

After Adoption - North East

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Stephen Smith/Bill Drumm
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Service information

Brief description of the service

After Adoption is national voluntary adoption agency and a registered charity. The headquarters of the organisation is based in Manchester. After Adoption North East is a branch office and is registered as a voluntary adoption agency. The service comprises a service manager and team manager, four adoption social workers, five adoption support workers and two adoption support assistants. This staff team work a mixture of full and part time hours. The team is supported by administrative staff.

This branch does not recruit, assess or approve prospective adopters but undertakes a full range of adoption support services including, birth records counselling and intermediary services, support for birth parents and support to adopted children and their families. It has contracts with a large number of local authorities in the area and handled 449 cases in the 2014-15 year.

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: outstanding

This is an outstanding adoption agency branch. It provides a service that is of impressive quality. The high quality support provided to people affected by adoption is underpinned by an excellent knowledge of adoption. The agency bases its practice on current research and continuing learning and development.

Leadership and management at a strategic level in the organisation is impressive. The agency's senior leadership team is influential and fully engaged with adoption developments at a national level. Learning from current research and policy, as well as

information from the agency's monitoring of its own services is used to develop and operate innovative services.

These services are delivered by a committed, experienced and highly skilled staff team. They work very effectively with service users to identify their needs and desired outcomes and assess their current situation. They combine this excellent understanding with insightful work which improves service users' situations in ways that are wide ranging and often exceed all expectations. One adopter said that the support provided 'transformed my son's life' and another said she 'wouldn't be here and my family wouldn't still be together' without the agency's help. The agency is flexible and responsive based on people's individual situations and strives to ensure that they receive the support, help, guidance or advice that they need. Service users have a significant impact on the development and delivery of the agency's services. For example, young people take part in the delivery of training, have produced a book and help work with other young people affected by adoption.

The branch's service users and other involved parties benefit from its highly effective safeguarding practice. This is underpinned by the agency's impressive understanding of children's needs and the effects of trauma, poor attachment and family dynamics on children's behaviour. This understanding is apparent in structured services provided by the agency including its 'SafeBase' training for adoptive parents. It is also apparent in the individual work with families and people they support. Staff members are vigilant in their work. They promptly identify and report any areas of concern and the agency liaises with local authorities to ensure that these are followed up.

Monitoring of the agency's operation at a national and strategic level is of very high quality. However, the detailed monitoring and supervision of practice, recording and decision making at a case by case level is not as robust as it should be.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency. Specifically, that clear and detailed records of case supervision, monitoring and managers' decisions are retained on service users' files. (NMS 25.2)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: outstanding

This branch of the agency provides a full range of adoption support services to the

whole range of people affected by adoption. The delivery of all these services is characterised by the agency's highly professional, skilled and innovative approach to its work. This means that service users, be they children or adults, receive a service which significantly improves their situation.

Work with birth parents is highly sensitive and empowering. Birthparents feel listened to and able to have some part in the lives of their children who have been adopted. For example one said, her support worker 'has been very good. She's helped me write a letter and I'm just waiting for one coming back'. A birth father who had been marginalised by the adoption process was supported to influence decisions regarding the placement of his second child. This has resulted in the child being placed in the same adoptive family as the older sibling. This extremely positive outcome has left the person feeling empowered and reassured that his birth children will be together. He said that the local authority 'don't see my word as important but when After Adoption speak for me on my behalf they listen'.

People accessing the agency for access to records and intermediary services receive a similarly impressive service. Work is highly sensitive and well managed with the well-being of all parties involved being uppermost. One service user said that work done to help arrange a meeting with her birth mother included advice and guidance about her emotional state. This led to improvements in her other relationships as well excellent progress towards a reunion with her birth mother. She said, 'I can't believe how efficient and helpful they have been. My whole life is much happier'. Another person said the support they received 'explained a lot about me and helped me understand why I'm like I am'.

