

After Adoption – West Midlands

After Adoption

First Floor West, New Oxford House, 16 Waterloo Street, Birmingham B2 5UG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

After Adoption is a national voluntary adoption agency and a registered charity. The headquarters of the organisation is based in Manchester. After Adoption West Midlands is a branch office. It undertakes a full range of adoption support services, including birth records counselling and intermediary services, support for birth parents and support for adopted children and their families. Although the agency recruits, assesses and approves adoptive parents, these functions are not managed at this office. The office has several service level agreements with local authorities in the area and contracts cover a range of services.

Inspection dates: 9 to 16 May 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
How well children and parents are helped and protected	good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding

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

Date of previous inspection: 13 August 2012

Overall judgement at last inspection: Good

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because

- Post-adoption support is tailored to meet the individual needs of children, adopters and adult service users. As a result, all those using the service receive prompt and effective support.
- Adult service users, especially birth mothers involved with the 'Breaking the cycle' project, receive a high level of individual support and care, which is having a positive impact on their progress and experiences.
- SafeBase gives adoptive parents good insight into their children's behaviour and offers practical strategies to address challenges.
- Regular 'TALKadoption' groups and residential camps offer young people the opportunity to meet and share their experiences with other children who have been adopted.
- The agency has strong and ambitious leadership. Managers deliver an ambitious service to children and adult service users. They know and understand the agency's strengths and weaknesses well and have an excellent understanding of adoption nationally.
- Senior managers continually drive improvement through rigorous strategic monitoring.
- Staff feel well supported by senior managers who are visible and accessible to them.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development

- Managers need to schedule training at different times of the day and week so that training is available and accessible to all adopters.
- Managers need to ensure adopters develop a knowledge and understanding of extremism and radicalisation in order to safeguard children.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure adoptive parents have the skills, knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter. This relates to ensuring training is scheduled so that it is available to all adopters. (NMS 10.9)

- Ensure adoptive parents have the skills, knowledge and practical techniques to manage the issues they are likely to encounter. This relates to adopters' knowledge and understanding of extremism and radicalisation. (NMS 10.9)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Although the agency recruits, assesses and approves adoptive parents, these functions are not managed at this branch office and will be examined during the inspection of the agency's Manchester office.

This branch's main work is post-adoption support. Adopters and birth parents benefit from standards of adoption support that range from good quality to excellent quality'. All speak positively about the service they receive.

Adult service users are receiving high levels of individual support and care, which are having a positive impact on their progress and experiences. This is especially evident in the work with birth mothers involved with the 'Breaking the cycle' project. Staff work in a sensitive way with birth mothers and the work is of a high quality. The project is successful in achieving positive outcomes and facilitates birth mothers to embark on a journey of reflection to take back control of their lives. After completing the course, many birth mothers have gone on to parent subsequent children, complete training and find paid and voluntary work. It is encouraging that, following feedback from the group, the agency is now looking to develop this project for birth fathers. Birth mothers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. One consistent message was, 'I realise I am not alone.' One birth mother told the inspector, 'It made me feel me again.'

The agency provides good support for adopted adults in accessing their records and seeking birth families. All are positive about the support that they receive from staff and the difference this has made to their lives. One adopted adult told the inspector, 'I have had fantastic communication with the agency. They are second to none.' Staff enable adopted adults to understand the circumstances around their adoption and receive information on the possible implications of contacting their birth relatives. As a result, they are able to make informed decisions about tracing and contacting their relatives. Staff work well in partnership with local authorities and adopters to ensure that intermediary work is conducted in a safe and supportive way. One adopter said, 'I found the agency social worker to be a very helpful reassuring presence throughout the process.'

Staff also support birth parents in writing letters for letter-box contact. Local authority social workers welcome this. Social workers feel staff are constant in their support for birth parents, as they help them keep in contact with their children while at the same time helping them to understand the adoption process.

The agency runs a therapeutic parenting SafeBase course that is designed specifically for adoptive families. Adoptive parents speak positively about the difference that SafeBase has made to their understanding and parenting. The course gives them good insight into their children's behaviour and offers practical strategies for addressing these challenges. One referring social worker commented, 'The couple developed a real insight into the impact trauma can have on brain development and took them back to some of the basics they had learnt in preparation groups.' Families talk about using playful songs to help their children cope with transitions in their lives. One adopter said, 'This is the best training I've

ever done. It was a revelation. It gave me real insight into why my children were behaving in the way they were.'

