

Families for Children Adoption Agency

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Address	Southgate Court Buckfast Buckfastleigh Devon TQ11 0EE
Telephone number	01364 645480
Email	mail@familiesfor children.org.uk
Registered person	Families For Children Trust
Registered manager	Nicholas Goodwin
Responsible individual	
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Families For Children was established in 1993 as a Joint Venture between Exeter Diocesan Board for Christian Care and Plymouth Diocesan Catholic Children's Society. In January 2003 the Agency became a separate registered charity. The agency is also a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA). It operates from premises in Buckfastleigh, Devon and offers a service to people who live in the counties of Devon, Dorset and Cornwall, including the Isles of Scilly, as encompassed by the Anglican Diocese of Exeter and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Plymouth. The agency is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption only.

The services provided by the agency include the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. The agency works with local authorities which are placing children with Families for Children approved prospective adopters to support the matching and placement processes. It provides an adoption support services to children and adoptive parents to support placements. The agency also provides adults affected by adoption to with services which includes birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work.

The agency, via a service level agreement with Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth, undertakes counselling and provides advice and support to birth parents who have lost their child to adoption in these geographical areas.

Summary

This was a key, announced inspection. The agency takes a sound approach to the recruitment of adopters and ensures that the needs of children needing a placement informs the recruitment activity. The preparation and assessment of applicants is of a good quality and ensures that people are well informed about and understand the implications of the complex needs children needing adoptive placements often have. The agency takes considerable care to ensure that prospective adopters are supported in considering the needs of specific children and the impact these needs may have on their family. The approval processes are sufficiently robust and ensure that applicants are suitable people to be adoptive parents and are likely to be able to ensure the child has a safe, stable and secure family life.

There are an excellent range of support services in place to support adoptive families. The agency takes a life long approach to supporting families and provides flexible, individualised support from internal and external resources. The agency carries out direct work with children, for example, in undertaking life story work, and this is of a very good quality. It also uses an external agency to provide therapeutic support where this is needed.

The agency is committed to supporting birth relatives and adopted adults through its counselling, access to records and intermediary services, which are carried out in a very sensitive, non judgemental and professional way.

The agency is managed in a very effective and efficient way. Very good support is provided, by the management team, to the very able and committed staff team. The agency takes a sound child-centred approach to its work and this enables good outcomes for children to be achieved. The managers and the staff of the agency overall communicate effectively with each other and with people using the services and this enables a shared understanding to be developed.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Six recommendations were made at the previous inspection and these have all been addressed. The statement of purpose has been rewritten and updated and provides a comprehensive view about the work of the agency. The monitoring systems for cases and the arrangements for the health and safety checklists have been improved as has the quality assurance role of the panel. The managers have suitable management qualifications and the arrangements for management of the agency have been significantly strengthened. The arrangements for maintaining case records have improved and the access to information policies and procedures take into account the Human rights Act 1998.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency has a written plan for the recruitment of adopters which has been developed with the needs of children waiting for an adoptive placement in mind. The agency takes an inclusive approach to recruitment and ensures that interested parties are provided with good quality information on which they can make informed decisions. Initial visits to enquirers are thorough and are undertaken by two social workers. This enables an objective view to be reached about if the enquirer may be a good resource. Where it seems that the enquirer would not be an appropriate resource the agency takes a sensitive approach in counselling and supporting people in making the sometimes difficult decision that adoption is not for them.

The agency has formal preparation and assessment processes. Preparation takes place over three days, an increase from two days since the last inspection. Comments from two adopters who had previously used this agency showed that they felt there had been a significant improvement in the quality of the preparation course when compared to last time. A third adopter commented, "Preparation was excellent, very thought provoking and informative....helped us to grow a wider understanding." another stated "Preparation is well presented, concise useful sensitive and emphatic." The agency also runs groups for applicants family and friends which informs them about adoption, the disruptive backgrounds some children will have experienced and the behaviours which can arise as a direct result. These are reported by adopters as having been very useful in helping supporters of the adopters to understand and better deal with the sometimes difficult and disruptive behaviour children placed for adoption can display.

Assessments are undertaken with due care and diligence. Information about prospective adopters is not only obtained but it is subject to a sound analysis. Assessments reach clear view about the prospective adopters parenting capacity of the applicants strengths and identify any areas for development. All appropriate checks and references are carried out which ensures that the safety of children is promoted. There is a well established practice of a review midway through the assessment and this along with a second opinion visit provides additional quality assurance to assessments. One adopter commented that the assessment process was "very positive" they saw it as a "period of growth." Adopters also commented on the flexibility of the social workers

in carrying out assessment visits, for example visiting during the evening so that the applicants did not have to take too much time away from work.

