

Families for Children Adoption Agency

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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.

This voluntary adoption agency operates from premises in Buckfast, Devon, with a sub-office (not a separate branch) in Wimborne, Dorset. The agency offers a service to people who live in the counties of Devon, Dorset and Cornwall, including the Isles of Scilly, the area covered 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. It specialises in finding adoptive families for children who are proving difficult to place, due to their age or complex needs.

The services provided by the agency include the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents and lifelong adoption support to children and adoptive parents. There is a service level agreement in place with an adoption support agency in Exeter, to help support adoptive families. The service also works with adults affected by adoption, to provide birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work.

There is a further service level agreement with the local authorities of Poole and Bournemouth, to provide counselling, advice and support to birth parents who have lost children to adoption. From time to time, the agency is commissioned by other local authorities to undertake specific pieces of work with birth family members or adopters who require independent assessment.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The agency achieves excellent outcomes for children and adoptive families. All four outcome areas are rated outstanding.

All adopters interviewed and the majority of those who responded to questionnaires said that they were extremely pleased with the service provided. One adopter said: 'the agency has provided a very open and honest approach which I engaged with. All staff are really friendly, professional and very easy to talk to. This was my first experience of Families for Children and for me, it was positive. I am not sure what could have been done better, I don't think it could have been better'.

The agency provides an excellent training and preparation programme for

prospective adopters. Adopters from all walks of life are recruited by an enthusiastic marketing team. The aim is to provide very high quality permanent family care for children whose social workers may be struggling to find placements for them. The approval process is very efficient and no significant delays were reported.

The agency particularly excels at post adoption support. There is a lifelong commitment to providing a tailor-made service to children and families after adoption. One family commented: 'the agency supported us thoroughly throughout our relationship with them. We have been very pleased with the approach and knowledge they have given; they have made a difficult and emotional journey possible. We would be very comfortable to recommend this agency to anyone considering adopting'.

The service has strong links with other organisations which can provide additional support to adoptive families. The agency also provides very good outcomes for birth family members and to adults who are affected by adoption.

The social work and administration staff are very well supported by strong but empathic leadership from their practice supervisors and the three senior managers. Staff say that the agency is a very good employer and it is never difficult to recruit new staff when needed.

Regular feedback from service users helps to ensure that social work practice is reflective and responsive. The senior management team and the adoption panel seek constantly to improve the service. All the recommendations from the last inspection have been addressed and no further recommendations have been made on this occasion.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection was held on 5 March 2009, when four recommendations were made. The first recommendation concerned panel policies and procedures. Since then, the agency has ensured that the panel procedures encompass all the points listed in the national minimum standards.

The second recommendation concerned the constitution of the adoption panel. The panel is now correctly constituted and has appropriate social work representation.

The third recommendation concerned the need for secure storage of archived adoption records. The archive arrangements were reviewed and improved after the inspection. The present arrangements provide a more secure storage facility. The agency has further plans to expand the storage facilities and ensure that the archive continues to meet the required level of security and safety.

The fourth recommendation concerned panel members' recruitment records. All adoption panel members now have up to date personnel files, which contain all the required information.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children are kept safe by means of effective, well understood policies and procedures, excellent preparation for adopters and ongoing post adoption support. Adopters confirm that they have received thorough training on all aspects of child safety and in particular, on the risks of unrestricted internet use. The group also highlights the challenges of managing difficult behaviour and caring for children who have suffered abuse in previous families.

The agency actively promotes children's health needs throughout the recruitment, assessment and post-approval period. Health and lifestyle issues are discussed in some depth before an application to adopt is taken up. The agency medical advisor is available to support prospective adopters with helpful information about specific health needs.

Adopters interviewed show considerable knowledge of and sensitivity to their children's needs. They are recruited from a wide range of backgrounds and lifestyles, but their capacity to meet children's dietary and other health needs is a high priority during the assessment process.

The agency is committed to promoting the psychological health of all children placed. There are strong links with an adoption support agency and the local child and adolescent mental health service. Social workers in the team are skilled in the use of therapeutic work with children and responding to issues around bereavement and attachment.

The agency has a lifelong commitment to supporting adoption placements and achieves excellent outcomes for children in terms of stability. There has been only one disruption over the past year. The agency held its own enquiry in order to learn from this experience.