Regular 'TALKadoption' groups and residential camps offer young people the opportunity to meet and share their experiences with other children who have had been adopted. Parents and children benefit greatly from the camps. Young people state that in particular they enjoy the chance to come together and meet others who have shared similar experiences. The agency gathers and evaluates young people's feedback during groups and residential camps to help inform and develop the service. For example, young people have been asked for their opinions to assist the agency in developing bullying information for adopters.

The relationships between social workers, adopters and adopted adults are positive. Those using the services of the agency feel it is accessible. They like that they can speak easily and directly to the people involved. They receive a prompt service following referral and service users are clear about the intended outcome of their involvement.

A wide range of post-adoption training is available for adopters. However, the majority of courses are held during the day and are not easily accessible to those who have working commitments. As a result, not all adopters are able to easily access training that could be of benefit to them and their families.

There is a clear process for complaints, which is known to adopters and children. A complaints information leaflet is available to service users. Children and young people also receive this information as part of the children's guide to adoption support. All complaints are thoroughly investigated and have good independent oversight. Managers learn from complaints that enable them to drive improvement.

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

Children and adults using the service feel safe. They feel staff listen to them and take their concerns seriously. There is a strong and proactive response from all those working with children and vulnerable adults. This helps keep children and vulnerable adults safe and reduces the risk of harm. Staff work with adopters to help them understand the potential impact of abuse on the behaviour of children. Consequently, adopters understand the importance of keeping children safe. Children very rarely go missing. Staff and adopters receive wide-ranging safeguarding training that includes child sexual exploitation. This ensures that they are aware of the risks associated with children self-harming or going missing, and know the action they should take to keep children safe from harm. Although staff receive guidance around radicalisation and extremism, this is not covered in training for adopters. Managers are aware of this and have plans to address this shortfall.

Staff conduct risk assessments prior to any work commencing with adult service users to ensure that all work is carried out safely. Staff have a good understanding of safeguarding thresholds and are proactive in referring on to other agencies in a timely manner. Managers challenge and escalate concerns appropriately when they feel local authorities

are failing to act on safeguarding referrals. The agency has a safeguarding lead who has a thorough understanding of all safeguarding concerns and monitors these closely to prevent any delay. She has developed links with local authorities and other safeguarding agencies to keep children safe.

Safeguarding arrangements meets statutory requirements. The recruitment of staff, including agency staff, ensures the safety and protection of children and minimises the risk of unsuitable people being recruited.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: outstanding

The agency has strong and ambitious leadership. Managers are innovative. They have an excellent understanding of adoption nationally and are actively involved in the national development of the future of adoption. As a result, the agency is able to respond quickly to national changes to meet the demands of local authorities. The service manager and head of service are qualified and experienced. Three additional managers with particular specialisms support the work of the West Midlands office.

It is clear that managers and staff prioritise the needs of children. They have high expectations for the children and adults they work with and ensure that standards of work are of a high quality. Research underpins the work of the agency. Staff are proactive in keeping up to date with new developments in adoption. They are proactive in sharing new research with colleagues to ensure that their knowledge is current. They also meet regularly with staff from other parts of the agency to share ideas and good practice.

Staff feel well supported by their managers. They say that senior managers are visible and accessible to them. One social worker said, 'We know senior managers have our interests at heart.' There is a wide range of training available to staff, both internally and externally, with specific training in intermediary services and SafeBase.

The agency is meeting the aims and objectives stated in its statement of purpose. This is accessible on the agency's website and clearly describes the range of services offered nationally and in each office for commissioners and service users. The agency has two children's guides that are user-friendly and are designed to meet the needs of children of different ages.

Managers know and understand the setting's strengths and weaknesses well. They take decisive and effective action when areas for improvement are apparent. Clear development plans are implemented and are responsive to market changes. There are robust systems of reporting to the board of trustees that ensure there is clear governance. Senior managers continually drive improvement through rigorous strategic monitoring. Safeguarding audits and reports are of high quality and identify themes and learning from safeguarding incidents.

Robust monitoring exists at an operational level. There is strong evaluation of service users' experiences and baseline questionnaires that demonstrates their progress. This

helps to inform the delivery and increase the effectiveness of the service locally. Regular monitoring of contracts is fed back to local authorities on a quarterly and annual basis. One social work manager said, 'As an agency they are flexible and committed and willing to work over contracted hours to provide a good service.'

Staff and managers work well with other professionals. They are proactive and challenge when the responses from other services are not effective. They also work collaboratively with social workers from local authorities. One member of staff has set up a group for birth families to support letter-box contact alongside a colleague from a local authority.

Managers actively promote equality and diversity within the agency. They receive training to support staff to consider issues around diversity and develop their service to meet the individual needs of children and young people.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the voluntary adoption agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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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