After approval as suitable to adopt, prospective adopters are provided with support in finding children needing an adoptive placement and considering if they would be able to meet the needs of the child. Some social workers go to great lengths to find out all available information about a specific child including reading the case files. Some prospective adopters said that their social worker knows them so well and are very clear about which children would be right to join their family. Adopters commented about the quality of work carried out by the agency in respect to obtaining information about a child they were considering included, "Our social worker did a brilliant research job." The agency also takes a very proactive approach in the introduction process. It encourages the local authorities making the placements to hold a life appreciation day. These meetings include a range of people who have known and worked with the child and allow information to be shared on a first hand basis with the prospective adopters. During these meetings prospective adopters can also ask any questions they have about the child and its early life. An adopter commented about the matching and introduction process, "Wonderful introduction to our daughter.... feel in control and listened to at each stage."

The adoption panel is governed by policies and procedures which do not include all issues contained within the standards. Applicants are invited to attend panels and are well supported in their attendance by their social worker. Attendees are asked for feedback about their experience. The constitution of panel has some shortfalls in terms of membership, although, all panel members do have suitable qualities and experience. No member of the panel commences work prior to a satisfactory criminal records bureau check (CRB) having been completed but files for panel members are not consistently being comprehensively maintained. There is an established programme of induction and training in place for panel members which includes some training with the social workers. The panel meetings are effectively organised and conducted and the administration of panels is of a good quality. The decision making process is carried out in an effective way. Decisions are based on all available information about a case, including the draft panel minutes, and are made in a timely way.

The manager and staff working for the agency are all appropriately qualified, very experienced and knowledgeable about working in adoption. Recruitment practices are overall sound and ensure that people working for the agency are suitable to work with children and vulnerable people.

People are aware of how to make a complaint and complaints are dealt with in line with the policies and procedures. This agency is responsive to complaints and uses them to improve the services provided.

The agency has written local safeguarding procedures which relate to children who are placed for adoption, historical abuse allegations and children receiving a support service.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The support provided to children and adopters is a real strength of this agency. The good preparation and the careful attention paid to obtaining good quality information about the child and their needs ensures that a sound basis for planning support to children and families is established. It is clear that this agency takes a child focused approach to all of its work

including the assessment and provision of support to placements and that support is a life long commitment. A number of adopters said they had used this agency due to the stated commitment to providing support into adulthood and beyond.

Services provided directly by the agency include various activities, such as, an annual BBQ, various training sessions including those for family and friends, buddy systems for adopters and children including birth children of adopters and support groups. Assessments of support needs can be carried out in a timely way and support is tailored to the families specific needs. General support, such as, advice and emotional support is also provided on a flexible basis by the social workers. Adopters report that there is excellent communication between them and the agency and that this means that any potential difficulties are dealt with in a timely way.

The agency also has a service level agreement with a registered adoption support agency to provide a therapeutic input for social workers and adoptive families in difficulty. This agency will work with families and children across the area and will advise schools about issues, such as, attachment difficulties and resulting behaviours. The commitment the agency has to paying for this service, something it is not required to provide, demonstrates its dedication to ensuring that families get the right support when they need it.

Adopters feel very confident that if required support will be forthcoming. One survey respondent wrote about how impressed they are by the depth and range of support available, and another stated "We are given fantastic support and understanding of ours and the children's needs and feelings." A professional adviser to the agency commented, "I have been very impressed by the dedication and passion shown by all staff towards securing secure and loving placements for children." These are just three of more than 30 positive comments about post placement support. The agency has very low rates of disruption of placements which is another good indication that families are very well supported. One family said that the support they had received had probably stopped the placement from breaking down.

The agency has good access to the services of professional advisers in addition to the support from the support agency. There is a medical adviser who is a community paediatrician who will meet with adopters to help them consider the impact of any medical issues a child has. The agency has the services of a legal adviser who scrutinises all of the panel papers and provides written reports for panel to consider on any potential legal issues. The legal adviser is also available for more general consultation. The social workers working for the agency also have a range of skills and training between them in areas, such as, attachment issues, behaviour management, bereavement and parenting techniques.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Families for Children does not have the responsibility for providing a service to the birth families of children placed with the adopters they have assessed due to it being a VAA. It does however, recognise the life long implications adoption has for all concerned and ensures that adopters are aware of and are supported in helping the child to understand their situation. It has on occasions carried out some life story work where this has not been forthcoming from the placing agency. Where a one off meeting is arranged between birth parents and Families for Children adopters the agency social worker will attend this meeting to provide support to the adopters.

