

Adoption Matters

Adoption Matters

14 Liverpool Road, Chester CH2 1AE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Adoption Matters is an independent specialist voluntary adoption agency (VAA) and registered children's charity. It operates in the north-west, north-east, Yorkshire, Humberside, Staffordshire and Shropshire. The agency has offices in these geographical locations, with its head office being in Chester. The agency undertakes a range of adoption services. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval and support of adoptive parents. The agency also provides a range of adoption support services, including birth records counselling for adopted adults and intermediary work for those wishing to contact their birth family. The agency works collaboratively with another voluntary adoption agency to provide a concurrent planning service.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2022, the agency approved 92 adoptive families and placed 85 children for adoption. In the same period, 79 children placed with adoptive families were made the subject of an adoption order.

The current manager has managed the service since March 2018, with the responsible individual/chief executive officer (CEO) being in post since January 2022.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 January 2023

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

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: 17 October 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Prospective adoption applicants feel very welcomed by the agency. The introduction of dedicated enquiry staff is helping to ensure that there is a positive and consistent response to those making telephone enquiries. The agency's website also contains clear and helpful information, including personal accounts from adopters about their experiences and potential profiles of children who are likely to be placed for adoption through the agency. The agency's commitment to inclusivity is also evident, ensuring that potential applicants are confident to proceed to the next step with the agency.

Highly skilled and experienced social workers prepare and assess adoption applicants to understand the impact of a child's early life experiences and to prepare them for the parenting task ahead. Assessment reports are of exceptionally high quality, containing detailed social work analysis. When complexities do arise, these are explored thoroughly, and supportive strategies considered. If the agency feels that it is unable to proceed further with an assessment, the reasons are clearly explained to applicants, and they are made aware of the options available to them.

The agency is dynamic and is quick to learn from what has gone well and from things that have gone less well, such as a placement disruption. The agency has a comprehensive review system for any disruptions, helping to identify any patterns or trends to aid learning for the future. Additional support is also available for adopters and for the staff involved, appreciating the potential impact on their emotional well-being.

Adopters said that they feel exceptionally well supported. They value the individual relationships they have with staff and with the agency. Adopters spoken to throughout this inspection and those who responded to the Ofsted point-in-time surveys all reported a positive working relationship and connection to the agency. Examples of their comments include:

- 'Our social worker is exceptional, and we have felt extremely supported during a very intense process.'
- 'From the start to the finish, our social worker went above and beyond for us.'
- 'Everyone is thorough and professional, but with a personal touch.'
- 'Our experience has been faultless. Everyone from Adoption Matters has been outstanding.'

Adopters are enabled to establish positive relationships with staff, as the staff team is stable and consistent. Social workers are very experienced adoption practitioners, but they are not complacent, being open to new ideas and initiatives.

The agency works closely with local authorities, so that it is aware of their current needs. However, it prides itself in being able to successfully place children with

complex needs and those that need to grow up alongside a brother or sister. The recruitment of adopters is appropriately targeted to meet this need.

Although generally children are pre-school at the time of their placement for adoption, their views and feelings are considered and understood through observation and play. Children are also helped to build trusted relationships with their adoptive parents, through sensory and therapeutic support provided by the agency. Innovative work is also completed with existing children in the adoptive family, as the agency employs support workers to spend quality time with each child individually. This ensures that the child's views and feelings are clearly understood and taken into consideration. This support continues throughout the adoption process.

Access to adoption support is impressive. The agency has a specialist adoption support service, which is proactive in ensuring that the right support is available when it is needed. The service offers a range of support initiatives, from signposting to other, more appropriate, supporting agencies and attending webinars, to more intensive packages of sensory processing support, delivered by occupational therapists, and individualised therapeutic parenting support. The service has a range of skilled workers to ensure that children's different needs can be met. Adopters are exceptionally positive about this support. One adopter said, '[Name of therapist]'s expertise and professionalism has changed our lives and we will be forever grateful to them.'

A range of support groups are available for both adoptive parents and children. This allows participants to meet with others who are in a similar position to themselves. Children spoke to the inspectors about enjoying a music group, which has helped them make friends, understand other perspectives and gain in confidence. Informal family events also contribute to family support. In addition, the agency recently hosted a number of well-attended celebration events, for those children who had been adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, wanting to ensure that families were able to celebrate this significant milestone.

Adopters are committed to maintaining children's identity. Children maintain contact with their birth families, including brothers and sisters and those who have been important to them, such as former foster carers. The agency has produced a short video recording of adopters talking about their experiences of promoting direct contact with birth families, which is shown to applicants during preparation training. This informative video highlights the importance of supporting children's identity and helps encourage prospective adopters to consider this early in their adoption journey.

Adopted adults choosing to access their birth records report a swift and professional response. This helps to prepare them emotionally for the information that they receive. Similarly, intermediary services are of a high standard. Social workers are sensitive to the needs of the service users and manage the progression of the work appropriately. Social workers have managed some complex cases, such as the death

of a birth family member, in a professional and compassionate way. Social workers are highly skilled in this complex area of adoption practice.

