

Sandwell Children's Trust Adoption

Sandwell Children's Trust
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, PO Box 2374, Oldbury B69 3DE
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency is managed by Sandwell Children's Trust Adoption. It was registered as a voluntary adoption agency by Ofsted on 7 March 2018.

The agency prepares, assesses and approves adoptive families. Recruitment of prospective adopters is conducted through the local regional adoption agency. Adoptive families approved by the agency are also used by other local authorities for their children waiting for an adoptive placement.

The agency provides support to families and also manages the arrangements for children to have post-adoption contact with their birth families. The support to adopted adults and birth parents affected by adoption is provided through a service level agreement with another voluntary adoption agency.

Since April 2018, 19 children have had adoption orders made. Twenty-eight children are matched and placed with adopters and 11 approved adopters are waiting for a match with a child.

Inspection dates: 8 to 11 January 2019

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| Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account | requires improvement to be good |
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| How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected | requires improvement to be good |
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| The effectiveness of leaders and managers | requires improvement to be good |
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The voluntary adoption agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children, young people and adults. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of previous inspection: none

Overall judgement at last inspection: N/A

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency requires improvement to be good because:

- Challenges within the staff team have had a negative impact on the assessment process of prospective adopters and on the quality of the support offered to adopters and children.
- There have been significant changes in management, which have resulted in inconsistent support and supervision of staff.
- Staff recruitment and vetting processes are not thorough. Gaps exist in the recruitment practices of those staff employed through an agency.
- Training for staff is not consistent. Managers have not ensured that all staff have had adequate training to support them in their role.
- The electronic recording system is not being used effectively. This raises significant challenges for managers in getting consistent and accurate information.
- Children are not given clear information about what support to expect following adoption. They are not given information about how to contact the children's rights director should they feel they need to.
- Members of the adoption panel have not been effectively inducted or appraised and they have not received the appropriate training to help them in their role.

The voluntary adoption agency's strengths:

- Children flourish in their adoptive families
- Matching children to their future families is well considered. There have been no disruptions.
- Children are well prepared for their new families.
- The staff team is experienced and is passionate about ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and adoptive families.
- The adoption panel is effective and promotes safe, secure and stable placements.
- There is good support from home-finding social workers.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meet(s) the Care Standards Act 2000, the 'Voluntary adoption agencies and the adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations', 2003, the 'Adoption agencies regulations', 2005 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

| Requirement | Due date |
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| <p>The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch manager, shall ensure that there is, having regard to the size of the agency or (as the case may be) branch and the agency's statement of purpose, a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the agency or (as the case may be) branch. (Voluntary adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations, 2003, Regulation 13(a))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that assessments are allocated in a timely manner and support is provided to adopters and children as agreed in their placement plans.</p> | 28/02/2018 |
| <p>The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager, shall not employ a person to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency; or allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of an agency unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to him in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 2. (Voluntary adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations, 2003, Regulation 14 (1)(2)(3)(d))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that the quality of references is robust and references are verified.</p> | 28/02/2019 |
| <p>The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager shall ensure that all persons employed by the agency receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Voluntary adoption agencies (miscellaneous amendments) regulations, 2003, Regulation 15 (2)(a))</p> | 28/02/2019 |

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service. (Adoption: national minimum standards 1.6)
- Ensure that the life story book and later life letters are completed within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony. (Adoption: national minimum standards 2.7 2.8)
- Ensure that the children's guide contains information on how a child can contact the children's rights director. (Adoption: national minimum standards 18.5)
- Ensure that the children's guide to adoption support services is provided to the child and includes a summary of what the service sets out to do for children. (Adoption: national minimum standards 18.6)
- Ensure that each person on the central list is given induction training which is completed within 10 weeks of being included on the central list (Adoption: national minimum standards 23.14)
- Ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the adoption staff. (Adoption: national minimum standards 23.15)
- Ensure that the chair and individuals on the central list have their performance reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. (Statutory guidance on adoption page 22 1.35)
- Ensure that there is an effective system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and action is taken when needed. (Adoption: national minimum standards 27.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: requires improvement to be good

Prospective adopters' point of enquiry is through a well-established local consortium, consisting of four local authorities. Prospective adopters are provided with adequate information about all aspects of adoption to enable them to consider, in an informed way, if adoption is right for them.

Prospective adopters have had mixed experiences of the assessment and preparation process to help them in their journey towards adoption. Some adopters have found the preparation courses to be informative and feel that staff work collaboratively with them. Others have not had such positive experiences and have found the process to be insensitive to their needs. When applicants have needed additional support and help through their assessment, the agency has recognised this and has offered individual training tailored to meet their needs.

The agency is clear on the two-stage process for assessment, and it endeavours to complete the process within the recommended timescales. However, difficulties in allocating prospective adopters' assessments to social workers have meant that these have not always been conducted in a timely manner. Assessments are of an acceptable standard. They give an accurate reflection of adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities, enabling effective matching to take place.

A high level of sickness within the adoption social work team and significant changes in managers have meant that visits to adopters and children have not always taken place as agreed. As a result, some children have experienced delays in their adoption process.