The agency offers a service to adults adopted through the agency. The service provided is of a good quality and work is sensitively undertaken. An intermediary service is offered as is a tracing service and support during reunions. Adoptees are helped to understand the impact a reunion may have on them and their birth family member and someone using this service said they really appreciated the support and guidance provided. The service to birth family members is also professional and sensitively undertaken with two people using this service confirming that the service is delivered in a professional and sensitive way. Adults affected by adoption receive a professional service which is geared to meeting their needs.

The agency does provide a counselling and support service to birth parents for three local authorities via a service level agreement. Birth parents feedback about the service is positive with one commenting that after she has spoken to the social worker she felt that a weight had been lifted from her and she is now able to maintain contact arrangements with her children. The responses about this service from people using it show that it is sensitively undertaken in a non judgemental way. There is regular communication and negotiation between this agency and the commissioning agencies to ensure that the service is meeting the needs of all. One survey response from a commissioning agency about the service praised its flexibility.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency shows a committed approach to ensuring that issues around equality and diversity are given appropriate attention on a strategic and practice level.

The agency has a clear and comprehensive statement of purpose which is underpinned by a full range of policies and procedures. The agency has developed guides to adoption for children and supports children placed for adoption and birth children of adopters on a practical level. The information provided to adopters is of a good quality and can be provided in different languages and formats where required. The agency maintains a website which provides information about adoption. Adopters find the information provided useful in helping them make informed decisions.

The agency is managed very efficiently and effectively and achieves good outcomes for children. The managers of the agency are suitably qualified, show a strong commitment to adoption and have a wealth of experience in childcare, adoption matters and financial procedures between them. The supportive and caring management style, the clearly defined roles and responsibilities, the attention to workload management and the excellent communication between all working in the agency help to achieve a well integrated service to all affected by adoption. There were overall very positive comments about the management of the agency including: "I believe this is a well run organisation. We have had a very positive experience and cannot thank all those involved in our adoption enough." Another adopter said, Families for Children are genuinely committed to children and families and it shows in the service they deliver."

The monitoring of the agency is undertaken in a robust way. The agency feeds the comments and views of people using the service into service development and the work is supported the Trustees who show a high level of interest in and commitment to providing good quality services.

The Trustees keep themselves informed via a variety of means, including Trustees meetings, sub-committees, written reports about the work of the agency. In addition one Trustee carries out a weekly visit to spend time in the agency talking to managers and staff which is felt by the managers and staff to be very supportive.

The calibre of the social work staff is of a very good quality and the staff team is suitably qualified, skilled and experienced in their roles. Social workers are well supported through the various systems in place including, an induction process, supervision sessions, team meetings and peer support. The training opportunities for staff are good and are focused on the developmental needs of the staff member and of the service. Examples of many positive comments are as follows; "They have staff who give 100% to all of the children and adopters." (From a stakeholder) "Could not praise the staff highly enough, from our social worker through to managerial staff." (From an adopter) "Fantastic attitude; caring open and professional." (From an adopter). These reflect the satisfaction of the vast majority of people and the quality of the services provided. The arrangements for the administration of the agency are also very good. The administrative team are very well managed and supported and the calibre of the staff is good. The administrative team was described by social workers, adopters and other respondents as "excellent", "efficient" and "helpful".

Without exception staff felt that this agency was a very good employer. Staff feel that they are nurtured by managers and they feel valued for their views and input. They feel that they are part of an organisation committed to improving outcomes for children and others touched by adoption.

Case records are comprehensively maintained and well ordered. There is an audit system in place and written records of supervisors decision making is made and maintained on files. Recording of visits to adopters clearly show the reason for the visit and the discussions that took place. The arrangements for storage of current files are sound and the arrangements for access to records appropriate. While the archived adoption files are well maintained and ordered the arrangements in terms of the internal security arrangements and demonstrating the risk from fire and water damage is minimised are not robust enough.

Staff personnel files show that all required information is gathered and maintained, there is an effective system in place for the renewal of CRB checks and generally show that the agency has a sound approach to recruitment and selection of staff. Panel members' files contain evidence that recruitment procedures are followed in the main but they are not as well maintained. For example, there is a lack of consistency in recording the gender and date of birth of members and an inconsistent approach taken in obtaining application forms and verifying references.

The premises used by the agency are appropriate for the purpose. They are open during usual office hours, have robust security systems and IT systems are safeguarded. There is a disaster recovery plan in place.

The arrangements for financial viability are subject to close internal and external scrutiny and monitoring. This arrangements ensure that action can be taken at the earliest opportunity should any problems begin to emerge.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- include in the policies and procedures all points in the NMS about the handling of the panel functions (NMS 10.2)
- ensure the panel is properly constituted (NMS 11.1)
- ensure that confidential records relating to past adoptions are stored securely (NMS 27.4)
- ensure that up-to-date, comprehensive personnel files are maintained for each member of the adoption panel (NMS 28.1)