

Families for Children Adoption Agency

Families for Children Trust

Higher Mill, Buckfast, Devon TQ11 0EE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

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 has a principal office in Buckfast, Devon. There are two small branches in Dorchester, Dorset, and in Filleigh, North Devon.

The agency offers a range of domestic adoption services to people who live in the counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Cornwall, and in the Isles of Scilly. The agency places children from all over Great Britain. It specialises in older children, those with complex needs and groups of brothers and sisters.

Families for Children in Buckfast also works with adults affected by adoption to provide birth records counselling, birth relative-initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work. The Buckfast and Filleigh offices are partners of the developing Adopt South West regional adoption agency.

The agency's Dorchester branch is part of Aspire, the regional adoption agency for Dorset, Poole and Bournemouth. It provides counselling, advice and support to birth parents from that region whose children have been placed for adoption. This branch also provides a range of other adoption services to children and families.

The service approved 26 adoptive families between January and December 2017, and 48 children in 31 families were placed for adoption. The agency received 90 adoption support referrals. At the end of December 2017, the agency had 163 open cases.

Inspection dates: 26 February to 6 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children, young people and adults, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The voluntary adoption agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the voluntary adoption agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children, young people and adults.

Date of previous inspection: 26 January 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding.

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- This agency provides a consistently high-quality, individually tailored service to children, young people, adult service users and adopters. One adopter said, 'The agency has always gone the extra mile to do everything possible to support us and guide us through the process. I would greatly recommend them to anyone considering adopting or seeking advice on adoption.'
- The outcomes for the vast majority of these children are outstanding. This applies equally to children with a variety of additional needs. Disabled children benefit from being placed with adopters who have highly specialised skills to support them. The agency provides very high levels of support to their adopters.
- Extremely rigorous assessment and approval processes ensure that prospective adopters are carefully selected. Adopters have a wide range of unique skills, experiences and personal qualities that can make a real difference to a child's life.
- Adopters receive excellent training and support to promote their children's health, well-being and education. Social workers frequently intervene to help children to achieve positive educational outcomes.
- Although the service is regional, it provides a wide range of courses and support groups locally. The agency organises groups on a responsive basis, so that any event requested will be run if there is sufficient interest.
- The agency's leaders and managers are vastly experienced and skilled in providing a

voluntary adoption service. They have strong links with a wide range of other organisations, from central government committees to other voluntary adoption agencies and adoption support agencies, many of which are outstanding in their own right. These collaborative relationships open up numerous opportunities for learning, development and providing excellent adoption support services.

- The adoption agency is involved in a number of innovations, including the development of two regional adoption agencies. In collaboration with an adoption support agency it has also set up Atrium, a bespoke therapeutic service which brings together a wide range of professionals to support children and families.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The adoption agency should ensure that file records for panel members can show evidence of a person's full employment history. The agency should maintain an audit trail for the identity of or other personal information about staff and members of the panel that has been destroyed in order to comply with data protection legislation.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the agency can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of staff, volunteers and persons on the central list. This includes Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. In particular, ensure that records of full employment history are kept for members of the adoption panel. Also ensure that when evidence of identity checks is destroyed, an audit trail is maintained to show that this information has been obtained. (NMS 21.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children, young people and adults: outstanding

This agency provides a service of outstanding quality to children, young people, adult service users and adopters. The outcomes for the vast majority of children and young people, many of whom have considerable additional needs, are extremely good.

Adopters commented very favourably on the recruitment, assessment and approval process. They considered that the process was fair and transparent. One adopter commented, 'I am thinking of adopting again, and I wouldn't go anywhere else'. Any prospective adopters who are not likely to be approved are supported at an early stage to consider withdrawing from the process. This ensures that only the most suitable people are approved to adopt.

As a result of extremely well-informed and careful matching, children live in safe and secure families. Therapeutic parenting and excellent post-adoption support enable them to build relationships and begin to recover from past trauma. This helps children to make excellent progress in relation to their starting points.

