

Yorkshire Adoption Agency Ltd

Yorkshire Adoption Agency Ltd – SC049010
Loversall Court, Clayfields, Tickhill Road, Balby, Doncaster DN4 8QG
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework
Event: 10021661

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Yorkshire Adoption Agency is a registered voluntary adoption agency, which has charitable status and is registered with the Charities Commission. The agency is a private limited company, and overall responsibility for the agency lies with the trustees, known as the council of management.

The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters, and provides post-approval support. From 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the agency approved 27 adopters, and in the same period, 24 children from local authorities were placed; 19 of these children were considered hard to place. In addition, six families were approved as inter-country adopters. Adoption support services are only provided to adoptees whose adoptions were arranged by the agency. Birth record counselling is offered and then adoptees are signposted to alternative agencies who can provide intermediary services if requested. If adoptees contact the agency whose adoptions were not arranged by the Yorkshire Adoption Agency, then they are signposted to agencies who can provide support services.

As part of the government's regionalisation plans, the agency is involved with seven other voluntary adoption agencies known as the Yorkshire and Humber voluntary adoption alliance. The alliance is offering a joint menu of services to the three regional adoption agencies in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

The agency is also involved with six other voluntary adoption agencies in a project to improve earlier matching and the placement of children who are in local authority care. This project is known as the Specialist Adoption Matching Service and is being piloted with two local authorities in the East Midlands, Leicester City and Leicestershire and Rutland and is led by Family Care Nottingham. The agency submitted a successful application to the Department for Education for a practice improvement fund grant as part of this project.

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into

good

account

How well children and parents are helped and protected good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers good

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

Date of previous inspection: 23 May 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because

- Children are placed without delay in safe and supported homes with well-matched adopters.
- Children make good progress from their starting points. They are supported to form secure attachments with their adoptive families.
- Children have good access to educational and health support and both the agency and the prospective adopters advocate on their behalf.
- Adopters have support to develop skills in parenting their children, who often have complex needs.
- Introductions are carefully managed by the agency in conjunction with the placing authority. Adopters describe feeling well supported during this process.
- Adopters feel overwhelmingly positive about the initial responses of the agency towards them. Adopters say they are treated with sensitivity and respect.
- Preparation and training of prospective adopters is effective and helps adopters focus on children's needs.
- Adopters are able to consider the significance of contact for their children with birth family and relatives.
- Inter-country adoptions have increased in the past year.

- A diverse mix of prospective adopters have been approved, including same sex and single adopters.
- The agency has placed 24 children with 19 families in the year ending 31 March 2017. Thus far, since 1 April this year the agency has placed or matched 17 children. The majority of these are considered 'hard to place' children.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development

- Developing the offer of ongoing support for adopters longer term through regionalisation projects.
- Thinking creatively about how to gain birth parents' views about the work of the agency and how such views can develop the service in the future.
- Gathering feedback from children placed for adoption. This is a challenge when placements occur while children are very young.
- To consider how the agency collates evidence in more detail about the outcomes for children placed by the agency.
- Continue to develop prospective adopters' access to information and training about keeping children safe from all forms of exploitation.

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

Recommendations

- Continue to ensure children's safety and welfare are promoted and children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm. For example, ensuring prospective adopters receive training about children who may go missing or show vulnerability to child sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation. (national minimum standards: page 18, paragraph 4.1)
- Ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency and adoption support agency in monitoring and developing its services. (national minimum standards: page 11, paragraph 1.6)
- Ensure as far as possible that the adoption agency is active in its efforts to involve the birth parents and birth family in the adoption plan. (national minimum standards: page 38, paragraph 12.8)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are placed in safe and supported homes with well-prepared adopters. Children make and develop good attachments with their adopters. The adopters understand basic attachment behaviours from their preparation courses and they understand the impact of early experiences of trauma and abuse on behaviour and attachment. Matching children with adopters is, in most cases, quick. The agency supports and advocates for applications to be processed as quickly as the needs of each child allows.

Children experience love and inclusion in their adoptive families. Their adoptive families ensure that they can access a range of childhood activities, such as after school clubs, swimming, holidays, days out and general routines of family life.

