

Adoptionplus Limited

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Adoptionplus is a Voluntary Adoption Agency that provides domestic adoption services, adoption support services, birth relative counselling and training services. The agency specialises in recruiting, assessing and preparing adoptive families for children with a history of trauma and attachment difficulties. All their adoptive families have access to a multi- disciplinary team of therapists until their child is 18. Families' therapeutic needs are regularly monitored and they are provided with individually tailored packages of therapeutic support, when they need it. In addition, the therapy service is also commissioned by local authorities, children and adolescent mental health services and by individual families who require pre and post adoption support. Adoptionplus also provides therapeutic counselling to adults in connection with adoption, through service level agreements (SLAs) which are in place with nine local authorities.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

Adoption plus is an extremely effective agency whose forward thinking and passionate approach to adoption provides outstanding outcomes for children. Since the last inspection it has maintained its high quality post adoption support services and has further developed in that it has recruited assessed and approved adopters. This has resulted in children who are generally over the age of four years who have been significantly hurt within their birth family being adopted.

This is an agency that has a total commitment to treating people fairly, openly and with respect throughout the process and adopters confirmed they felt nurtured and safe throughout the adoption journey.

Prospective adopters are exceptionally well prepared and their preparation supports the development of their understanding about the impact of neglect, trauma and loss

on the development of children. The assessments of prospective adopters are of an excellent quality and the approval processes are robust. This ensures that only those likely to be able to parent a child with such complex and diverse needs are approved to adopt.

While this agency does not have responsibility for the children placed with their adopters, it is firmly child focused and carries out, following matching, additional assessments of children in order that the agency and the adoptive parents are clear about the children's needs prior to placement. This also enables the agency, using its highly skilled therapeutic team to identify the appropriate support services that need to be in place.

The agency routinely seeks the views of people using its service at a variety of stages throughout the process and these feed into the development of services. However, although children's views are sought they are not formally taken into account in monitoring and developing the service. Feedback from other professionals working with the agency and commissioners of the services spoke exceptionally highly of the practice and commitment of staff.

The leadership and management of the agency are impressive. They are well respected and an imaginative group who learn from research and there is a real determination to get things right. From the members of the board to all members of the team there is a clear vision about the promotion of adoption and lifelong adoption support. They have developed ambitious plans to ensure the agency continues to provide a valuable contribution to adoption. The senior management team and board members are highly experienced and skilled and provide excellent oversight. All staff are passionate and committed to ensuring excellent outcomes for children and families.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that a formal system is developed that clearly shows that children's wishes, feelings and views have been taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service. (NMS 1.6)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

Children are encouraged and are exceptionally well supported to make progress in all aspects of their development. Their needs, including those relating to ability, ethnicity and identity are extremely well met. Children have a variety of skilled therapeutic support before and after placement to enable them to settle into their

new adoptive families. For example, one social worker commented on the 'excellent progress' one child had made; another said that the progress emotionally was 'really good'. Another social worker said, 'contact was being well supported.'

Children are encouraged and supported to develop a positive self-view and an understanding of their identity. Children are supported in contact arrangements, both direct and indirect, which meet their needs and which enhance their knowledge and understanding of their history. Workers meet with birth parents to really understand the child's history and to help the child with the numerous questions they want to ask.

Through training and preparation, adopters fully understand the benefits and risks of their children having contact with their birth family. This means that children maintain a link, in a safe way, to those who have been significant in their lives.

Children feel safe and are safe living within their families. They are well supported to develop, in most areas of their lives, extremely well despite their past experiences. Children are enabled to develop positive relationships with those around them and children do form secure attachments to their adopters.

Children's behaviour improves as it is managed well by adoptive parents, with tremendous support and guidance from the agency. Parents adapt their parenting styles to meet the needs of their child. One adopter said, 'It is about seeing things from the child's point of view,' and 'It's about supporting the child to manage stressful feelings and anger.'

Children and young people are well supported to achieve well in their education, in line with their potential. A great deal of support is put into schools in order for them to understand the needs of the adoptive child and how to manage the behaviour. This in turn allows the child to engage fully and to enjoy the school experience and therefore to enjoy learning.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

The agency is very inclusive and encourages enquiries from anyone who may be suitable to care for an adoptive child who has suffered abuse and trauma. Adopters said that they were made to feel very welcome when they first approached the agency and that this was the reason for them making their application.