In the past three years, the agency has placed 28 groups of brothers and sisters to help to keep birth family members together. One couple has adopted a group of five children from one family. This is in itself a significant achievement, particularly so since the children are all making extremely good progress.

In a predominantly White area of the country, the agency was able to recruit two couples of dual-heritage background who have adopted children of similar heritage from the same birth family. These children could not be placed together in the same family, but the couples' close proximity and ability to work together enable the children to keep in frequent touch with each other.

One young person talked about the excellent progress that she has made since being placed for adoption. She has very strong attachments to both parents and, with her mother, enjoys a shared love of history. She is doing very well at school and is currently taking mock GCSE exams. This young person's sense of security means that she has ambitions and a clear idea of her future career.

Careful matching and diligent support during the sensitive time around introductions increase the chances of a successful placement. Some adopters have experienced difficulties with insufficient information provided by their child's placing authority. Others have experienced problems with the management and conduct of the introductions. The agency provides outstanding support during these challenges. One adopter remarked that, had it not been for her social worker, who made herself available at extended hours of the day and night to reassure and encourage the family, she would have given up halfway through the introductions with her child.

The children and young people are regularly consulted and encouraged to express their

views. During the inspection, they took part in the interviews for a new chief executive officer, which is good practice.

Post-adoption support is outstanding. The service employs highly experienced professionals, and has access to clinical supervision and therapeutic services. The agency makes a strong commitment to every child whom it places for adoption to provide lifelong support, if required. This unusual level of support makes a major difference to children's safety and helps to prevent family breakdown.

One child, who is deaf, was placed with an adoptive parent who has a high level of training in British Sign Language and in deaf education generally. This set of skills enables her to support her child. The parent explained that her son is now signing well and is able to communicate. This makes an enormous difference to his everyday life and educational potential.

The agency supports adopters to find schools in which the staff have the appropriate skills to help the child. Social workers go into schools to help school staff to understand the challenges faced by adopted children and their parents. This can make a major difference to the child's chances of maintaining a school place.

The agency has obtained a government grant for post-adoption support services. Together with Psychology Associates, an outstanding adoption support agency, this service has developed a multi-agency support provision called Atrium. This offers specialist assessments and comprehensive support through a combined team of clinical and educational psychologists, occupational therapists and social workers.

One parent explained that one of their sons had a sensory assessment which identified the need for occupational therapy. This has been instrumental in helping their son to cope with the sensory overload that can occur in unstructured, noisy times in school. As a result, this child is now managing in school and achieving well.

The agency makes excellent use of Music Zone, based in Plymouth. A young person who regularly attends Music Zone explained that her confidence has increased greatly since she started to go there. She can now sing in public with the other young people who attend the group. This young person showed the inspector a DVD of a recent performance, where her confidence and professionalism were clear to see.

Social workers described significant improvements in children's lives as a result of the post-adoption support provided. One child was described as 'barely able to sit down, sleep, eat or drink' when he moved to his adoptive family. As a result of the agency's support, he is now much more settled. He has a strong attachment to his adoptive parent, and is eating and sleeping well. He is also popular in school, which helps to motivate him and support his educational achievements.

Training for adopters and their families is extensive. The practice managers in the two small branch offices explained that they run bespoke local workshops to train adopters in their local areas. For example, one member of staff has run training on foetal alcohol syndrome for eight adoptive parents. Further workshops are planned on helping children

to move on. The agency also runs a workshop for families and friends of adopters to provide important guidance to them about how to support the new family. The North Devon branch also runs an adoption support group and a parent and toddler group. The Dorset branch office is setting up a group for teenage young people, by popular request.

The agency provides high-quality life-story work to children who are going through or who have completed the adoption journey. This helps the children to gain an understanding of their history and identity, and helps to sustain the adopted children in their families.

Birth records counselling for adults affected by adoption is provided at the Buckfast principal office. The agency also undertakes tracing and intermediary work.

Birth families receive excellent support through the Aspire regional adoption agency's Birth Family Matters service. Families for Children has been instrumental in the development of Aspire, and is leading on this work.