Records are clear, unambiguous and reflect the processes of adoption. Children's needs are met and when there is any delay to this, their adopters are fantastic advocates on their behalf. Children make progress from their starting points, and evidence of this is found from reading their case records. Despite this, the agency has no clear way of collating and analysing data on children's progress. This does not allow the manager to have oversight of progress or to keep a close eye on children when there is a lack of progress. Closer evaluation of children's outcomes would allow the agency to target resources and offer bespoke training when a lack of progress is evident.

The children whose cases were tracked at this inspection are very young, and too young to participate actively in the decisions made in their lives. The agency holds an annual event where it brings together adopted children and their families. Adoptive parents' feedback that they enjoy this activity. They would like more opportunities for events like these. A minor shortfall picked up during this inspection is how the agency includes children's decisions in their futures. Events such as these are a potential opportunity to expand this area of development for the agency. This could ensure that they are regularly including and supporting children to be involved in decisions for their futures.

The agency has a complaints policy and a link to this is available on its website. The agency has recently developed a new children's guide. The team manager is planning to use some animation characters to explain the process of adoption to younger children and to also make this available on the website. Using this kind of tool to explain important information makes it accessible to children who have communication difficulties or special needs.

Complaints are taken seriously and are thoroughly investigated in line with the agency's policy. There is a good record of responses to complaints and the agency learns from such feedback and incorporates learning into the ongoing provision of services. For example, a complaint made in respect of a panel member led to staffing changes and further training for panel members. In addition, adopters are aware of their right to make representations to the Independent Review Mechanism and request a review if they are not in agreement with the outcome of their assessment.

Children attending early years provision and education are supported in this area. Adopters advocate on their behalf and call on the support of the agency when needed. Adopters showed knowledge and insight when talking to the inspector about personal education plans and education, health and care plans for their children. They were also aware of their children's entitlement to pupil premium payments to support their education.

Children are encouraged to develop and grow in independence within their adoptive families. This nurture and progress will develop confidence for them to become independent adults in the future and to keep themselves safe. The agency advocates on behalf of children when the placing authority is not completing tasks as it should, for example chasing up life-story work and later-life letters for children. The staff recognise the importance of this for children in understanding their history and learning later in life why they were adopted.

Children enjoy good health and are encouraged to look after themselves and choose healthy lifestyles. Their adopters are ensuring that they are linked into all necessary routine and preventative health services. When further help and support is required, the agency advocates and supports adopters to ensure that this happens.

The agency has social workers who are trained in Theraplay techniques. If needed the agency links adopters and their children into specialist services, such as the child and adolescent mental health services. Adopters can access ongoing training and support groups. The ongoing adoption support is an area which the agency is seeking to develop further.

Carefully planned introductions are arranged at a meeting attended by the agency, the placing authority, foster carers, adoptive carers and any other relevant professionals. Adopters describe feeling supported at this time and such careful planning allows smooth transitions for children. When things are not going well, the agency is proactive in meetings to review and offer additional support. Disruptions are rare, but when these do happen, the agency supports adopters and attends meetings to think about what went wrong and how to learn from these experiences.

Adopters are given support to develop skills in parenting their children, who often have complex needs. They are encouraged to learn and develop these skills through the preparation and training on offer and the advice and support of skilled workers from the agency.

Careful transitions and adoption support help the development of secure attachments between adopters and their children. This helps children to develop positive self-esteem and confidence. Adopters are promoting identity for their children by meeting with birth parents and supporting a range of direct and indirect contacts. This helps children to increase their understanding of identity, as well as an understanding of their background and past. As well as birth family, children are also encouraged to sustain contact with other important people, such as their foster carers. This holistic approach to birth families and others reduces fear and allows children permission to settle in their adoptive families.

Adopters felt overwhelmingly positive about the initial responses of the agency towards them. One adopter stated, 'They went over and above, they were very welcoming.' Responses to prospective adopters are positive, sensitive and fast, which is helping the agency to recruit good quality adopters.

Preparation and training is effective. Adopters recalled the assessment phase as, 'full on' and 'running at 100 mph'. They particularly liked some of the visual exercises about loss and separation, which they felt had a major impact on their understanding of needs. The training is making adopters selfless and focus on the needs of children. For example, adopters said the training had, 'changed views on contact to birth families', and 'changed perceptions and perspective on contact', and 'makes you less selfish and more child focused'. Helping prospective adopters understand longer-term risks for their children is less developed. These include the risks of child sexual exploitation, internet safety and risks of radicalisation and extremism. Although the agency's training does touch on these areas, it is developing and planning how to meet this deficit better in future training.

