

Adopt Together

Faith in Families

7 Colwick Road, West Bridgford, NOTTINGHAM NG2 5FR

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Adopt Together is a voluntary adoption agency which operates from premises in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire. It is provided by the registered children's charity, Faith in Families. The agency is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption and adoption support, including birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive parents. It works with local authorities to place looked after children with its approved families and provides a range of adoption support services to children, adoptive parents, adopted adults and birth relatives.

At the time of the inspection there were 21 approved adoptive families, of whom 13 had children placed with them, pending an adoption order, three were linked to children and five were waiting for a placement. In total there were 87 open adoption support cases, 15 of which related to historical adoptions.

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 December 2018

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The voluntary adoption agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the voluntary adoption agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children, young people and adults.

Date of previous inspection: 16 November 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- Staff are highly skilled in providing an individualised service across a range of adoption and adoption support services. They are passionate about their work and committed to providing the best service.
- Children build trusting and secure relationships with their adoptive parents and make significant progress in a relatively short time.
- Staff support careful matching of children with adopters. As a result, despite the complexity involved in many placements, there are few adoption breakdowns.
- The agency uses research to inform its response to understanding the behaviours of children and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. This research provides adoptive parents with an enhanced understanding of the impact of early trauma on their children's behaviour and emotions.
- Partnership work with a range of professionals is exceptionally strong. Social work staff offer presentations to schools to help teachers to understand the trauma experienced by adopted children.
- Leaders and managers are committed to supporting staff to ensure that they provide a high-quality service. There is a learning culture that permeates through the agency. Staff and managers are always looking for ways to develop and improve the service.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The agency needs to improve the diversity of its panel central list to reflect the local community.
- The agency should ensure that the regulator receives timely notifications of significant events.
- The agency needs to strengthen the voice of children to inform the development of the service.

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

Recommendations

- 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 the service. (National Minimum Standards 1.6)
- Each agency must maintain a list of persons whom it considers suitable to be a member of an adoption panel. Having a pool of people with different skills, experience and qualifications allows most appropriate members to be drawn to consider individual cases. (Statutory Guidance on Adoption paragraph 1.27) This is specifically in relation to ethnic diversity.
- Ensure that the manager of the VAA has a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 24. (National Minimum Standards 29.1) This is with specific reference to timely notification of significant events to the regulator.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Adopters report feeling welcomed from the outset of their contact with the agency. They feel that they receive individual support which enables them to fully engage in the preparation and assessment process. The agency's adopters are extremely well prepared and supported to care for children who are deemed 'harder to place' because of their age or their level of needs, or because they are part of a sibling group. This support 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 are invited to attend information meetings. The quality of written and verbal information is excellent. This enables enquirers to make an informed decision about whether they wish to proceed. 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. As one adopter stated: 'The agency has been totally supportive from day one and has empowered us to make a choice that has changed not only our lives but the lives of the two children we adopted. Firstly, they accepted and approved us as a 50-year-old couple; secondly, they prepared us throughout the adoption process with first rate teaching and the benefit of their experience. Our social worker was outstanding; the support since adoption has been consistently helpful.'

Adopters feel exceptionally well prepared for the challenges that adoptive parenting can bring. The agency provides a comprehensive programme of five workshops during stages 1 and 2. Since the last inspection, two additional optional workshops have been offered to prepare adopters for the complexities of sibling groups and 'foster to adopt' placements. Training provides applicants with information about the complex needs of the children waiting for adoption and an understanding of the skills and support that they will need to parent children effectively. Applicants' self-reflection and learning from each workshop is integrated into the assessment process. The agency has developed a workshop for family members and friends to ensure that supporters understand the impact of the child's past on their development and ability to form relationships, and to identify how the agency can best offer support. Alongside another local adoption agency, this agency additionally provides a workshop for birth children. This ensures that any children in the prospective adopters' family are thoroughly consulted and given the opportunity to express their views or any worries, and ask any questions about the process. Research tells us that existing children in an adoptive family are a vulnerability, therefore this workshop is fundamental in promoting placement stability.