Birth family members may have been involved in an adversarial legal process and, as a result, they may be difficult to engage in therapeutic work. The agency has had considerable success in encouraging birth family members to take up the offer of support. At the time of the agency's last quarterly report, it had 22 family members working with it and eight new referrals. The agency works collaboratively with other professionals involved, such as drugs and alcohol services, to help some people to turn their lives around.

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

Safeguarding is the highest priority for this service. Prospective adopters are rigorously checked during their assessment to help to ensure that only suitable people are put forward for approval. This includes detailed checks on the applicants' previous relationships, particularly when there were children in the household.

Adopters who were interviewed during the inspection praised the quality of the training that they receive, both before and after approval. This includes training in the potential impact of abuse, neglect and maternal use of drugs and alcohol on children's neurological and social development. Specialist training in attachment and therapeutic parenting ensures that adopters are extremely well prepared to meet the challenges that lie ahead in terms of parenting traumatised children.

The agency recruits a diverse range of adopters, who are assertive and champion their children's rights. Adopters are well able to recognise the impact of past trauma and abuse on children's development and behaviour.

The agency works very effectively with local authorities to protect children at risk of harm. Risks are managed very well. The high level of safeguarding experience in the team ensures that risks are properly evaluated. The agency does not take precipitate action which could make the situation worse for the child.

Adopters' homes undergo rigorous health and safety checks to identify any hazards before

a child is placed. Risk assessments are updated annually to reflect any changes, for example new pets.

Adoptive parents praised the high-quality support that they had received to help them to establish and maintain behavioural boundaries with their children. One parent, who has experienced highly distressed, violent behaviour from their child, said that Families for Children provided individual psychological support for all the children in the family. 'I cannot describe what a difference this work made to our family... we would not be together as a family if it wasn't for the agency.'

The agency has received 10 complaints in the last year. Detailed records show that these were handled fairly and proportionately. In some cases, an independent investigator was asked to review the complaint. Written responses to complainants are balanced and well judged. The agency's strong commitment to reflective practice ensures that, if any aspect of a complaint is upheld, the managers and staff learn from the experience.

Many of the staff are recruited from child protection backgrounds and receive regularly updated training to ensure that they have the latest information about safeguarding children. Managers and staff are willing to challenge other agencies rigorously, yet always professionally, to ensure a child-centred response. On the rare occasions when allegations had been made about prospective adopters, the agency responded swiftly and escalated any concerns to the local authority social worker and designated safeguarding officer.

The staff have a detailed understanding of the vulnerabilities of adopted adults. Adopted adults with particular vulnerabilities, for example mental health difficulties, are urged to seek help for their problems before proceeding with contact with their birth family.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: outstanding

Leadership and management are outstanding. This long-established agency has strong links with government and national organisations to promote adoption for children and families.

Collaborations with a wide range of other services and local authorities enable the agency to develop innovative services for children, birth parents, adopted adults and adopters. Leaders and managers are involved in sharing excellent practice with other voluntary adoption agencies across the country. For example, the agency has been closely involved in the development of the Aspire and Adopt South West regional adoption agencies, also the South West Adoption Consortium.

The chief executive officer has worked for the agency for 25 years. She is a highly regarded adoption professional who was recently given a lifetime achievement award in recognition of her work. She was awarded the Order of the British Empire in 2014 for services to adoption. The responsible individual sits on the all-party parliamentary committee for adoption and has been closely involved in the development of the regional adoption agencies.

The head of operations is also highly knowledgeable. She is responsible for the day-to-day management of the service. She has led the agency in a number of new areas for

development. For example, she has ensured that the agency is ready for the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation 2018. For adoption, this new regulation means that there have to be even more rigorous safeguards around prospective adopters providing consent for data to be held by the agency.