Direct work to support adoptive families is insightful, skilled and effective. Workers work directly with families, liaise with other professionals and signpost and arrange access to other services. Their high degree of professionalism is delivered with a warmth and understanding that is highly appreciated. Impressive outcomes are achieved, even in the most complex of cases. In one case, work to support a young person and family in crisis, rapidly identified significant events happening in a young person's life that no other professional was aware of. This led to support and action which safeguarded the young person, their emotional wellbeing and the stability of the whole family. Another family described the healing of relationships within the family following work to support an adopted young person to learn more about his background and make contact with birth family members.

It is notable that, in all these cases, work undertaken goes beyond that initially identified as a presenting need. Agency staff use their significant experience, skills and the theoretical and wider knowledge held by the organisation to look further to identify and address underlying issues. For example one person said that agency identified that 'us as adoptive parents needed therapy too as we're suffering from secondary trauma'. This helps ensure that needs are fully met in a long-lasting way.

Service users have a significant involvement in the development and delivery of services. For example, the Talk Adoption service for adopted young people operates with input

from older young people who have been adopted and who may have received direct support from the agency in the past. Young people take part in the training and preparation of prospective and approved adopters in other agency branches. They have also attended adoption conferences and helped develop books and information for adopted young people and older young people help support groups for younger adopted children. This not only helps others but serves to empower and improve the self-esteem of the young people involved.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: outstanding

The agency works very effectively within the commissioning framework used by local authorities in the area. Clear arrangements are in place for people to access the service and the agency. It provides excellent information about the services it provides and ensures that people understand what the agency is able and not able to do for them. The agency works flexibly to meet the needs of local authorities using it and its work is highly appreciated. For example, one local authority commissioner praised the agency's independence and quality of its work and said, 'For children adopted some time ago who are just hitting teenage years, After Adoption is a very valuable resource.'

The branch has a strong focus on providing the highest quality support for those people affected by adoption. National research and the latest developments in the adoption field are used to develop individually focused services. The agency has a clear service strategy for providing support. For example, its Birth Ties service works with birth families, Reunite undertakes access to records and intermediary work and Talk Adoption covers group work, activities and camps with adopted young people. Service provision also includes 'SafeBase' therapeutic parenting course, which is based upon research and a deep understanding of the effects of trauma upon behaviour and parenting styles. It also provides therapeutic support including play and art therapy and direct one to one work with families. Agency workers identify partner services which may be needed and act as a liaison and support for families when dealing with other services.

Impressively, despite this structure, services provided to individuals are seamless and based on their individual situations. As such an initial referral for one type of service often changes or develops into something else. The smooth and sensitive and progression means the service works holistically and highly effectively with service users to support them and improve their lives.

The branch's staff team is highly experienced in adoption. The team comprises people with social work and therapeutic skills who keep abreast with the latest developments in the field of adoption. Team members communicate well with each other and share information between them. This helps bring fresh insight into work being carried out. Research underpins the agency's practice and the agency's senior managers are engaged at a national level in various national bodies relating to adoption. As such they ensure that the agency is able to comment on and discuss new developments.

The expertise, insight and commitment to support people affected by adoption that the agency provides is highly appreciated. When describing the quality of support people said things like 'I can't speak highly enough', the agency made it an 'excellent experience' and 'they've been great – just superb. They understand and they "get it".'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: outstanding

Children and adults who use the agency and those who come into contact with it in the course of its work are safeguarded very effectively. The agency's practice is underpinned by its excellent policy and its operational procedures. These are reflected in practice with staff taking a proactive stance towards safeguarding. Agency workers are vigilant in their practice. They are alert to any possible concerns and ensure these are reported immediately. Staff not only consider the safety of the children they are working with, but also other children who may be at risk of harm. For example, work with a birth parent identified a situation in which an unrelated child might have been at risk and an appropriate referral was made. Commendably, there is a real clarity where concerns are identified which ensures that they are reported without compromise despite the continuation of the support work and relationships.

The agency has a safeguarding lead who monitors all safeguarding concerns. This person monitors the progress of every concern including following up with the relevant local authority or agency regarding action taken. This ensures that any referrals are progressed and appropriate action taken. The agency's trustees regularly monitor safeguarding issues as an additional layer of oversight.