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

Prospective adopters are very well prepared to understand the impact of a child's early life experiences on their emotional well-being and development. This begins from the first contact with the agency and is built on during preparation training and assessment. Assessments explore potential risk factors but the agency is not risk-averse. Emerging issues are creatively managed to promote positive outcomes and minimise the impact on children and families. Adoptive parents understand the importance of therapeutic parenting, to ensure that their child can develop attachments and is ultimately successfully adopted.

Safeguarding systems are robust. When incidents do occur, they are appropriately notified to managers and social workers, who follow clear processes and procedures. Referrals are made to safeguarding partners in a timely and appropriate way. There is a whole-organisational approach to safeguarding, where all staff, including trustees and administration staff, receive training, so matters are dealt with quickly and efficiently. The threshold for notifications to Ofsted is appropriate, allowing the regulator to monitor the agency's actions when a serious incident has occurred.

Additional systems have been put in place to improve safeguarding practice, such as disseminating learning from serious case reviews. The agency is quick to respond to such learning and change its practice to introduce additional safeguards. It has recently introduced unannounced visits to families and keeps in touch with referees throughout the adoption journey, because of such learning. These additional safeguards help ensure the welfare of children.

In addition to regular safeguarding training, staff benefit from attending training specific to the safeguarding needs of adopted children, such as around self-harm and online safety. Practice forums are also used effectively to share learning across the agency.

There is a strong emphasis on keeping children safe throughout the adoption journey. Adoption support staff are acutely aware of their safeguarding responsibilities. The high-quality support that adopters and children receive helps them and those involved with the family, such as teachers, understand children's presenting behaviours and how best to respond therapeutically to these.

The agency has a strong safer recruitment process for staff, preventing unsuitable adults from being allowed to work with children. However, in one recruitment file considered during this inspection, further curiosity would have highlighted that a reference had not been sought from an individual's last employer, although this omission was quickly rectified during this inspection. Furthermore, panel members' files do not always contain all the required documentation.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers are ambitious and inspirational. The recent change of CEO has had a positive impact, with her transition into the post being well planned and seamless. Despite being an existing employee of the agency, she was not familiar with all parts of the service, but she has worked tirelessly to familiarise herself with the whole organisation and is visible and approachable in her new role. Staff reported that communication is strong and that they feel listened to.

The organisation is ambitious and there is a strong appetite for continued innovation to ensure that the agency continues to meet the needs of the children waiting for adoptive families. Trustees and senior leaders are willing to explore new ideas and initiatives to keep abreast of changes in the adoption sector. The agency is currently working with local authorities to look at early permanence options for children.

Despite the agency growing considerably since the last inspection, staff working across the whole agency share the same ethos and values. They said that they feel very connected to Adoption Matters.

Staff across all roles in the organisation are overwhelmingly positive about working for the agency. They reported feeling valued, listened to and respected. Staff reported that communication is a strength, and a recent drive to improve staff well-being has been very well received. This is making a positive difference to the emotional health and well-being of staff. Caseloads are manageable and allow staff to ensure that their work is of a high quality. The staff team is passionate, committed and child-centred. Staff benefit from regular, high-quality supervision and training, as well as peer reflection time to consolidate their learning and enhance their practice.

The agency is a learning organisation, using feedback and challenge to drive forward improvement. The recent introduction of the practice development manager ensures that there is always a focus on internal development. Regular consultation with service users is used to review the quality of services provided. Routine internal audits also ensure that the agency continues to operate at the high standard it sets for itself.

Effective management has ensured that the recommendations from previous inspections have been used to improve the service further. The organisation's lead for complaints has now streamlined all policies and procedures, and clear records are maintained, and complaint timescales adhered to, if a complaint is received. Refresher training has also been provided to staff.

The agency has a large central list of adoption panel members, bringing a range of both professional and personal experience of adoption. There are three panel chairs, operating in different venues, as well as virtually, ensuring easy access for adoptive applicants. Panel members benefit from comprehensive legal and medical advice. Panel minutes demonstrate a thorough exploration of issues evident in the reports presented. Furthermore, high-quality minutes assist the agency decision-maker to

reach well-considered decisions in a timely way. The best interests of children are always at the forefront of any decision-making. Panel members benefit from regular training opportunities and an annual performance appraisal. However, the agency has recently introduced group appraisal, rather than individual ones, which does not allow for individual discussions about performance or suggested areas for development.

The agency has excellent working relationships with a number of regional adoption agencies, working in partnership with them, as well as with other voluntary adoption agencies. The concurrent planning partnership operated with another agency is held in high regard and the agency has shared learning from this project with local authorities. Senior managers are strategically involved in the national adoption arena, influencing adoption practice and being at the forefront of developments in adoption practice.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the agency can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of staff, volunteers and persons on the central list. Ensure that all personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 61, paragraph 21.2)
- The registered person should ensure that all panel members have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 71, paragraph 24.6)

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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