

Together for Children Adoption – Sunderland

Together for Children Sunderland Limited
Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland SR3 4EN
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency is managed by Together for Children, Sunderland, which provides children’s social care services on behalf of Sunderland City Council. In the last 12 months, the agency has approved 32 adoptive families and placed 32 children for adoption. It recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive families. It also finds adoptive families for children referred by Together for Children, Sunderland with its own adopters or with those from other agencies. The agency provides support to adoptive families, operates a letterbox facility, which enables indirect contact arrangements between adopted children and their birth families, and works with adopted adults, including undertaking intermediary work. Support to birth families is commissioned to an adoption support agency.

Inspection dates: 24 to 27 September 2018

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account	Good
How well children, young people and adults 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: This was the first inspection of the agency,

Overall judgement at last inspection: n/a

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- The agency recruits, assesses, prepares and trains prospective adopters well. This means that they are well equipped to parent the children they go on to adopt and to provide them with stable and nurturing homes.
- It engages effectively with children's social workers and promotes the importance of early permanence planning and decision-making. This means that the agency is able to place children with their adoptive families in a timely manner. In particular, the agency has placed a strong emphasis on, and has been successful in, the use of foster to adopt placements, which have improved the experience of adoption for the children concerned.
- Adoptive families are provided with a wide range of training that is appropriate to their needs. This helps them to parent children in a therapeutic manner, understand the complex needs that they may present and to meet children's needs as they grow and develop.
- The agency is careful in the way that it links children with their future adoptive families, how it shares information, and how it carries out the introductions and placement processes. It uses 'bump into' meetings and life appreciation days effectively and provides high levels of support for these arrangements.
- The agency works effectively with a wide range of other agencies. Relationships with children's social workers are well developed, which helps improve children's plans. The agency also works highly effectively with professionals working in the field of adoption support. This helps children and their families access the support that they need.
- The agency's provision of adoption support, both for children before their adoption and for them and their families after adoption, is creative and proactive and of excellent quality. Adoptive families and their children benefit significantly from the extremely high levels of individualised support available to them, which helps to ensure that children develop and thrive in their families.
- The leadership and management of the agency is innovative and inspirational. Monitoring is effective and there is a focus on the continued development of the service and improving the quality of its practice. This has enabled the agency to continue to develop and improve despite a context of challenge faced by the organisation as a whole.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- Recruitment checks on staff and panel members are thorough, but rely on the adoption manager to carry out the telephone verification of the written references received for the applicant. It would be more robust if this was centrally managed and monitored as part of the overall central recruitment process.
- Panel meeting minutes do not include a record of the various documents that panel members accessed and on which they based their deliberations and recommendation. As such, they do not explain the recommendation as well as they could.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written reference. Specifically, that this verification is centrally managed rather than being the responsibility of the registered manager. (NMS 21.1)
- The panel chair should ensure that minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues. Specifically, that minutes record the documents that were presented to panel and that they considered when coming to their recommendation. (NMS 17.10)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

The agency is welcoming and responsive to people who are considering adoption. It is developing its methods of marketing its services and recruiting adopters to ensure that it continues to be successful in recruiting the families it needs. Information evenings are welcoming and informative, and good written information is given. When prospective adopters decide to make a formal expression of interest, initial visits are timely and robust in assisting these prospective adopters to make decisions regarding whether adoption is appropriate for them. Decision-making at this point is effective and this means that, when the agency decides that applicants are suitable to commence stage one of the assessment process, there is a high degree of confidence that they will be suitable to adopt.

The assessment and preparation of adopters is effective, rigorous and carried out with sensitivity. Assessments are thorough in their consideration of applicants' motivation, suitability, aptitudes and resilience. The pre-approval training and preparation processes help applicants to understand the challenges that they may face and the strategies and support that are available to them. One adopter said, 'They were very supportive, the training was good, they were very open and very good at answering questions.' This means that they are well prepared to adopt.

The agency works effectively with children's placing social workers. Adoption team members are linked with each social work team and act as 'adoption champions' to promote early permanence planning and assist with, and advise on, the work necessary to fulfil these plans. This relationship has improved the timeliness for many children and has resulted in an increase in the use of fostering to adopt as a route to permanence. For example, in the 12-month period up to 31 March 2018, the agency placed 12 children for adoption via foster to adopt out of a total of 52 adoption placements made. The agency also remains ambitious for children and committed to finding adoptive families for children who may be considered as harder to place. For example, the agency recently placed a family of three older children for adoption in just over 12 months from the date of the placement order. The agency challenges children's plans where appropriate and where it is in the child's best interest. For example, it worked successfully to achieve the adoption of two older sisters in a case in which their guardian did not think this would be possible.