Prospective adopters' reports are of excellent quality with detailed analysis throughout. The adoption panel exercises appropriate rigour, to ensure that approval and matching are subject to scrutiny and challenge.

Adopters are approved without delay and are always referred to the National Adoption Register promptly. As adopters are specifically recruited to meet the needs of waiting children, they are often in high demand from the placing authorities.

Good quality information is provided for adopters, if necessary, as a result of their

social worker going to the placing authority and reading the files. Adopters all say that they were given sufficient information to prepare them for their placements. One adopter said: 'we wish to say how hard our social worker is working on our behalf. She keeps in touch with us about each possible child that we are following up, she tirelessly liaises with social workers around the country and we feel she is a fantastic advocate for us. She understands us and the right child for us.'

Adopters also have access to advice from specialists to help them to understand their children's needs. They are extremely well supported throughout the introduction process, which helps to ensure that children and adopters are properly prepared for the placement. Most children have the opportunity to visit the family home before moving in.

The agency has an effective safeguarding policy which has been accepted by senior managers in both local authority areas covered. The Registered Manager, who is also the designated person for child protection, ensures that safeguarding maintains a high profile throughout the work. Most of the staff have come from safeguarding posts, so they are very well aware of the issues. They receive annually updated training in safeguarding to ensure that they are aware of the latest developments. There have been no notifications recently, but should the need arise, the agency would notify all the relevant authorities.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Adopters said that they felt very well prepared, through the training provided, for many of the challenges and rewards of adoption. One couple said: 'we asked an awful lot of questions, but this has achieved a good end result, with us both feeling confident about adoption'.

When the placement is made, the reality of the situation can still take them by surprise, but they all agreed that the level of support received is excellent. The agency offers individual counselling and a wide range of activities in conjunction with partner agencies, including opportunities for adopted children to meet together with others and enjoy themselves. Adopters also have a very clear concept of the need for confidentiality. Children seen during the inspection were enjoying a variety of stimulating activities including ballet, swimming, walking and enjoying country life.

The agency has developed an innovative group for family and friends of adopters. This has proved to be very helpful in increasing understanding of the issues faced by adoptive families and consequently, has encouraged higher levels of support within the extended family or friendship network.

Adopters show a strong commitment to promoting educational attainment, within realistic limits and without undue pressure. The social work team has staff with strong links with educational resources to enable them to promote high quality

educational outcomes for children using the service.

The agency is passionate about its work to support children and families after adoption. There is a dedicated group of social workers who undertake the majority of the post adoption support work. They work closely with colleagues who conduct assessments.

Joint working helps to ensure that children and families receive a comprehensive service and better outcomes. Young people have a different social worker to their parents. One young person explained: 'they are a 'forever' agency...they will support me and my mum for as long as we need it. Without them I would still be in foster care and I wouldn't have met my amazing mum...I love Families for Children and I'm so grateful for what they have done'.

The agency has an impressive commitment to continuity of care. Temporary staff with the relevant skills are appointed very promptly if a member of staff is away from work. This enables families and children to obtain rapid but expert support when they need it.

There are formal links with The Consultancy, an adoption support agency which was itself rated outstanding at a recent Ofsted inspection. This agency provides sessions with adoptive families to advise and support them in very practical ways.

There are support groups available for single adopters. One recent venture is the development of a group for families and friends of adoptive families. The group been very well received. This work can benefit children by helping people in the adopters' own support networks to gain greater understanding of the pressures on adoptive families.

All the homes visited during the inspection, provide an excellent range of physical environments for adoptive children. Homes are carefully checked, using the current health and safety guidance. Pets are risk assessed. All family pets seen were very friendly and amenable with children.

Every adult and child, who requests an adoption support service, receives a thorough assessment. All 54 people who requested adoption support over the past year are receiving a service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency takes children's wishes and feelings into account at every opportunity, through a structured programme of reviews, individual work and consultation. Children who are of sufficient age and understanding have access to clear information about the service, how they may seek independent advocacy or raise a complaint.

A parent wrote to the adoption agency to say: 'we have found Families for Children to be a very helpful and positive agency. We have benefitted from their support, not only during the assessment and placement, but also in the post-adoption phase. Our child's placing authority offered no support once the adoption was finalised and so we relied very much on Families for Children for help and advice. We therefore had no hesitation in returning for our second adoption'.

