

Adoption West

Wiltshire Council

Floor 2, Old County Hall, Bythesea Road, Trowbridge, Wiltshire BA14 8JN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

The agency's statement of purpose states that the agency is a Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) commissioned to deliver adoption services by six local authorities. These are Bath and North-East Somerset, Bristol, Gloucestershire, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

The agency is a company limited by guarantee and is registered with Ofsted as a voluntary adoption agency. Service delivery is defined by a contract that sets out specific performance measures and the reporting requirements of the RAA. The local authorities make up the controlling committee of company members with ultimate responsibility for organisational performance and appointment and dismissal of directors.

The service operates from three hub premises in Wiltshire, Bristol and Gloucestershire. However, the teams of recruitment, assessment, family finding and support staff are now centralised. The panel is made up of a single central list and operates three panels with three chairs, linked to the three hub offices.

The agency was first registered with Ofsted in March 2019. The registered manager has been in post since September 2018 and is suitably qualified and experienced.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 August 2024

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 good

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

Date of previous inspection: 24 January 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Prospective adopters are welcomed into this agency and provided with clear information about the realities of choosing to adopt. This helps them to make an informed decision. Adopters repeatedly report on the high quality of their preparation training and the support of their assessing social worker to understand how trauma and abuse may affect their child.

The quality of prospective adopters' assessments is good. Leaders and managers have ensured that learning from incidents has been applied to future assessments and this was reflected in the reports sampled.

Most children live in loving, supportive and stable families with adoptive parents who advocate strongly on their behalf. They are making good progress from their starting points. Disruption rates in this agency are very low, reflective of the good quality linking of children with prospective adopters.

Family finders and assessing social workers have strong working relationships. This ensures that matches are identified in a timely way. Family finders advocate strongly when the search needs to be broader than within the agency to reduce any potential delay for children where possible.

A strength of the agency is the work around early permanence, and this has been externally recognised, achieving an early permanence quality mark. Adopters are well prepared and understanding of the associated risks and complexities when considering an early permanence placement.

The support offer to birth family members has strengthened since the previous inspection in January 2022. There is an established support group available offering peer support as well as good ongoing support to help children maintain meaningful links with their birth families.

The agency social workers are committed and passionate about their work and achieving the best possible outcomes for the children they work for, often cited by adopters as going 'above and beyond'. However, feedback from adopters is mixed. A small number of adopters have experienced too many changes in social workers and this leads to inconsistencies in the support they receive.

The agency demonstrates creative and innovative practice. It is supporting new peer-to-peer support groups establishing across the region. This means more families will have access to others with a shared experience of adoption.

The agency values and acts on feedback from adopters and their children. It has recently put arrangements in place to gather the feedback of children and young people, which is yet to be evaluated. It has set up a pilot youth group with a small

group of children and is looking to evaluate this shortly, with a view to considering how this could evolve to have a wider reach.

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

The agency's approach to safeguarding is generally effective. Social workers have effective relationships with local authority safeguarding partners to promote the welfare of children. The inspectors saw an example in which the agency worked well with the local authority to act on information received and ensure a child was protected.

While the vast majority of children are safeguarded by the agency's social work practice, this is not always the case. There was an example found where leaders and managers did not investigate a safeguarding concern with enough rigour to fully understand the risk posed and assure themselves that this could be mitigated. Social workers did not apply sufficient professional curiosity and there was an overreliance on the self-reporting by the adopter. The agency missed opportunities for the case to be reconsidered by a panel, which could have offered further scrutiny of the risk and the agency's assessment of the additional information gathered. After being raised by inspectors, the agency took action to explore the shortfalls identified.

The support offered to families post-adoption is variable. Many adopters are receiving timely and effective support and intervention when in crisis. Some adopters reported not feeling supported and left struggling. Leaders and managers have recognised these adopters' experiences. There are plans to change the way that support is provided in line with the agency's adoption support strategy. The agency is committed to intervening if families feel they are in crisis.

Adopters have benefited from further bespoke training, such as sessions on education matters with virtual school officers, while others have attended training on non-violent resistance funded through the adoption and special guardianship support fund.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency board meets regularly and has good oversight of the function of the agency, including the agency's finances. The six local authorities work well together, although there are still some differences in the support offer to adopters across the region. There is a comprehensive business plan that clearly demonstrates how the agency proposes to develop in the future.

Complaints are taken seriously and investigated effectively. Where there has been a delay, there is a clear rationale and the complainant informed of the new timescales. Leaders and managers have reflected on their complaints practice and developed new processes with partner agencies for further clarity.

The function of the adoption panel is effective with suitably experienced and qualified chairs, and this is providing an effective quality monitoring function, for example grading the quality of reports. Panels are quorate and make timely and well-informed recommendations to the agency decision-maker. Minutes are comprehensibly recorded and clearly evidence how decisions are made.

Staffing and retention continue to be a challenge for the agency, as is reflected nationally, and they are operating with a relatively new and inexperienced workforce. This has an impact on service delivery as it takes time to induct new workers. Leaders and managers continue to raise these challenges with the board members. They are proactive in trying to combat these issues in a competitive market.

Staff consistently report feeling supported by leaders and managers. However, supervision records rarely demonstrate reflective practice, or detailed discussions or agreed actions. Leaders and managers have recognised this in their own audit and are working to try and rectify the issue.

Developing the agency's cultural competencies is on the agenda for leaders and managers. The agency recognises that they are at the beginning of this journey, with some staff having recently attended further training and looking at using new tools to support with this.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered provider and the manager shall prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption—</p> <p>by the agency; or</p> <p>by another adoption agency but with prospective adopters approved by the agency as suitable to be adoptive parents in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983(1); and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) shall provide in particular for—</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures that may be necessary to protect children placed with prospective adopters following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, 10.1(a)(b) and 2(f)).</p> <p>In particular, the registered provider and manager should update the existing policy to ensure there is a clear process for safeguarding children from abuse and neglect who are placed for adoption. Leaders and managers should have clear and robust practices in place for overseeing investigations, ensuring that they are thorough and seek to obtain information from all parties to ascertain the details and assess the potential risk. Also, ensure that learning from these instances is applied to future assessments.</p>	<p>14 October 2024</p>

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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that prospective adopters are prepared and supported to promote the child's social and emotional development, and to understand and promote the child's culture, heritage and identity, to enable the child to develop emotional resilience and positive self-esteem. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 13, paragraph 2.3)
- The registered person should ensure that they have in place the support to meet the evolving and complex needs of children and their families. This support should be informed by both the children and carers wishes and feelings and must prioritise their welfare and safety. The registered person should build upon their existing plans to develop the systems and processes for families accessing adoption support. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 45, paragraph 15.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the written record of supervision includes detailed discussion, reflection of practice and clear actions and provides management oversight on the case files. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 71, paragraph 24.5)

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

Unique reference number: 2499314

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Inspectors

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