The agency allocates a social worker to prospective adopters at the initial contact with the agency. This worker stays with them throughout the adoption process from start to finish. Prospective adopters and adopters value this consistency and the individual approach. Some adopters then had the same worker when they returned to adopt for a second time. Sometimes, because of staffing changes, prospective adopters had changes of staff. One adopter stated, 'A change of staffing is difficult, but we had X who was superb and then another worker who was great too.'

Parenting assessment reports (PARs) are well written, give good analysis and make appropriate recommendations. When there have been delays, these are clearly recorded within the assessment with the reasons. The assessment process appropriately challenges issues prior to panel. This avoids delay at panel from further questions or assessments being required.

Adopters are advised of recommendations at panel. They receive decisions very quickly after panel, in writing and with reasons. Once approved, adopters are swiftly referred to the adoption register and are generally very quickly linked with children. When they are not, there are good reasons and the agency are aware, and work with adopters to address the reasons.

The agency provides birth record counselling for adults who have had their adoptions arranged by the Yorkshire Adoption Agency. If these adoptees wish to then trace birth relatives, the agency signposts them to agencies who can help with intermediary work. Where adoptees have had their adoptions organised by another agency, they signpost adoptees to appropriate services, which can help them. This is only a small area of work for this agency, but is managed and organised well.

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

Children are safeguarded and protected from harm. Adopters' understanding of their children's needs for protection comes from the agency preparation training. The training

course prepares prospective adopters about children's attachment patterns and how these can be affected by abuse, trauma and previous life experiences. It also includes sessions on risks of radicalisation, child protection disclosures, social media and internet safety. The agency is aware that its preparation training does not yet include enough information for adopters about children who may go missing from home or who may be vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation. They are looking at how to integrate this into future training.

Ongoing training and support groups encourage adopters to continue learning about important issues that may affect their children's behaviour and development. They are encouraged to think about their children's vulnerabilities and how these may have an impact on their ability to keep themselves safe. Additional training opportunities help adopters to keep children safer, such as learning about managing challenging behaviour, internet safety or using techniques such as Theraplay. The agency also offers mentor support and opportunities to talk to other more experienced adopters and social workers. Some feedback from prospective adopters indicates that these are the areas where they feel they need more information, guidance and advice to ensure that they can feel confident to protect children, both now and in the future. For example, one adopter said, 'You can over-emphasise the adoption factor. I've never been so happy to see a social worker who says, "it's normal".'

The agency carries out thorough recruitment checks and monitoring of staff and panel members to ensure that unsuitable people do not have the opportunity to harm children or place them at risk. Prospective adopters also undergo rigorous checks and monitoring to ensure that they are suitable people to care for vulnerable children.

The agency has experienced staff who understand and hold an effective knowledge of safeguarding. There have not been any recent safeguarding allegations. However, managers and staff understand processes and the need to refer. The agency took appropriate action to ensure that relevant authorities were informed when an inappropriate adult sought to access vulnerable children. They pursued this referral to ensure that the necessary safeguards were in place. This shows the agency's ability to identify concerns and take appropriate action to safeguard.

Staff and adopters are aware of their duty to respond to any concerns about the safety of children in their care. Staff have received training on child sexual exploitation and risks of radicalisation. There is a comprehensive safeguarding policy, which includes historical abuse. This helps guide staff to understand processes to refer any incidents or concerns. Leaders and managers have good connections with the host authority designated officer and other safeguarding partners.

Short-term, early adoption support is very good from this agency. For example, one adopter says, 'They have been exceptional. I probably would have given up on X if I hadn't had such good support.' Longer-term adoption support is less defined and this is a national issue for adopters. The agency is working hard to improve its offer of post-adoption support. It ensures that adopters know and understand about their right to access assessments, and the adoption support fund, for ongoing longer-term services as a matter of routine. Adopters said that access to long-term support needs could be better

with clearer agreements at the beginning. Often support needs are not known at this stage and only emerge at later stages.