Another adopter said: 'this is a very good agency committed to providing a caring, empathetic, supportive service, to both adopters and children'.

Social workers delve deeply into children's heritage, well beyond what is recorded on the child permanency report. This helps to ensure that adopters and children have full information about the child's history at every stage in the process. Social workers frequently travel to placing authorities to read file records, take photographs and interview those who knew the child.

All adopters are made well aware of the importance of keeping treasured items and life story work safe for their child. Social workers place a high priority on lifelong work with children to help them to acknowledge their identity. They explained that they challenge traditional views of life story work and that they ensure this goes well beyond the usual book format. They explained that sometimes it is more appropriate to start with the Adoption Order and work backwards, to help each child understand. Social workers will continue with life story work throughout the young person's involvement with the agency.

One young person said: 'my social worker told me I can phone him if I have any problems or need to ask about why I was adopted. He got his secretary to make me a life story book, and they chose a pink cover because it's my favourite colour. My life story book is important to me, as it's the only bit of my birth parents that I have'.

Adopters confirm that they have practical contact arrangements in place through local authority letterbox schemes and face to face contact. The agency maintains a small letterbox scheme for reducing number of historical contact arrangements, for which it is still responsible.

Work with birth family members is undertaken on behalf of two unitary authorities. Assessments are also undertaken by order of the courts. Birth parents confirm that they receive a very good response, with quality information provided. They say that the agency's strengths include their capacity to listen. They are routinely advised about national support agencies which may help them.

The agency also provides a high quality service to adults who have been affected by adoption. There are no waiting lists for this service, which is unusual. The person's identity is carefully verified and any concerns about safeguarding the welfare of other parties are addressed appropriately. Service users are provided with honest and accurate information, using original documents. Work is always conducted at their own pace. Adults are advised about the potential issues around tracing and contact with birth family members. As with all other aspects of the agency's work,

service users are invited to contribute their views on the service to help to develop professional practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Enquirers are welcomed without prejudice, irrespective of background, sexuality, marital status, ethnicity or creed. The agency has a broadly Christian ethos, but also welcomes those with no specific religious beliefs.

Professional marketing and recruitment staff work hard to raise public awareness of children in need of adoptive placements. This is achieved through a concerted programme of community and media contact. Recruitment is targeted on children aged over three years, sibling groups, disabled children and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. All of these groups are traditionally harder to place with adoptive families.

Adopters receive high quality written information, very promptly. One adopter said: 'I was given a lot of information about becoming an adopter....each step was clearly explained; information was easy to follow and understand'.

The majority of adopters are effusive about the preparation courses. They enjoy meeting experienced adopters and birth family members. One adopter said 'this gave me great insight to all aspects of the adoption process'.

Due to small numbers involved, the courses are not run very frequently, so adopters might be well under way with their assessment before they complete the course. The agency is looking at ways to address this, by increasing numbers through links with other adoption agencies.

Many adopters commented on how they had enjoyed meeting experienced adopters and birth family members during the training. Course participants often keep in touch afterwards, which helps to provide children and families with ongoing support.

Adopters receive a very thorough preparation and assessment, conducted by experienced, knowledgeable social workers. An adopter commented: 'I engaged very well with the process. It was handled with great respect, one step at a time, not rushed...I knew exactly what was going to happen. I was given lots of information which satisfied all my questions. The whole process is long, but there were no delays'.

Observation and comments from the adoption panel confirm that prospective adopters' reports are of exceptionally high quality, with detailed analysis and objective, fair assessments. A local authority which commissioned an independent assessment from the agency stated that they completed 'a brilliant piece of work; a good, thorough, balanced assessment'.

Panel meets monthly and is very effectively chaired. At present, the two vice chairs are sharing this role because the chair is unwell. Chairpersons are appointed by the agency, not the panel, which is good practice. There are plans to include a small number of additional panel members on their central list.

There are robust administrative systems in place for the panel, with members receiving papers a week in advance of the meeting. The minutes seen are excellent. The agency has found a creative way to ensure that panel members agree the minutes before the agency decision maker reaches their decision, in line with Department for Education guidance. This process is completed within the necessary timescales, as indeed are all the agency's processes.