The agency is open to receiving complaints. Where complaints are received they are thoroughly and promptly investigated and appropriate action is taken to address any issues identified. The agency's robust approach is exemplified by its monitoring of 'potential complaints', those situations which it believes could have been subject to a complaint but were not. These are given a similarly high level of consideration for any learning points. As with safeguarding matters, the agency's trustees monitor the complaints received to ensure they are fully investigated.

Adopters being supported by the agency have an excellent understanding of the impact of abuse and trauma on the behaviour of adopted children. This understanding arises from both the direct individual work undertaken with them by the agency staff and from the highly regarded 'SafeBase' therapeutic parenting course the agency developed and provides. This understanding is key in helping to safeguard and protect children's wellbeing and emotional security. One adoptive parent said, 'this was excellent training' and another said the course 'was when we finally understood our situation, what we had been doing wrong and how we needed to parent our child'.

The agency's work with young people ensures they have a voice and an avenue to express any concerns they have. Very good written information is provided to them about the service and who they can contact. Direct work with young people and

children's groups and activities and camps help staff develop trusting relationships with young people which gives them an additional route to raise any concerns. Adopters say they feel listened to and their views are taken seriously.

Work with adult service users is always risk assessed and documented before the service commences to ensure staff and service users are protected from potential harm. For example initial meetings may be held in public places to allow further assessment of risk to be carried out. Clear information is provided to people accessing the service, particularly those requesting access to records and intermediary work. This helps them to appreciate the potential risks involved.

Staff recruitment processes are thorough and ensure, as far as possible, that the agency only employs people who are suitable to work with children and vulnerable adults.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: good

Leadership and management at a strategic level in this agency are excellent. Leaders and managers are ambitious for the service and the outcomes it achieves for people affected by adoption. The agency is influential in policy development and discussions at a national level and uses this expertise and knowledge to inform its locally delivered services. Research underpins the work of the agency and its managers are committed to promoting the very best outcomes for children, young people and adult service users. This commitment is reflected in the branch's staff team. It is an effective team of highly experienced professionals who work well to support those people accessing the service. The staff team work highly flexibly with service users and each other to meet changing needs and to learn from their practice. The staff team receive good levels of training that are appropriate to their individual roles and are keen to develop their knowledge and skills further.

The branch has very good relationships with the local authorities who contract its services. All services provided are carefully monitored by the agency's managers and good feedback is provided to commissioners about the outcomes being achieved. One commissioner described branch as 'open, amenable, keep us well informed and are flexible in the work they do'.

Senior managers and the board of trustees rigorously monitor and quality assure the agency's practice at a strategic level. The agency works hard to evaluate the impact its interventions have on people's lives by measuring people's situation across a range of factors in their lives at the commencement of the service and again after its conclusion. The agency continues to work to refine and develop this further. Strategic monitoring also covers key performance matters, including types of service delivered, timescales, targets, complaints and safeguarding issues. Senior managers and trustees give close oversight to this information and use it to inform the agency's development plan.

Monitoring of service delivery and case supervision and decision making is not as well

developed at an operational level. Recorded evidence of case supervision and managers' decisions on individual case files is weak. In many cases this shortfall is not compensated for by recording in workers' individual supervision files as this is often lacking in sufficient detail. This means that the agency is often unable to demonstrate that workers' practice with service users and the outcomes being achieved are supervised well enough. The agency works with some very vulnerable service users and the type of input and support provided can change as work progresses. The lack of recorded case decisions means that agency managers cannot be certain that the work done being done remains appropriate and well judged.

The branch's premises are accessible and have appropriate facilities including secure storage for records, meeting rooms and privacy. The agency has a suitable plan for business continuity in place in the event of a crisis to minimise any disruption to its operation and service users.

The agency website displays detailed information about the services it provides and how to access it. It also contains the agency's key policies and procedures along with the Statement of Purpose. This means that people are helped to understand what they can expect from the service before deciding whether to approach it for support.

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.