The agency complete good health and safety checks of the home environment where children are likely to be placed. They are not afraid to challenge prospective adopters to ensure good standards. Similarly, risk assessments are undertaken on all pets kept in prospective adopters' homes and reports from veterinarians are requested to ensure that children are not placed where family pets may cause them harm.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: good

The agency has a director, a team manager and a deputy team manager all involved in the day-to-day running of the agency. A new team manager started in March 2017 and two new social workers are also in post. The agency is now properly staffed and resourced to meet the needs of the children it serves and the prospective adopters and adopters it approves. Prior to the recent staff changes, the agency went through a period of staff changes, which affected workloads and morale. This situation has now eased and staff feel less pressured and better supported. Now that the agency has a new manager for day-to-day operations, the director proposes to take on a more strategic role in the ongoing development of the agency and the regionalisation plans.

All staff are suitably vetted and appropriately qualified and experienced to carry out the tasks they are employed to undertake. The agency has a safe recruitment process and ensures that there are regular appraisals of staff, which helps them to develop their skills or address any deficits of practice.

Leaders and managers oversee and monitor practice within the agency. Case supervisions are recorded on files. PARs are overseen by managers and are given further scrutiny by the agency panel. Feedback is provided to the agency from the panel on the quality of the reports provided. Matching and court reports are similarly audited and scrutinised. Direct testimony is evident on the records, with clear feedback from adopters and professionals. The agency does not have an agreed approach to seeking direct feedback from children. An area of development for the agency is to establish a way to ensure that their views are heard and used to improve services and processes. The agency could similarly think about how it incorporates parents' views, for example when they meet with prospective adopters or when they have direct or indirect contact with their children.

Most adopters felt exceptionally well supported during the matching and transition of their adopted children. Adopters felt less supported post adoption order, which is not just an issue for this agency but also a national issue within adoption support. The social work expertise within the agency is building up, with specialist training in areas such as Theraplay and dyadic development therapy, which expands the agency offer to adoptive parents. The agency manager is already thinking about structuring staff training to be targeted to the needs of the children placed and the agency need.

The agency works well with commissioners, partner organisations and with the

regionalisation plans to improve the offer of support. Once fully established, this will increase the offer of support for a wider group of adopters and in other areas of the country.

Placement stability is good and the agency has very few placements disrupted. When disruptions have occurred, the agency has learned from them, fully participated in disruption meetings and spent time discussing and analysing the issues with adopters and as a team.

Leaders and manager do not have any accurate tool for demonstrating progress in placements for adopted children or how the agency has had a positive impact on such progress. Collating data would help the agency to measure and demonstrate progress for children.

Staff say that they feel supported and are able to do current and interesting training. They describe regular and effective supervision and feel happy to be working for the agency. Staff work well as a team and feel that they have good opportunities for training and development. The staff team is cohesive; its members help each other out and share positive working relationships. The staff are experienced and skilled and share these skills within the staff team. A new worker described a very supportive and helpful induction period.

The agency has an up-to-date statement of purpose and children's guide, both of which are easily accessible on the website. Both these documents help service users understand what is available and what to expect.

The agency has an annual report in draft form, which shows that it is financially viable and indeed financially healthy. It also sets out its activities for the previous year, its successes and areas for development. Areas that the agency has earmarked for development were also picked up during the inspection, which indicates that the agency has a good knowledge of its strengths and weaknesses.

Significant events are notified appropriately, and safeguarding issues are appropriately reported and followed up to ensure children's safety.

The leaders and managers have high expectations and aspirations for the children they place and this is reflected in the work of the agency. It is also demonstrated through the practice of the workers assessing and preparing prospective adopters. The agency is meeting its objectives, as set out in its statement of purpose, and is thinking about where and how to recruit next. The agency has made a short film for the website that will promote and encourage further adoptive carers to apply.

The panel provides additional gatekeeping for the agency and adds an extra layer of independent scrutiny to the assessment process. The panel meets regularly and has enough people on the central list to ensure that it is always quorate. The administration of panel is organised well ahead so that panel members have dates and times in their diaries. Panel minutes are well recorded and quickly circulated. The new chair is experienced and

has some good ideas about how to take the panel forward together. Panel is also providing good feedback to the agency about the quality of reports and presentations from social workers and adopters. The panel is diverse in gender and background, and has education, health and legal expertise. The agency decision-maker sees all recommendations and information and makes independent decisions in a timely manner.

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

Unique reference number: SC049010

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Inspector

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