

Birmingham Children's Trust Adoption Agency

Birmingham Children's Trust Community Interest Company
1 Lancaster Circus, Birmingham, West Midlands B4 7DJ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency is managed by Birmingham Children's Trust Adoption. It was registered as a voluntary adoption agency by Ofsted on 19 March 2018. The voluntary adoption agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adoptive families, finds adoptive families for children referred by Birmingham Children's Trust and makes placements of children from other local authorities with its own adoptive families.

Since 1 April 2018, the agency has approved 31 adoptive families and placed 78 children for adoption. Thirty-six children have been placed for adoption with families recruited by the agency and 42 with externally recruited adopters.

The voluntary adoption agency provides support to adoptive families and operates a letterbox facility, which enables indirect contact between adopted children and their birth families. Work with adopted adults, including intermediary work and support to birth parents, is commissioned to another voluntary adoption agency.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 February 2019

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: first inspection

Overall judgement at last inspection: n/a

Enforcement action since last inspection: n/a

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- Highly skilled staff provide an individualised service across a range of adoption and adoption support services. They are passionate about their work and committed to providing the best service to adopted children and their adopted families.
- The agency recruits, assesses, prepares and trains prospective adopters well. This means that the adopters are well equipped to parent the children they go on to adopt and to provide them with stable and nurturing homes.
- The agency uses research to inform and understand the behaviours and responses of children to trauma, loss and attachment. This provides adoptive parents with an enhanced understanding of the impact of early trauma on their children's behaviour and emotions.
- Staff carefully match children with adopters. As a result, despite the complex issues involved in many placements, there are few adoption breakdowns.
- Staff deliver a range of training to adopters that is appropriate to their needs. This helps adopters to parent children in a therapeutic manner, to understand the complex needs that they may have and to meet children's needs as they grow and develop.
- The agency provides creative and proactive adoption support. Adoptive families and their children benefit significantly from this because it helps children develop and thrive in their families.
- The leadership and management of the agency are innovative and inspirational. Effective monitoring means that there is a focus on the development of the service and improving the quality of staff practice. This enables the agency to continue to improve.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- Children do not receive information about post-adoption support services.
- Staff knowledge of radicalisation and child sexual exploitation is limited. Consequently, they are unable to give up-to-date safeguarding guidance to their adoptive families.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the Children's Guide to adoption support services is provided to the child by the adoption agency. Ensure the guide is appropriate to the child's age and understanding and includes a summary of what the service sets out to do for children and is given to all children and/or their representatives. (National minimum standard 18.6)
- Ensure that the learning and development programme is evaluated for effectiveness at least annually and if necessary is updated. (National minimum standard 23.2)
Specifically, ensure that staff are aware of current safeguarding issues, for example radicalisation and child sexual exploitation awareness.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Warm, welcoming and knowledgeable managers and staff respond well to people who are considering adoption. This approach puts potential adopters at ease. Information evenings are informative, with good written information provided to people who attend. Staff continue to develop different marketing methods to promote the service and recruit adopters to ensure that the service recruits the families it needs.

The timeliness of the assessment and preparation of adopters is improving. Assessments consider applicants' motivation, suitability, aptitudes and resilience thoroughly. 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. Adopters describe preparation training as 'a fantastic experience', 'very comprehensive' and very 'informative'. The training modules cover a range of topics, including attachment disorder and the power of play, which adopters find simulating and thought provoking. As a result, assessments are thorough, and people are well prepared to adopt.

The agency's staff work effectively with children's placing social workers. Adoption team members are linked with area social work teams to promote early permanence planning and assist with, and advise on, the work necessary to fulfil these plans. Effective joint working means that adopters are linked with children without delay. In the last year, staff have matched most adopters with a child/children within a few months of their approval. When approved adopters are waiting for a child/children to be placed with them, managers have a good understanding of the reasons why.