The agency strives for continuing improvement in all areas. Managers ensure that statutory timescales are adhered to in terms of assessment and approval. All work is scrutinised carefully to maintain the highest standards and consistency. For example, prospective adopter reports are very well written. They contain excellent, detailed analysis of the prospective adopters' strengths and areas of vulnerability. The adoption panel also plays an important role in the quality assurance process. Thorough assessments mean that the panel does not have to ask the social worker to return at a later date with more information.

There are clear lines of professional responsibility through the service's manager, the chief executive officer and the board of trustees. Trustees are chosen for their specific skills and experiences, and undertake a strategic role.

In common with other voluntary adoption agencies, this service has experienced significant challenges over the past three years. At the last inspection, the agency had received an expansion grant and was in the process of growth in all areas. To this end, it opened three new small branches in Cornwall, North Devon and Somerset to provide a local service to adopters and children. This was in addition to the branch in Dorchester, which had already been established. As a result of the national decline in the numbers of children placed for adoption, the service reduced the number of branches to three. This has enabled the service to remain financially viable and to continue with its work.

The agency shows the highest level of commitment to children and adult service users, irrespective of their cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. The staff regard the agency as an excellent employer. They are delighted to be able to practise creatively, and spoke about the rewards of practising responsive, child-focused social work.

Staff are highly trained. All social work staff hold a qualification at level 1 in dyadic developmental practice, and several staff have a level 2 qualification. They are also trained in an internationally acclaimed attachment-based therapeutic parenting technique. This enables them to work well with adoption support services that use the same therapeutic model. The adoption panel members have two training days each year, and are also welcome to join training events for adopters and staff.

Management monitoring is excellent. The agency uses an electronic recording system which supports the work effectively. The database used provides leaders and managers with the facility to monitor all aspects of the agency's operations. The agency sends annual data analyses to Ofsted. This ensures that the inspectorate is fully aware of the agency's performance.

The agency's managers are highly reflective and learn from experience. They analyse any disruptions, complaints and safeguarding incidents to provide learning for staff and panel members.

At the last inspection, one recommendation was made in relation to the timing of notifications to Ofsted. The agency took action immediately after the last inspection to remedy this. The stability and safety of children placed for adoption mean that notifications are very rarely necessary. The agency's managers seek advice from Ofsted appropriately with regard to the need to notify significant events.

The service has a clear statement of purpose, which is available on its website. This document is updated when necessary. The agency produces a number of different children's guides to adoption and adoption support. These are very child friendly and advise children on what to expect from the service. The guides for older children also contain information about how to seek extra help or advocacy. Some minor updates were required.

Throughout its long history as a voluntary adoption agency, this service has built and maintained excellent working relationships with a wide range of organisations. These include working with local authorities to set up regional adoption agencies and with healthcare professionals to provide therapeutic services. The agency also works with other voluntary adoption agencies, such as Parents and Children Together. This collaborative relationship has led to improvements in access to online training and other benefits for both agencies.

The agency is not afraid to challenge local authorities, particularly with regard to slow processing of adoption support applications. This can be a major cause of delay in providing services, but the practitioners associated with this agency ensure that this does not have a negative impact on children and families receiving a service. The agency's leaders and managers show a great ability to challenge constructively yet maintain excellent working relationships with other organisations.

The agency works in an anti-discriminatory way. For example, prospective adopters who have positive attributes yet have been rejected by other agencies can receive targeted help to enable them to provide a loving, permanent home for children. Managers balance positive attributes with any concerns. For example, if a prospective adopter needs help to move on from previous experiences in their lives, the agency provides therapy to support them through this process. Adopters who were offered this service found it to be very beneficial. They reported that they would not have been able to proceed with an application without this support.

Adopters, staff and panel members are recruited safely. Recruitment files are very well organised and the staff responsible have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. The only shortfall found during this inspection was in the employment checks on panel members. The agency thought that, because panel members are volunteers, they did not require the same level of checks as paid staff. There were some gaps in employment history for panel members and for one member of staff. These were resolved during the inspection. When personal data obtained for the purposes of checking identity is destroyed, there is no record to show what has been destroyed with the date of disposal. A recommendation has been made.

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 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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