. This development is well received. This is now being extended and improved to make it more wide ranging and meaningful. The management board also provides robust oversight and receives regular reports to enable members to fulfil their role effectively.

The agency recruits adopters who can meet the needs of children waiting for adoption, and it is responsive to the needs of local authorities. Senior leaders have worked with a regional adoption agency to successfully target adopters able to offer brother and sister placements. The majority of the assessments are undertaken by independent social workers who are recruited through a recruitment agency, which is also part of its larger organisation. However, the quality assurance of assessment reports is not always thorough. As a result, one assessment was deferred by panel and another report had been

poorly written and was edited so severely that it did not appropriately identify the challenges identified during the assessment process. This contributed to a placement disruption. The manager has recognised that this is an area for development. She regular meets with the recruitment agency to ensure consistency and has planned a series of training events for independent social workers.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose. This outlines its aims and objectives. It is a helpful document for local authority social workers and service users. It is subject to regular review and available on the agency's website, but has not been sent to Ofsted as required. This was addressed on inspection and therefore will not be raised as a regulatory breach. Since the last inspection, the service has developed a range of helpful guides for children and young people. The recommendation made at the last inspection is met.

Leaders and managers value diversity and positively promote tolerance and equality. Prospective adopters are not discriminated against because of any specific individual characteristics. For example, there are older adopters, single adopters and adopters in same-sex relationships.

Professional relationships are of a good quality. Staff and managers make good links with local authority consortiums. Relationships have been further enhanced by the director's active involvement on the regional adoption agency agenda. The manager and staff are not afraid to challenge partners if it feels that children are being let down and not receiving the service that they are entitled to. For example, where families have received incomplete paperwork from the placing local authority, staff are proactive in escalating their concerns about it.

The adoption panel provides robust oversight of the work of the agency. It is administered well and the panel chair is very experienced and knowledgeable. Panel members provide a breadth of knowledge and experience of adoption, both personal and professional. This promotes the approval of safe and secure adoptive placements. The agency decision is made in good time, based on the panel's considered recommendation and thorough and timely minutes. As the panel chair commented, 'There is a genuine commitment to improve the adoption experience.'

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 difference 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: SC476482

Registered provider: Adopters for Adoption Limited

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