Later life letters and life story work are generally completed by children's social workers and are of a good quality. However, for some children these are still outstanding long after celebration days. Similarly, while individual adopters promote children's identity well, the agency does not manage letter-box contact arrangements in a timely manner. The service has recognised this shortfall and managers are allocating extra resources to improve this service. This is vital as it promotes children's emotional resilience and sense of identity.

The agency has one children's guide which includes information about how children can complain if they are unhappy about their care. This does not cover adoption support. Furthermore, it does not include information about how children can contact the children's rights director. The agency has not developed any system to seek and capture feedback from children or service users to inform and improve its service.

There is limited post-adoption support offered by the agency. However, where this has been offered, it is of a good quality and the social worker has been responsive. One service user commented that the adoption support worker 'has been brilliant' in the support she has offered him over the years. Adopters and children have access to therapeutic interventions funded by the adoption support fund and informal buddying with other approved adopters. The development of adopter support groups is in its infancy. Limited training courses are available to adopters post approval. Adopters and their

children can access a therapeutic parenting training course run by another voluntary adoption agency.

Matching children to their future families is well considered, resulting in good placement stability. Child appreciation days are taking place consistently. Adopters appreciate that these are a good way of facilitating a positive transition of a child into their family. Children are well prepared for their adoptive parents. Staff from the agency work well with children's social workers to support children to move on. There is good support from home-finding social workers, who often stay involved with adopters from external agencies long past what is expected. One interagency adopter commented that the home-finding worker had 'gone over and above' in her support.

Adopters are supported to understand the behaviours of children and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. As a result, children build trusted and secure relationships with their adoptive parents and they make good progress in a relatively short time.

Children do well once they are placed with their adoptive families. They begin to develop attachments and improve their confidence and well-being. Children's learning and health needs are well met. They make good progress in school and take part in social activities with their new families. Adopters spend time with their children and stimulate them. Consequently, children who have experienced developmental delay make significant progress. For example, in a relatively short time, one child's long-standing night terrors subsided, and the condition of his skin significantly improved.

Adopted adults seeking support to access their records and counselling, and intermediary services for adopted adults and birth relatives, are carried out effectively through a service level agreement by a local voluntary support agency. This is due to end in April 2019.

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Staff are experienced social workers and understand their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding children. They all receive mandatory training to ensure that they understand and know how to deal with risks to children's safety and well-being. However, staff have not received training on current issues, such as radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. Consequently, this limits the up-to-date safeguarding guidance they are able to give to their adoptive families.

Staff recruitment and vetting processes are not always robust. Although all staff undergo a comprehensive interview, there are gaps in the recruitment practices of those staff employed through an agency. References are not sufficiently thorough and there is no verification of references.

Children are secure in stable placements with prospective adopters who listen to them. As a result, there have been no disruptions. Children do not go missing from their families and there have been no safeguarding incidents since the formation of the agency.

Prospective adopters are generally well prepared to understand the potential impact that abuse and neglect has on children. They understand the effects of loss and attachment, and the impact of historical abuse and trauma on children's behaviour. Therefore, adopters are able to respond to the needs of their children in a way that promotes positive

attachments. The training helps them to be aware of risks associated with contemporary living, such as social networking.

Adoption panel members are proactive in raising the implications of matters such as foetal alcohol syndrome, and check that adopters understand the impact of historical abuse.

Adopters are aware of their right to make a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the actions taken by the agency. The agency has received three complaints since the formation of the agency. These complaints were taken seriously, and thorough investigations undertaken.

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

Many of the challenges that were inherited from the local authority have persisted. Staff sickness has meant delays have continued in assessments of prospective adopters and in the support offered to adopters and children. Challenges remain in the accuracy of record-keeping. The electronic recording system is not being used effectively. This raises significant challenges for managers in getting consistent and accurate information.

There have been significant changes in the management of the agency since it has been in operation. It is only in recent months that the agency has been fully staffed at management level. Current managers are ambitious to solve the difficulties and are fully aware of the challenges facing the service. Leaders and managers have a variety of monitoring systems to identify strengths, shortfalls and areas for development, but have yet to embed these to achieve sustained improvements.

Social workers have not received regular supervision and the number of staff accessing the agency's training has been inconsistent. Some members of staff have not received any recent meaningful training from the agency to enable them to effectively fulfil their role. Despite this, the staff team are passionate about achieving the best possible outcomes for children and adoptive families. Their personal commitment and integrity to practice honestly is clear. One social worker commented, 'We would have collapsed without our experience, knowledge and pulling together. We are committed to our children and our adopters.'

Although staff morale has been low, workers report that, in recent months, support from senior managers has begun to address issues concerning them. Managers have recognised the high level of work placed on social workers and have acted to reallocate and reduce caseloads. The new team manager has started to develop a programme of monthly supervision.

The adoption panel is effective and promotes safe, secure and stable placements. It effectively carries out its quality assurance function and promotes thorough assessments. The agency decision-maker makes well-considered decisions in a timely way. Adoption panel members have been recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds and experience. However, new members have not been effectively inducted or trained in their role and panel members' appraisals are outstanding. Furthermore, there has not been the opportunity to attend a joint training day with adoption staff at least annually.

Managers and staff have developed good working relationships with other professionals

and work well with others to help improve the service to children and their families. The agency has developed a long-standing effective relationship with the regional consortium that will become the regional adoption agency. Managers are actively working with care management staff to improve the quality of children's permanence reports.

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: 1264707

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