Adopters all said that panel had been daunting, but that they had been welcomed and helped to contribute. Meetings are held in pleasant surroundings and everyone is introduced to help put any visitors at their ease. All adopters report that they received panel's recommendation on the day and the written decision very soon afterwards. There are no significant delays at any stage in the agency's processes. One adopter commented: 'the panel themselves were friendly and it did not feel difficult to talk to them'.

The panel has a clear quality assurance function. Social workers say that panel is appropriately challenging. Panel is kept fully informed of important developments; for example, whether the agency is meeting timescales and of any safeguarding issues.

The agency has a clear and effective Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the service's functions. The Statement of Purpose is reviewed annually. Children receive personalised children's guides which contain an age appropriate description of the services offered and contact details of other organisations that might help them.

The Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive (the Registered Manager), are very well qualified and experienced managers with a strong track record of providing high quality adoption services. They are effectively supported by two practice managers, one of whom is based in each office.

Staff all commented on how much they appreciate the management support they receive. There is a friendly, yet professional culture and an 'open door' policy. This helps to promote staff morale and consequently, many of the staff have been in post for some time. This in turn has a positive impact on continuity of service for children and families.

The current economic climate is a challenge for this agency, as well as many other voluntary organisations which substantially rely on local authorities for income. The chairman of the trustees explained that it has been necessary to convey some difficult messages to staff about the need to address the financial situation. Staff at all levels have embraced this need in a very positive and determined way. The agency has appointed an enthusiastic fundraiser, who has many creative ideas. Many of the staff have signed up to complete a sponsored parachute jump to raise funds for the charity. This demonstrates the staff's total commitment to continuing the high quality service provided for children.

Social work and administration staff are subject to a robust process of recruitment. This process includes all the required checks to help ensure that staff are safe to work with children and vulnerable adults. Panel members are also appropriately checked and good quality personnel files are maintained.

Although finances are assertively managed by the business manager, who is a qualified accountant, together with the board of trustees, appropriate training is always funded. Added value is ensured by sharing the information at team meetings. Staff are satisfied with the level of training provided. New staff receive a thorough induction to ensure that they are fully aware of the role before working on their own.

All social workers are highly experienced, well qualified and registered with the General Social Care Council. Social workers and administration staff feel very well supported in their roles. Social work staff receive regular, high quality and structured supervision from the practice supervisors or the deputy chief executive, who supervises post adoption support work. Everyone commented on how much they value the practice of sitting together to share lunch, which is seen as an important way to give and receive informal support. There are regular monthly team meetings and practice-based 'away days'.

Senior managers are also very well supervised and supported. The Chief Executive receives agency-based supervision from the chair of trustees and professional supervision from an external source, to ensure that her professional development needs are addressed. The team has access to specialised medical, psychological and therapeutic advice when required.

The trustees oversee the agency in a sympathetic but businesslike manner. There are regular quarterly reports to the board, to ensure that they are fully informed of the agency's work. A robust business review took place which has been challenging but effective. Trustees are very committed and visit the agency frequently to attend working groups, or just to share lunch with the staff.

Management systems are clear and effective. There is excellent monitoring of prospective adopters' reports and all social work records to ensure continuing high standards of practice and recording. Accounts are independently audited in line with Charity Commission regulations.

The agency has an effective complaints procedure which is well understood at all

levels. Adopters say that this is made available to them at an early stage in their contact with the service. There have been no complaints.

Both the agency's offices provide a pleasant and welcoming environment for service users, but everyone acknowledges that the Wimborne office is much less well suited to modern business needs. Managers have been actively searching for more suitable premises for a long time, so far without success. The office in Buckfast provides excellent access for disabled people. It is situated in exceptionally peaceful, attractive surroundings, which help adult and child visitors to relax in what can be stressful personal circumstances.

Excellent recording protocols are in place. Supervisors' comments are clear and specific to each file. The agency has efficient business systems and the administration team is motivated, professional and well-resourced. The agency has an excellent computer system which enables them to produce high quality graphics for the purposes of creating life story information, as well as meeting other business needs.

The Buckfast office provides an archive facility which is suitable and secure. Records are exceptionally well managed and appropriately stored for the size and resources of the agency. Social workers report that it is an easy matter to locate an archived file. The agency has an effective business continuity plan and risk assessment, which provides advice on how to manage the emergency conservation of any damaged records.