

After Adoption - Merseyside

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Mandy Williams
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Registered person After Adoption
Registered manager Sue Kelly
Responsible individual Kathleen Batt
Date of last inspection 25/10/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

After Adoption is an independent registered charity established in 1990 to offer support, advice and counselling to anyone whose lives are affected by adoption. The head office is based in Manchester and is registered as a voluntary adoption agency. It provides a national service with several branches across the country. This branch of the agency in Liverpool, which was formally registered in June 2006, provides adoption support services to adoptive families, adopted adults and birth relatives. Although the agency does recruit, assess and approve adoptive parents, these functions are not performed at this branch office. The branch has several service level agreements with local authorities, and contracts cover a range of services. For example independent support to birth parents who are currently involved in court proceedings and the administration of letterbox arrangements.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This is an effective branch of a voluntary adoption agency. It has some outstanding features. The agency has positive relationships with commissioners and service users and works well in partnership with them. Strategic leadership is strong and senior managers respond quickly to regional and national changes to the delivery of adoption services. The agency is flexible and responsive to the needs of local authorities and to those affected by adoption.

It provides a prompt service following referral and service users are clear about the intended outcome of their involvement. The agency measures the success of their intervention and uses the information to shape the delivery of future support provided.

The service seeks the feedback of service users and professionals to help inform its future development. Constructive dialogue ensures that the agency continues to offer a service that is able to meet demand.

Staff have an in-depth understanding of adoption related issues. This enables them to provide very good quality support to adoptive families. Many say that without this support and understanding they would have been unable to continue with the demands of parenting.

Similarly, staff provide an informed and supportive service to birth parents. They demonstrate empathy and successfully engage with them. This enables them to work effectively with birth parents so that they can move on in their own lives but also make the most of contact opportunities and celebrate the successes of their children.

Shortfalls identified at this inspection relate to the safe recruitment of staff and management monitoring and oversight.

Areas of improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to individuals employed to work for the purposes of the agency. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 14 (3), Schedule 2)	01/03/2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendation(s):

Ensure that the agency has a clear statement of purpose; specifically that this reflects the actual delivery of services from this branch (NMS 18.1)

Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies; specifically that case records include management decisions and oversight and the completion of regular file audits. (NMS 25.2)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, service users

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

All those spoken to during the inspection spoke positively about the service they receive from this branch. In particular, adoptive parents speak very positively about the difference that SafeBase has made to their understanding and parenting. SafeBase is a therapeutic parenting support programme designed specifically for adoptive families. It helps by providing practical strategies, as well as by putting attachment and child development into context for adoptive families. One adoptive parent said, 'This was invaluable. It really helped us to re-frame and understand our child's behaviours.' Another commented, 'I would go so far to say that it prevented a placement disruption.'

Similarly, staff provide valuable support and training in schools. This has made a big difference to some young people who were struggling to fit in at school. Their teachers now have a better understanding of their needs and can interact with them more effectively. As a result, young people and their families have become less anxious and young people are able to make the most of their educational opportunities.

Work with adopted adults and their birth relatives largely results in positive outcomes. This is undertaken sensitively and at the service users pace. This has resulted in successful re-union for some.

The agency provides independent support to birth parents. The service users and the commissioning local authorities value this service. Comments from birth parents include, 'Staff are really helpful', 'I feel that I can telephone them anytime', 'They are brilliant and always there when you need them' and 'They are my life-line.' Support groups for birth parents also enable service users to gain peer support within a safe environment. Supportive peer friendships have been formed as a result.

Children and young people who attend After Adoption events speak positively about their experiences. Regular 'TALKadoption' groups offer young people the opportunity to express their feelings and share their experiences with others from similar backgrounds. As a result, young people realise that they are not alone. They have also grown in confidence and made new friends. The agency has also recently introduced therapeutic short break camps, currently funded by the adoption support fund. Children and young people can enjoy a weekend away; while their parents

enjoy a break. Staffing ratios are high and staff have a good understanding of young people's needs. Demand for places is high and feedback positive, from both young people and their families. The agency appreciated the need for such a resource and responded to this.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Those wishing to access a service from this branch receive a prompt, welcoming and person-centred response. Sometimes service users contact the agency directly or a commissioning local authority may refer them. In both situations, a worker is quickly allocated and delay is minimal. Those using the service say they were given clear information at the outset about the aims and objectives of the agency's involvement.

Staff in the agency are skilled at dealing with difficult issues sensitively. They demonstrate an up-to-date knowledge of adoption issues and their implications. Service users comment on the high level of support they have received during their involvement with the agency. Some adoptive families say that they would have struggled to carry on without the support they have received.

Work with birth parents is of high quality. Staff go the extra mile in order to engage them. They offer a range of options to meet with them and effectively gain their trust. For example, one intervention began with a walk in the park before the service user was able to engage with the support being offered. Similarly, staff operate an effective letterbox scheme on behalf of one large local authority. This involves the management of over 300 letterbox exchanges. Staff who operate this demonstrate sensitivity and an understanding of the feelings of all parties involved. They spend time with birth family members in order for the content of the exchange to be meaningful and child friendly.