Staff work highly collaboratively with prospective adopters throughout their assessment and their attendance at panel. Prospective adopters feel exceptionally well supported and value their individual relationships with staff and the agency. Adopters speak highly of the preparation and assessment process and feel that it has prepared them well. One adopter said: 'We have been thoroughly impressed from our first meeting. The training was really

comprehensive and the assessment extremely thorough.' The agency promptly informs prospective adopters regarding their suitability following their attendance at panel.

Staff support adopters to help children to build trusting relationships with their new families. In the last year, staff matched most adopters with a child within a few months of their approval. A home-finding workshop is offered to prepare and enhance adopters' understanding of the linking process. Staff go to great lengths to ensure that they match children appropriately with adopters. They use comprehensive matching analysis tools to ensure that adopters have a thorough understanding of children's presenting needs. They are meticulous in securing all possible information about children prior to placement, including attendance at life appreciation days, arranging 'bump into' meetings and organising medical adviser meetings. As a result, the number of adoption breakdowns is very low. Since the last inspection, only three children's placements have ended prior to the adoption order being made. Given the children's highly complex needs, this is a high achievement and testament to the thorough assessment and ongoing support offered by the agency. The level of support during introductions is excellent. Staff act as advocates to ensure that introductions are well planned and meet the needs of children. One adopter said that the agency had 'looked out for us every step of the way'.

Children can build trusting and secure relationships with their adoptive parents. They make significant progress in a relatively short time. From troubled early lives, they settle, they begin to develop attachments, and they improve their confidence and their general health and well-being. They are given a wide range of positive experiences in their adoptive families. They make friends, take part in lots of activities and experience family life. As a result, children settle well in their new families. One children's social worker said that she was amazed with the developmental progress made by twins placed after severe neglect and early trauma. She added: 'I am absolutely delighted how the girls have blossomed both physically and emotionally. Completely beyond my expectations.'

Children make progress in all areas of their development. The agency is particularly skilled at supporting schools to meet children's needs. Staff undertake training for schools to help them to understand attachment issues and how best to respond to the challenges children may face in school. This is effective, with children engaging well with school and pre-school learning opportunities. Adopters are particularly positive about the support within school that is provided by the agency.

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 the contact 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 a range of different interventions, including informal buddying with other approved adopters, therapeutic workshops and interventions, and more general social events such as family activity days. These offer adopters and their adopted children valuable opportunities to broaden their support networks. Regular children's groups are held which offer children a safe space to share their adoption experience. The agency uses research to inform its response to understanding the

behaviours of children and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. These areas of informed practice are helping adopters to keep children safe and support their development. 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 fantastic. I couldn't have done this without her support. She's done things over and above.' Another adopter said: 'Their commitment and insight has been invaluable.'

The agency provides services to adults through birth records counselling and intermediary work. Service users feel that they receive an excellent service, which for many exceeds their expectations and has a positive impact on their lives. One adoptee said: 'The efforts to help find my birth mum have led to a whole new part of my life. This would not have been possible without you.' Another adoptee stated: '[The social worker] has always provided timely and appropriate guidance which has been both sensible in content and thoughtfully delivered. She has been a consummate professional.' The work is well organised and easily accessible for adopted adults and their birth families, with staff supporting them to sensitively understand their experiences.

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

Safeguarding underpins the agency's practice. All the agency staff are experienced social workers, with a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities. The agency's policies and procedures reflect this. Agency staff and panel members all complete regular safeguarding training. They are aware of the actions that they need to take to ensure that children are safe. Staff take this responsibility seriously and refer to other agencies with a safeguarding responsibility, when necessary. Good-quality recording indicates that staff act swiftly, without delay. This ensures that children are safe in their adoptive families.

Prospective adopters are well prepared for being able to understand the potential impact that abuse and neglect has on children. This begins in their preparation workshops and continues once they have children placed with them. Staff are proactive in ensuring that adopters receive advice and guidance to meet the needs of specific children matched with them, for example around foetal alcohol syndrome. Adopters comment that the training they have prepares them for understanding the impact of trauma, abuse and neglect on how children present and the behaviour they may exhibit. Adopters understand the training they receive and can put it into practice to safely care for their children.

