

Sandwell Children's Trust Adoption

Sandwell Children's Trust

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, P O 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. Sandwell Children's Trust Adoption is owned by Sandwell Children's Trust, which is a private limited company.

Since 1 April 2019, the agency joined a regional adoption agency. Most of the agency's adoption services are undertaken by the regional adoption agency. These services include the recruitment and assessment of adopters, adoption panel, family finding, post-adoption support, and life-story work. Other elements of the adoption work are undertaken within the children's social care teams from Sandwell Children's Trust, such as completing the child permanence reports and later-life letters.

Since the last inspection, the agency has placed 123 children with adoptive families.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 December 2022

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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

Date of previous inspection: 8 January 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Recent inspection history

Inspection date	Inspection type	Inspection judgement
08/01/2019	Full	Requires improvement to be good

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Children build positive relationships with adopters. Adopters have the skills to support children well, form strong emotional attachments to children, and help them to build a sense of their identity. Adopters are conscientious about children's individuality and keen to promote this. Children achieve a sense of permanence and stability with their adopters.

Children who have communication challenges are placed with adopters who understand their needs and vulnerabilities. Adopters are sensitive to children's needs and provide individualised care. As a result, children can express their views and feelings to skilled adopters.

The agency progresses early permanence for children when adoption is identified as a part of a child's care plan. The agency works closely with the regional adoption agency and the children's social work teams to progress early permanence, for example, through the fostering to adopt pathway. As a result, the number of children placed in fostering to adopt placements has increased. This means that children are being placed with prospective adopters sooner.

Children have access to a range of social and educational opportunities. The agency, through its links with the virtual school, keeps track of children's attainment, achievements and progress. When needed, additional support is provided to children without delay. This ensures that children's educational progress does not drift, and the support promotes children's learning.

Children's health needs are considered from an early stage. Adopters are provided with information about children's health needs and have access to further consultations with the medical adviser and wider network of specialist health professionals should this be required. Children and adopters make use of the therapeutic support provided by the regional adoption agency. This support is provided at any point in the child's adoption journey and is also accessed by adopters and adopted children as part of the post-adoption support service.

When adopters make initial enquires to the regional adoption agency, they are provided with a prompt response and are sent clear, comprehensive information about the adoption process. The prospective adopter's assessment reports are based on a clear understanding of the adopter's knowledge and skills, and their ability to meet the needs of children. Adopters are provided with information about children, which helps them to form an understanding of the child's history and journey. As a result, children are suitably matched with adopters.

Children are provided with life-story work and books as well as later-life letters, which are mostly child focused. Inspectors saw some good examples of life-story books and later-life letters, which were personalised, and creatively and sensitively

put together. However, this is not consistently applied and for some children, their life-story books or later-life letters are not individualised. In addition, a small number of children have not received their later-life letters in a timely way. This is despite the agency undertaking training with children's social workers about this area of practice.

Children are introduced to adopters in a planned and sensitive way. When introductions take place between children and adopters, these are managed well. Adopters are supported to develop strategies to help manage children's feelings and build positive relationships. On occasions, there have been delays in the introduction process for some children to their prospective adopters. This has led to some adopters feeling anxious and they have not always understood the reasons for the delay.

Overall, prospective adopters feel that the assessment and training process is sensitive and responsive to their individual needs. However, some adopters said that they did not feel that they were treated with dignity and respect. A small number of adopters felt that the assessment and training process was judgemental and that they were spoken down to. This has led to those adopters feeling that their experience of some aspects of the adoption process has not been satisfactory.

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

The training of adopters helps them to understand childhood trauma and learn the approach of therapeutic parenting. This ensures that children are placed with adopters who are sensitive to their needs.

Adopters are helped to understand the risks associated with children's past adverse experiences. This helps adopters to understand the impact of childhood trauma and what this may mean in terms of support for children in later life.

Children's social workers work collaboratively with the regional adoption agency to ensure that children and adopters, once matched and placed, are supported well. As a result, there have been no disruptions for children who have been placed by the agency.

Staff in the agency are clear about child protection processes. There have been no safeguarding concerns raised by the agency about children while in the care of adopters during this inspection period.

The adoption panel offers a rigorous quality assurance function. This helps to promote safe, secure and stable placements. The adoption panel helps the agency to raise its standards in ensuring that adopters are suitably approved, and children are matched well to adopters.

The agency staff are receiving a wide range of training, which includes safeguarding training, childhood trauma and exploitation, as well learning from serious case reviews. This helps staff to keep up to date with their knowledge and skills.