The linking and matching of children with their future adoptive families is effective. Children are well prepared for adoption, even if this work means that it takes longer to make the adoptive placement. The agency uses 'bump into' meetings and life-appreciation days well, and these are highly valued by adopters. Staff sensitively manage introductions and the voice of the child is reflected well throughout this work. Staff support adopters to understand and use well-researched practice that considers children's sensory needs to facilitate their smooth transition into their new family. This care in the matching and making of placements helps to ensure that children achieve stability, and disruptions are rare. When disruptions do occur, managers ensure that they are subject to rigorous analysis to identify learning and inform practice development.

The agency's staff work effectively with children's social workers to ensure that life story books are made available to children and their adoptive families in a timely manner. This commitment to ensuring that life story work is undertaken helps children to have information about themselves and their origins to refer to as they grow up.

Children build trusted and secure relationships with their adoptive parents. They make significant progress in a relatively short time. From troubled early lives, children settle, begin to develop attachments and improve their confidence and their general health and well-being.

The agency's social workers are particularly skilled at supporting schools to meet children's

needs. They work well with the virtual school head and designated teachers to raise their awareness of the needs of adopted children in the city. Individual staff provide training in schools to help teachers and pastoral staff to understand attachment issues and how best to respond to the challenges that children may face in school. This is effective, with children engaging well with school and pre-school learning opportunities. Adopters are particularly positive about this aspect of support for their children. One adopter commented that without the actions of the agency's staff, '[My child] would have potentially been excluded had [Name of worker] not provided that link and support.'

Children's voices are at the forefront of practice. Their views are evident in case recording, as is their involvement in their adoption plan, attachment support plans and post-adoption contact arrangements. However, managers and staff have failed to ensure that children receive appropriate information about adoption support services. Managers have recognised this shortfall and have plans to develop a guide with assistance from members of a newly formed teen group.

The agency has developed a systemic, theoretical and proactive approach to adoption support. The range of support is spread across a range of different interventions from informal buddying with other approved adopters, therapeutic workshops and interventions, to more general social events such as stay and play and drop-in Saturdays. These offer adopters and their adopted children valuable opportunities to broaden their support networks.

The agency uses research to inform its response to understanding children's behaviours and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. These areas of informed practice are helping adopters to keep children safe and support their development. Clinical psychologists, employed by the agency, support the work undertaken by adopters and social workers. When necessary, the agency supports families to secure more specialist packages of adoption support through commissioned arrangements with external providers. Furthermore, the agency is highly effective in supporting families to access financial support from the Adoption Support Fund and has had a 100% success rate since registration.

Adopters value the agency's support. They report that this makes a significant difference to children's lives. One adopter wrote, 'The support itself has honestly been life changing. It has been a long journey and it hasn't always been easy, but now we feel equipped to parent [Name of child] the way he needs.' Another adopter stated, '[Name of worker] has been invaluable and without her support I don't know how our family would have managed. There is good chance our family would have imploded. The advice and support have made a very difficult situation bearable.'

The agency provides access to birth records for adopted adults in a sensitive manner. Staff assist adopted adults to gain some understanding of their early life and birth family. Intermediary work is provided via a local voluntary adoption agency under a service level agreement. This is regularly reviewed and evaluated to improve the take up of this service.

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

Good-quality assessments and pre-placement information about children ensure that adopters understand children's backgrounds and any issues that they may face because of their previous experiences. The preparation of adopters includes discussion about some of the risks that children may be exposed to as they get older. Ongoing support sessions allow the agency's staff to continue to monitor children's well-being and to provide support, if necessary. Adopters have access to a range of training to help them to understand the impact of early childhood trauma, including foetal alcohol syndrome, on children's development and behaviour. Effective adoption training and support helps adopters to manage the challenges that children may present as they get older. This helps adopters to continue to care for children safely and to protect them from risks that they might experience.