Children do not go missing. They are safe and protected from harm within their adopted families. The agency takes a strong and proactive approach to safeguarding. Adopters fully understand the need to refer allegations of harm. The agency supports this process well. Staff recognise safeguarding issues and take adopters' concerns seriously. Over the past year, there have been four recorded safeguarding concerns that have all been passed on appropriately for further consideration to safeguarding services. The agency informs Ofsted of significant incidents; however, a notification earlier this year was significantly delayed. Such delays prevent the regulator from being able to monitor patterns and trends as they occur.

Adoptive parents are aware of their right to make a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the actions taken by the agency. Details of how to raise a complaint are readily available. Adoptive parents receive written information at the onset of the agency's involvement, and this information is contained in the agency's statement of purpose. Similarly, information is available for those accessing adoption support, or who require access to birth records. Such information can also be accessed by children. Information for children is contained in a child-friendly guide to the agency. The agency has only received one complaint since the last inspection. Records indicate that the matter was taken seriously, and a thorough investigation undertaken.

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the last inspection, there have been changes in leadership and management in the agency. The responsible individual has provided consistency during these changes. A board of trustees is kept well informed about plans and developments in the agency; they provide effective challenge but are committed to providing a high-quality adoption service. The manager and responsible individual are both suitably qualified and experienced in adoption. They are driven by a real passion to make a positive difference to children.

The agency has faced some difficult challenges since the last inspection. A whistle-blowing incident shortly after the last inspection raised concern about the organisational working culture. This was swiftly and robustly addressed by trustees, and changes were implemented. In addition, because of a temporary decrease in prospective adopters' enquiries, the trustees made some difficult decisions in relation to the staff benefits to ensure that the agency continues to function and remain financially viable. This position has now stabilised, and it is to everyone's credit that this has had no impact on the commitment and passion of staff to continue to produce work of the highest standard. Children and adult service users have remained at the centre of their practice, and ways to improve the service are always under consideration. This ensures that adopters continue to support their children to do well.

Staff report that they feel well supported by the agency in terms of regular, reflective supervision, and access to training. The agency supports practitioners to have access to clinical supervision, external training and reflective peer supervision to enhance their practice. As a result of this supportive environment, staff demonstrate a high degree of passion and commitment for the work that they undertake, underpinned by a very good knowledge and skill base. One social worker said: 'I feel listened to and valued. My professional development is actively encouraged.'

The quality of assessment, matching and support is excellent. Leaders and managers regularly seek feedback from prospective adopters during the assessment process and afterwards, which leads to improvements in this process. The agency uses its extensive experience in providing adoption support, to inform and develop the training for adopters.

The agency is a learning organisation, and managers and staff reflect on things that have not gone so well, including disruptions, to improve practice. The agency has strong systems to quality-assure and monitor its performance. Systems include regular audits within the agency, reflective practice sessions, quality assurance at panel and regular reporting on the progress of the agency from panel to management, and to the trustees. The agency regularly seeks feedback from service users, which helps to inform and change practice. However, the voice of the child is weak. The agency has recognised this and has plans to strengthen the process for gathering feedback from children to make it more wide-ranging and meaningful.

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 is available on the agency's website, but it has not been sent to Ofsted, as required. This was addressed on inspection and therefore will not be raised as a regulatory breach.

The agency recruits a range of adopters who can meet the needs of children, in line with its statement of purpose. It has successfully increased the proportion of adopters able to take sibling groups and 'foster to adopt' placements.

Leaders and managers value diversity and positively promote tolerance, equality and diversity. 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.

The adoption panel comprises a central list of panel members who bring a range of experience of adoption, both personal and professional. However, the central list does not reflect the local community it serves as it does not include any members from the black and minority ethnic community. The panel chair is an experienced and knowledgeable adoption professional. The panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function, while being sensitive to the applicants attending panel. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on a regular basis on the quality of reports and presentation of social workers, so that agency staff can address any issues swiftly. Panel members receive regular updates on developments in the agency and have the opportunity to attend regular training events. This helps to ensure that they are kept up to date with changes in practice.

Professional relationships are strong. There are good links with local authorities. Relationships have been further enhanced by staff's active involvement with practice development workstreams in regional adoption agency agendas. The manager and staff are not afraid to challenge partners if the agency feels that children are being let down and not getting 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.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work with children, young people, adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families, and adult service users. 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, young people and adults 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: SC048470

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Inspector:

Anne Daly, social care regulatory inspector (lead)



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