The preparation, assessment and approval process is extremely rigorous and it focusses on the capacity to parent a child with unresolved trauma and attachment difficulties. A bespoke service is put in place which enables prospective adopters to be thoroughly attuned to meeting the needs of adoptive children. One children's social worker commented that the adopters would not have been able to parent such challenging children without the preparation, which she said was 'really exceptional.' The preparation training, which is integrated with the home study, results in very

analytical assessments of the competencies of applicants. This is further supported by an attachment style interview and a reflective functioning assessment to identify strengths and areas where support will be required. Applications are completed within timescales, unless there is a clear reason for a delay. Prior to placement and following placement, training is provided to key family and friends, so that they can better understand how to support the adoptive parents in their care of the children.

A thoughtful adoption panel, which comprises a very good mix of people with differing but relevant backgrounds and experiences of adoption, adds further rigour to the process by ensuring a thorough discussion of all the issues. Decision making is robust and the agency decision maker makes timely and well-considered decisions.

The agency demonstrates an exceptionally rigorous approach in ensuring adopters know and understand the implications of a child's needs and whether or not they can meet them. The agency carries out additional assessments to ensure there is as much information as possible prior to matching to ensure they capture all the historical events the child may have encountered. This provides an extra level of professional analysis and highlights the vulnerabilities of the match so that extra support can be provided at an early stage to maintain the stability of the placement. One adopter commented, 'The openness, helpfulness of the team and the therapeutic support available for the child, for us and our support networks were the key factors that enabled us to cope.'

As well as having an in-depth knowledge of how children's behaviour is affected by their previous experiences, adopters also demonstrate an extremely empathetic attitude towards birth parents. Contact arrangements are managed and supported effectively, including direct contact arrangements with birth parents and birth siblings, as well as indirect letterbox arrangements. One children's social worker commented that some outstanding work was carried out by the agency with a birth mother which enabled some really important answers to be given to the child as a result. This depth of understanding has helped children understand their history, develop a positive self-view and move forward.

Adoptive families are thoroughly supported; both before and after placement and after the adoption order is made. This support continues until the child reaches the age of 18. The therapeutic team who all have considerable experience in adoption and developmental trauma conduct the risk and protective exercise which determines the therapeutic needs of the child and the support the adoptive parents need to successfully parent the child. This therapeutic input is regularly reviewed to ensure the success of the placement. Adopters have said, 'This support has been brilliant.'

The agency employs a teacher/creative arts therapist and this has proved extremely effective in supporting adoptive families to understand their child within the school setting. Thorough assessments are conducted within school to ensure the child's educational needs can be met by teachers who are helped and trained to have a thorough understanding of how to manage a child with complex needs. This has resulted in children feeling safe and being more able to engage with school; to enjoy going and having the capacity to learn.

The agency works very effectively with birth parents in a number of ways, which also has a significant positive impact on their adopted children. It enables the birth parents to understand what has happened to them, but also helps them make effective contact arrangements with their children and contribute to their life journey work and heritage. Birth parents are very appreciative of the support, and surveys support the sensitive work that is carried out. All services are tailored to meet the individual's needs and are thoughtfully and sensitively delivered by experienced and well-qualified staff.

There is an exceptionally high degree of satisfaction with the agency, from stakeholders, other service users and adoptive families alike. More than one adopter said: 'I would certainly recommend this agency to other prospective adopters.' Children's social workers said: 'I am very impressed with the quality of work carried out' and 'absolutely fantastic.' Commissioners have commented, 'the agency really goes the extra mile to engage with birth parents' and 'impressed how they use research to underpin their practice.'

The service greatly values and respects those using its services and this is reflected in the written policies and procedures. The services are commissioned by local authorities and are supported by a written agreement, which is regularly reviewed. Those using the services are informed of their right to make representations and complaints and are helped to do so, if this is required. The service is committed to equality in practice and works hard to ensure that all service users are treated equitably regardless of race, religion, gender, sexuality or disability.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The safety and well-being of children placed for adoption has a high priority in this service. Children are placed with adoptive families who are exceptionally well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting and keeping them safe. Safeguarding, safe touch, attachment and managing behaviour form a significant part of the preparation course and on-going training ensures adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety. It is very much about understanding the impact that trauma and loss has on the development of children and how to keep them safe. Adopters are helped to develop appropriate strategies to manage the behaviour which results from abuse. The training is underpinned by very clear written communication from the agency, which ensures that adopters are fully aware of their and the agency's responsibilities with regard to safeguarding, child protection and behaviour management. The potential dangers of social networking sites are also emphasised. Helpful social story booklets for adopters and children are provided to reinforce the guidance.