The linking and matching of children with their future adoptive families is done well by the agency. Joint working between adoption social workers and the social workers of children being adopted is effective, and information sharing is good. This joint working has also helped to improve the quality of child permanence reports, which are now well written and clear. Children are well prepared for adoption, even if this work means that the length of time taken until the placement is made is increased. The agency uses 'bump into' meetings and life appreciation days well, and these are highly appreciated by adopters. Introductions are carefully and sensitively done and the 'voice of the child' is reflected well throughout this work. This care in the matching and making of placements helps to ensure that placements are stable. This is further supported by the excellent level of adoption support provided.

The agency is creative, innovative and proactive in the way it provides support to adoptive families and their children. It makes excellent use of the adoption support fund and

develops highly beneficial relationships with a range of external professionals. This means that it is able to provide a wide range of adoption support either internally from its own staff team or via external arrangements. For example, the agency has close links with the local university and has benefited from training from university staff at adopter support groups. The agency also has secured access to external counselling for adoptive families which can be accessed promptly as an additional support. Adoption social workers are trained in a range of therapeutic techniques and work directly with adopters and children, using these techniques where necessary. The agency's staff have also provided training in therapeutic work with children and staff at the school attended by an adopted child, to support the child, who was having significant difficulty with education.

The agency is proactive in offering this support based on the well-developed continued relationships it maintains with adoptive families and the take up of this support is widespread. For example, since April 2017 the agency has provided post-adoption support in 102 cases. One adopter simply described the quality and level of support as 'amazing'. The provision of therapeutic support is carried out within secure and established frameworks of training and supervision, with external supervision arranged for social workers doing therapeutic work. A wide range of training is provided to adopters to support them in understanding children's trauma and attachment, to help them parent children in a therapeutic manner, and to follow some of the principles of the therapeutic frameworks being used.

The agency provides regular support groups for adoptive families. As well as a forum for support, these groups provide training in matters such as the impact of loss and trauma and the risk of child sexual exploitation. The agency works hard to maintain supportive relationships with adopted children. As well as holding a number of activity days throughout the year, the agency runs a 'Crafty Kidz' group on Saturday mornings for children and their adopters and has recently started a youth group for older adopted children. These not only provide support to children and their families, but are a point of contact at which children are able to discuss any concerns, worries or issues that they may have. The agency is soon to start a group for young people moving from junior school to senior school to help support them through this potentially difficult time.

The agency demonstrates a commitment to helping children to understand their background. Life-story work is well embraced by the organisation, and books are generally produced in a timely manner after their draft content is agreed with children's adopters. The agency is accessing innovative life-story books for some children from another agency that it has a contract with. Careful preparation work for children being adopted, undertaken by children's social workers and those from the adoption team, helps children to understand their story and what is happening to them. The agency operates a large and active letter box service which allows safe, indirect contact between children and their birth families where this is a part of their plan. This helps children to understand their backgrounds and histories, and also provides a point of contact with birth parents that can help provide them with support or guide them to a service that can help them.

Birth parents have access to good support through an arrangement with a local adoption agency.

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

The agency works effectively with children's social workers to promote early permanence planning for children and to support them in their adoption work. This has improved early planning for children and has led to strong linking, preparation and matching work for children. This in turn helps to find safe and secure families for children and to place them in these families in an increasingly timely manner. The increased use of foster to adopt placements means that an increasing number of children move straight to their future adoptive families without the need for an additional placement, which improves children's well-being.

Robust assessment and good preparation and training help ensure that adopters are able to meet children's needs. Prospective adopters are informed at information evenings of the complex needs that children might have, and this is reinforced throughout preparation training. Pre-approval training is very good and ensures that applicants have an understanding of children's trauma and attachment and how to parent children with these sorts of needs. Good preparation and training help equip adopters with an understanding of the risks faced by children and child protection matters. Ongoing training for adopters is excellent, covering therapeutic parenting, safe behaviour management techniques, the effects of trauma, the impacts of abuse and neglect and the risks from child sexual exploitation. Very high levels of excellent adoption support for adoptive families help adopters to protect children. Training, support and access to therapeutic input help adopters to understand and respond to children's needs, manage their behaviour and form secure attachments that help children to deal with previous trauma that they may have experienced. Adopters understand the potential impact of previous abuse and neglect on children and are well supported to deal with this through the ongoing training offered and the excellent adoption support. For example, training including the range of topics referred to above, is reinforced at the adopter's support group sessions.