The agency works effectively with those commissioning its services. Written contracts are in place and feedback is provided to commissioners routinely, so they are aware of the extent of the agency's involvement. One commissioner commented, 'I do feel that the agency works in partnership with us and they are responsive to our needs'. There is regular communication regarding any difficulties and flexibility, ensuring that commissioners receive a value for money service. This positive working relationship ensures the effective delivery of services.

Adopted adults are enabled to understand the circumstances around their adoption and receive information on the possible implications of contacting their birth relatives. Hence, they make informed decisions about tracing and contacting their relatives.

The service seeks regular feedback from service users on the effectiveness of its services. They express a high level of satisfaction with the service that they have received. Comments include: 'I can't express how valuable this help has been to me';

'staff understood my position and acted thoroughly and appropriately'; 'staff deal with an emotive subject sensitively'; and, 'they supported me every step of the way.'

Adoptive parents, children and young people, as well as birth family members and those adopted are regularly consulted about service delivery. They play a significant part in shaping the future development of service.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

All staff receive training in safeguarding, which includes an emphasis on current issues, such as child sexual exploitation. Consequently, they develop their knowledge and ensure that safe practice effectively safeguards children and adults. Safeguarding procedures are clear and include the actions to take in the event of the disclosure of historic abuse. The agency's safeguarding lead ensures the satisfactory outcome of any concerns or referrals to other safeguarding bodies. Staff refer onto other agencies in a timely manner and records demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding thresholds. Commissioners are positive about the safeguarding ethos of the agency. The safety of children and young people is at the forefront of decisions made.

All service users receive a complaints information leaflet at the start of the service. Children and young people also receive this information as part of the children's guide to adoption support. This also provides details about other independent agencies that offer support. Although, only a very small number of complaints have been received at this branch, records demonstrate that they have been thoroughly investigated. The agency is keen to receive feedback from any dissatisfied service user, and they learn from this.

Service users report that they feel safe in their dealings with the agency. They believe that their confidentiality is respected but feel safe to share their experiences within the safety of group discussion. Clear parameters are set at the onset of group activities and participants informed about the duty of staff to take action if they are concerned about information that is disclosed within this.

Work undertaken with adult service users, such as birth parents is carried out safely. A risk assessment informs the decision about how best to contact an individual and the most appropriate venue to meet with them. However, additional details regarding the views of other professionals contacted is not always clearly documented. Similarly, it is not always clear if there has been managerial oversight to the completed assessment.

Currently, the agency's recruitment procedure for staff is not sufficiently robust. While applicants are interviewed and referees sought, insufficient exploration takes place into the reasons why individuals who have previously worked with children or vulnerable adults have left their previous employment. In addition, on one recruitment file considered as part of this inspection, a reference was not sought

from the individual's last employer. The current processes do not comply with safer recruitment practice or give the necessary assurances about the suitability of all those in employment.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has strong and ambitious leadership. Senior managers are actively involved in national and regional forums. Their views help shape the future of adoption practice. This also allows the agency to respond quickly to changes and re-design their service to meet the demands of commissioning local authorities.

The branch manager is qualified and experienced. Two additional managers with particular specialisms support her. Staff feel well supported and valued. They feel that caseloads are manageable. Senior managers are visible within the organisation and staff feel that their views are influential. Staff are positive about training opportunities available to them. Specific training relating to the delivery of adoption support services, such as intermediary services or SafeBase is particularly valued. Staff receive supervision on a regular basis and supervision records illustrate that case discussion is regular. However, this casework discussion and decision making is not recorded on the service users' record. This makes it difficult for other staff to pick up any issues in the absence of the immediate staff involved and it is unclear where some decision making has been made.

Service users' records are of a good quality, give a picture of the work that has been undertaken and are stored securely. Staff have addressed the recommendation made at the last inspection of this branch in October 2012, regarding the legibility of records. No concerns were evident in this regard, at this inspection. The auditing of casework files is however weak. These are not used effectively to identify missing or incomplete information.

The agency has a comprehensive website and invites those affected by adoption to access their support. A number of the agency's policies and procedures are also available on their website. This enables easy access by service users and commissioners. The agency has two children's guides that are user-friendly and designed to meet the needs of children of different ages. The agency has a Statement of Purpose, which is also accessible on their website. This describes the range of services undertaken nationally. However, a change in the delivery of services has resulted in this document not accurately reflecting the services provided by the Merseyside branch.

This branch is located in the city centre, enabling easy access by public transport for the majority of service users. The branch is located in a managed office complex but has secure access. The amount of office space available has increased since the last inspection. There is ample space for staff as well as meetings room facilities and

space for individual meetings with service users. Business continuity plans ensure that the service would be able to continue to operate in the event of a crisis.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.