Recruitment practices are robust for all members of staff and those panel members on the central list. This ensures that only those people assessed as safe are able to

work with children and service users. All staff are trained in safeguarding and this is regularly reviewed.

Adopters are assessed with safeguarding in mind. In addition to undertaking all the necessary checks and references, the workers have had additional training on the use of adult attachment style interviews to assess the attachment style and close relationships of individual adopters and their use of social support, as well as looking at the reflective functioning capacity of the adopters. Consequently, adopters demonstrate an excellent understanding of how a child's previous experience may affect their current behaviours. One adopter said: 'We were well prepared for the placement.' Thorough documentation about children when first placed gives adopters all the information they need to keep everybody safe. This enables them to put appropriate strategies in place to help deal with any situations. One adopter said, 'It is crucial that children who have suffered trauma feel safe...this may be the first time in their lives that they do feel safe.'

Once children are in placement they are visited regularly by both their own social worker and the adoption social worker and a member of the therapeutic team. Children know they can contact the social workers at the agency if they have any concerns they do not wish to share with their adoptive parents; there is clear information for them in the children's guide about this. This ensures that children have a variety of people to contact to share any worries.

Children's safety is also assured in practical terms by robust health and safety risk assessments in relation to the adopter's home environment.

Work with birth parents/relatives is underpinned by comprehensive and clear written guidance to staff, which recognises the potential vulnerabilities of those who access the counselling services. This, together with clear procedures which address historical abuse, ensure that these services are delivered in a safe and sensitive way.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the voluntary adoption agency are **outstanding**.

The agency has a well-planned, carefully focused and clearly thought out recruitment programme. This programme is regularly evaluated for its success in providing a diverse range of adoptive families to meet the needs of those children who the local authorities have found difficult to place.

All the written information, such as information for adopters, the Statement of Purpose and the children's guide, is clear, comprehensive, child focused, accessible, professionally presented and available in other formats so that it can be accessed by all members of the community. The website is particularly helpful with links to a variety of articles written by the service director and links to a free audio book for children to access. It ensures that people feel welcomed, whatever their backgrounds. The premises reinforce the agency's ethos of inclusivity. The building is

accessible, and very attractively decorated with the child in mind which reinforce the commitment to children of all abilities, ages and cultures. It is a very nurturing environment.

Leaders and managers have established rigorous monitoring at all levels, to ensure a high quality of service and identify areas where the agency can develop further. For example, managers routinely monitor records and case files, regularly discuss cases in supervision, and have a significant input into matching considerations. Service users are regularly consulted about their experiences of the service, and their views are given considerable weight. This has led to changes in the preparation training.

The agency has demonstrated a very good capacity for improvement based on its track record and it uses inspection to improve the already excellent services it provides. It has addressed the two recommendations from the last inspection and this means that all policies and procedures are reviewed and updated.

A significant strength of the agency is the calibre of its staff at all levels. They are committed, enthusiastic, and hard working as well as being knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and appropriately qualified. Managers support them through regular supervision and access to good quality training to ensure they retain their competence and up-to-date knowledge of adoption and therapeutic issues. The counsellors also receive professional clinical supervision alongside regular meetings with the manager and other counsellor colleagues. The staff team also have access to a range of consultants who are experts in the field of therapy. This ensures they deliver a child-focused service of an excellent quality. The agency invests in and learns from research; this is key to achieving good practice and excellent outcomes for children.

The agency has good relationships with a range of agencies, both in terms of the day- to-day work and in terms of the development of its services. A commissioner from a local authority stated he is, 'impressed with the team and their experience;' Another said, 'a real bespoke service to ensure they will be able to parent this child.'

Records are well maintained and clear and securely stored to ensure their confidentiality. The premises are fit for purpose and provide a pleasant place to work in and come to for a service.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for voluntary adoption agencies.