Adoption social workers know the children well, listen to them and ensure that their opinions and concerns are recorded. Ongoing work through 'Crafty Kidz', the youth group, activity and fun days and the evaluations of these all give children an opportunity to speak to people outside their home and to raise any concerns or worries that they might have.

Recruitment processes for staff and panel members are thorough, although the process for verifying written references is left to the adoption team manager and is not embedded into the central recruitment process. This means that these checks are not as reliably quality assured as they could be. An effective system ensures that DBS checks on the suitability of staff and that their continued professional registration are updated as necessary.

The agency operates within clear safeguarding and child protection procedures. Staff and adopters are clear about these and understand them. Processes to respond to any allegations or suspicions of harm are in place, although none have been received recently.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The adoption agency is managed highly effectively and efficiently. Leadership is innovative

and inspirational. This has led to the consistent and continuing development of the adoption service against a background of challenge in the wider organisation.

The adoption team is experienced and highly motivated. Team members are highly committed to the agency's work and focused on achieving good outcomes for children. Team members have manageable caseloads that enable them to work creatively to support children and their families. They have access to excellent developmental training as well as the mandatory required training. The training accessed is shared widely in the team. For example, team members are qualified to deliver training in a range of therapeutic models, which enables them to provide high levels of specialist and individualised support. The breadth and effectiveness of the agency's adoption support work is highly impressive and directly attributable to the quality of leadership and management of the service and the highly committed team members who deliver this work.

Staff members receive excellent support from the management team. Supervision is highly effective, with regular group supervision as well as individual sessions taking place. This high level of staff support, training and inspiring leadership promotes highly individualised and child-focused work as well as a drive to develop new practice initiatives and improve the service further.

Management monitoring of the work of the agency is excellent. It has a strong focus on quality as well as timeliness and on process. There is an impressive commitment to the needs of children and helping to prepare them for adoption. Once placed, the agency makes use of its excellent relationships with other professionals and services as well as its own workers to provide excellent levels of support for children and their adoptive families. The quality of individual work is closely supervised and monitored. Managers ensure that plans are kept under review and modified or changed where necessary. The agency reviews its practice based on feedback from adopters and other professionals, as well as its own learning. Strategic management is effective and the agency is well prepared for the development of the Regional Adoption Agency, of which it is to be a part.

The agency's adoption panel is rigorous in its work. It is thorough in its deliberations and makes clear and well-judged recommendations to the agency's decision-maker. Administrative processes are effective and support the panel well. Panel minutes provide a clear record of the panel's deliberations and recommendation. However, the minutes lack a record of the documents available to panel when considering the case concerned. This means that the basis on which the panel reaches its conclusion is not recorded as well as it could be. Agency decision-making is rigorous and based on full information.

The agency recruits adopters appropriately and is working to be more effective in this area. It works well with other agencies to help reduce the time that children wait for placements. It has a focus on children's needs and providing a good and timely service that is shared with wider professionals, and has led to a positive focus on this area. The agency's proactive and imaginative work with other agencies and professionals enhances children's lives through the very high levels of individualised support that it provides to children and their adoptive families. There is excellent working with partner agencies and social work teams, which improves the quality of service offered to both children and adopters. Adoption champions in all social work teams enable the agency to positively

influence permanence planning and adoption practice across the whole organisation. The organisation is highly committed to this effective joint working. This results in well-planned and implemented adoptions for children that are taking place in an increasingly timely manner. It also allows very effective work to help prepare children for adoption and their new families. There is a clear focus on the development of good-quality life-story books for children in a timely manner. All this work significantly enhances the outcomes achieved for children.

The agency has recently changed to a new electronic recording system, which complicated record-keeping during the migration of records from one system to the other. However, very close case supervision and oversight and highly effective monitoring ensure that records continue to be of good quality. Records relating to adopters are shared with them and are written to be accessible to them. Children's records, including child permanence reports and adoption placement reports, are of good quality. These are written in a way that ensures that updated information is clear and that the content would be understandable to a child referring to the document in later life. Children's opinions, wishes and aspirations are recorded clearly in these documents.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work with children, young people, adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families, and adult service users. 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, young people and adults whom 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: 1254834

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