Children are safe and protected from harm within their adopted families. The agency takes a strong and proactive approach to safeguarding. Adopters fully understand the need to refer allegations of harm and who to refer these to. Staff recognise safeguarding issues and take adopters' concerns seriously. Suitable procedures are in place to deal with and respond to any allegations made about adopters or staff, although none has been made since the agency was registered.

The agency's staff work collaboratively with people in different departments in Birmingham Children's Trust and within good policy and procedural guidelines. Workers know children and their families well, spend time with them and are alert to their needs. This means that they are in a good position to respond should they become aware of any risk of harm. Effective supervision and monitoring by operational managers mean that any potential safeguarding matters are given close oversight.

All staff receive safeguarding training, but there has been no strategic approach to ensure that staff undertake training that updates their understanding of emerging safeguarding challenges, for example radicalisation, county lines and sexual exploitation. Consequently, some staff's knowledge is limited in these areas and so they are unable to give up-to-date safeguarding guidance to their adoptive families. Managers have recognised this and are putting in plans to address this.

Safe recruitment processes for staff, panel members and adopters help to ensure the suitability of these people to work with or care for children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Ambitious managers have a clear vision of excellence and innovation in adoption. The staff team is stable, experienced and highly motivated. This combination has led to innovative and creative practice to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

Within the agency, there is a culture of high expectations and commitment to children. This ethos is supported by managers who provide staff with strong supervision and guidance. This helps the staff to reflect on their practice and focus on helping children to thrive and achieve permanence in their adoptive family.

The agency's current manager joined the agency in January 2018, and staff describe her impact as 'inspirational'. One colleague said, 'She's passionate about adoption and her passion is infectious.' The manager recognises the agency's current strengths and areas for further development. She devises and implements effective plans to improve the service further.

Team members have manageable caseloads that enable them to work creatively to support children and their families. They have access to some excellent developmental training, which enables them to effectively assess, train and support adopters.

The breadth and effectiveness of the agency's adoption support work is directly attributable to the quality of leadership and management of the service and the highly committed team members who deliver this work. The support provided to adopters has been recognised on a national level, and the agency's innovative practices are being used to inform the development of centres for excellence in adoption support. As the project manager in a centre for excellence commented, 'We have collaborated in some key areas, learning from the service Birmingham has developed, which appears to be ahead of developments in this area when compared to many other local authorities and regional adoption agencies.'

Staff members receive excellent support from the management team. Observation and evaluation of practice, alongside group and individual supervision, peer learning and reflection, promote further development and practice initiatives. These enhance the stability of placements and improve outcomes for children. High staff support and inspirational leadership promote highly individualised and child-focused work. Furthermore, they help to drive new practice initiatives and improve the service further.

The agency is a learning organisation, and managers and staff reflect on things that have not gone so well, including disruptions, to improve practice. The agency has strong systems to quality assure and monitor its performance. Systems include regular audits, reflective practice sessions, quality assurance at the adoption panel and regular reporting on the progress of the agency from the adoption panel to management. Excellent monitoring and oversight enable the agency to deliver good services to children and adopted families.

Managers and staff regularly seek feedback from service users, which helps to inform and change practice. One adopter told the inspectors, 'I am particularly impressed that a recent review of the service was undertaken with a lot of effort by spending a day consulting with adopters about the different parts of the adoption journey. The outcome of this is that already some positive changes have been made.' One example of positive change is the introduction of new measures to support families with adoptive teens.

Panel members bring a range of experience of adoption, both personal and professional. The panel chairs are suitably experienced and knowledgeable. The adoption panel provides a robust quality assurance function, while being sensitive to the applicants attending panel. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on a regular basis on the quality of reports and presentation of social workers. This enables managers and staff to

address any issues swiftly. Managers keep panel members informed of developments in the agency, and panel members can attend regular training events. This helps to ensure that panel members keep up to date with changes in practice.

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 children and adopters. The agency is highly committed to this effective joint working, informed by outcome-based commissioning of specialist services. This results in well-planned and supported adoptions for children that are taking place in an increasingly timely manner.

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

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