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

The agency has developed a governance structure that enables leaders to maintain some good oversight of the delivery of the adoption service provided by the regional adoption agency. This has helped the agency to promote discussions with prospective adopters around early permanence during their assessment. However, the agency does not have a robust system that enables it to have oversight of and gain feedback from adopters of their experience of the adoption process from beginning to end. This means that the agency does not fully understand the reasons why some adopters reported to inspectors elements of dissatisfaction with their overall experience of the assessment process.

The agency does not have an effective system to seek and capture feedback from children. This means that children's views are not used to help the agency to improve its service.

Adopters and children are provided with information about the complaints process. When there has been a complaint, the investigation is thorough. The agency implements learning from complaints and acts to further improve the service. However, some adopters informed inspectors that they do not feel confident to raise complaints due to the worry about the impact that this may have on the outcome of their adoption assessment. This means that some adopters do not feel able to share information that can help the agency to improve its service.

A small team of social workers has been recently created to progress plans for children at the point of a placement order being made. This has helped children to be matched to prospective adopters more quickly. However, the quality of children's permanence reports and the adoption support plans are inconsistent. In addition, there have been delays in the submission of the adoption application order in a small number of cases. This is due to issues such as children's social workers not completing court paperwork correctly and in one case, when a social worker left the agency, the adopter's completed paperwork could not be located. This has led to delays in the adoption process for these families.

The panel chair and the agency decision-maker offer well-informed advice following panel. However, there is not a current mechanism in place that tracks and monitors the impact of panel's and agency decision-maker's advice. For example, the panel and the agency decision-maker gave advice on learning reviews for two children to understand why early permanence was not considered sooner. In another example, advice in relation to adopters being offered additional training was given. However, the advice is not always followed, which limits the effectiveness of it and the learning that could be taken from this advice.

There have been challenges with staffing in the children's social work teams and social workers in the regional adoption agency's assessment team. Although staff retention is now improving, there has been some impact on adopters' and children's experience of the adoption process. For example, some adopters told inspectors that delays in progressing their adoption have been as a result of changes to staff and tasks drifting.

The agency's staff are suitably vetted, and they receive regular, good-quality supervision. They also have an annual appraisal. This good support promotes staff development.

The agency works proactively with partner organisations. They build effective working relationships with the courts, legal team, virtual school and medical advisers to develop positive outcomes for children.

The panel members are recruited from a range of experience, skills and diverse backgrounds. Panel members are recruited safely. The panel chair and members have the necessary knowledge to support the agency to make effective child-centred decisions. Overall, adopters report that they have a positive experience when they attend panel.

The agency has an informative and helpful statement of purpose and children's guide, which set out the ethos and objectives of the agency. The children's guide provides relevant information to children about the service, how to make a complaint, and how to contact the children's commissioner.

The culture of the agency is characterised by high expectations and aspirations for all children. This is demonstrated in their desire to achieve permanence for children and stability in placements.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that they take feedback and consider the wishes, feelings, and views of children to help them improve their service. (NMS 1.6) This was raised at the last inspection and is restated.
- The registered person should ensure that life story books are personalised to each and every child consistently. (NMS 2.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the later-life letter is individual and personalised to each child and that the prospective adopters receive the letter within 10 working days of the adoption ceremony. (NMS 2.8) This was raised at the last inspection and is restated.
- The registered person should ensure that children are introduced to prospective adopters in a timely way that is child focused and without delay. (NMS 13.10)
- The registered person should ensure that the training and assessment of prospective adopters are non-judgemental and based on anti-discriminatory practice. (NMS 10.8)
- The registered person should ensure that it seeks feedback from adopters about the experience of the adoption process from beginning to end and that the agency implements any learning from this. (NMS 15.6)
- The registered person should ensure that it has a system in place to track and monitor the advice from the panel chair and the agency decision-maker, and that this system allows them to monitor how the advice is being actioned. If the advice is not actioned, the impact of this on children and prospective adopters should be clearly considered and recorded, as should the rationale for this. (NMS 17.10)
- The registered person should ensure that adopters feel confident in using the complaints process at any point in the adoption process and that they seek to understand why some adopters do not feel that they can make a complaint without any anxieties. (NMS 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that it works with the children's social work teams to ensure that there is a consistent, good overview of the quality assuring of child permanency reports, adoption support plans and court paperwork to avoid any delay to the adoption process. (NMS 27.2)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people, 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

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