

D F W Adoption

DFW Adoption

Agriculture House, Stonebridge, Durham DH1 3RY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

DFW Adoption is a stand-alone, well-established voluntary adoption agency that has been operating in Durham since 1910. It is a registered charity, and a company limited by guarantee.

The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves adopters for domestic adoption only. It works with local authorities nationwide to place children with these families. It provides a range of adoption support, both before and following an adoption order, to sustain these placements. The agency also provides birth records counselling and intermediary services for adults whose adoptions were arranged by the agency or its predecessor, and their birth relatives. It has a service level agreement with a local authority to manage the local authority's postbox, and to provide independent support to the birth parents of that local authority whose children are being, or have been, adopted.

Between 1 April 2016 and 31 March 2017, the agency approved four adoptive families and it cooperated with local authorities to place six children for adoption. At the time of this inspection, 10 adoptive families were waiting for placements, and seven were in the process of being assessed. In addition, 15 packages of post-adoption support were being provided.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 May 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Outstanding
How well children and parents are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Good

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 and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 25 January 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: Outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection:
None

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because

- A consistently high standard of social work practice ensures that children and adult service users experience a service of exceptional quality.
- The agency has an inclusive ethos. Applicants are positively encouraged to contact the service, regardless of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.
- The agency has a well-structured, research-based bespoke service to prepare the children of prospective adopters. This provides children with the opportunity to explore their feelings and voice their opinions about adoption to a social worker who is independent of their parents' assessing social worker. This contributes towards placement stability.
- Therapeutic intervention, based on a well-researched model of practice, provides adoptive parents with an enhanced understanding of the impact of early trauma on their children's behaviour and emotions. They are equipped with strategies to respond very effectively.
- An extremely well-administered postbox service, together with a dedicated and committed social worker who works with birth parents, supports birth parents to maintain their contact agreements for the benefit of children's identity and heritage.
- Work with adult service users is of the highest quality. It is delivered by passionate, committed and sensitive social workers with a strong knowledge base of the issues and the findings of recent research.
- There is a strong focus on safeguarding children and adult service users.
- Leaders and managers are committed to supporting staff to ensure that they provide a high-quality service. There is a learning culture that permeates through the agency. Staff and managers are always looking for ways to develop and improve the service.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development

- The agency has not reviewed the approval of adopters in a timely way. This has not had a detrimental impact on adopters or children, as there were specific reasons why these reviews were delayed. Nevertheless, it is a breach of regulations.
- The agency's decision-maker has a social work qualification but is not a social worker as he is not registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. This has not had a negative impact, due to his knowledge, experience and professional background.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The adoption agency must review the approval of each prospective adopter in accordance with this regulation unless a child is placed for adoption with the prospective adopter.</p> <p>A review must take place whenever the adoption agency considers it necessary but otherwise not more than one year after approval and thereafter at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 29(1) and (2))</p>	<p>28/07/2017</p>

Recommendations

- The decision-maker is a senior person in the adoption agency or is a trustee or director of the voluntary adoption agency, who is a social worker with at least 3 years post-qualifying experience in child care social work and has knowledge and experience of permanency planning for children, adoption and childcare law and practice. (National minimum standard 23.17)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

An exceptionally high standard of social work practice enables children and adult service users to make sustained progress and have positive experiences throughout their life. The agency's adopters are prepared and supported to care for children who are deemed 'harder to place' because of their age, level of needs, ethnicity, or because they are part of a sibling group. This provides those children with the opportunity, which they otherwise may not have, to experience family life from a secure and permanent base. No placements have been disrupted in the last 18 months, and there is a history of good placement stability. This promotes the development of good attachments, self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Adopters, children and other professionals have a very positive view of the agency. One social worker said: 'The whole journey has been very positive. We were on the same page, and we had a close working relationship.' Feedback from children who have been involved in aspects of the service is also positive. For example, one child said: 'It has definitely been helpful and it was fun.' Adopters are similarly positive. Comments include: 'I'm pleased I chose DFW'; 'I thank my lucky stars that I chose them, they are only a phone call away'; and, 'I can't praise them enough.'

Enquirers feel welcomed and respected when they contact the agency. They receive a prompt response, and they are given time to talk. The quality of written and verbal information is excellent. This enables enquirers to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to proceed. The agency is very open to consider applicants who, at first glance, may present with more complex issues, as it understands that complexity also builds resilience, which is a vital quality in adoptive parenting.

Adopters feel well prepared for the challenges that adoptive parenting can bring. The four-day preparation training is excellent. It provides detailed information, it embraces different learning styles, and it encourages reflection and interaction. This is enhanced by presentations from a birth parent, a young adult adoptee, and adopters. The impact of personal testimony, particularly from the birth parent and adoptee, is powerful in promoting a more empathetic understanding of the birth family, and the need of an adopted person to have a positive view of their identity. This increases the likelihood of maintaining successful contact arrangements in the future.

One example of exemplary child-focused practice is the 'preparing children in the family for adoption' service. This is a research-based, structured and well-thought-out piece of work. It ensures that any children in the prospective adopters' family are thoroughly consulted by a social worker who is independent of the prospective adopters' assessing social worker. This empowers children to give their views, express any worries, and ask any questions about the process. A report on this work is prepared that informs the assessment, the panel recommendation and the agency decision. Research tells us that existing children in an adoptive family is a vulnerability, therefore this piece of work is fundamental in promoting placement stability.

Adopter assessments are timely yet thorough, and any delays usually occur in stage one and are out of the control of the agency. The prospective adopter reports are analytical and comprehensive, thereby providing a good basis on which the adoption panel can make its recommendation. Once an adopter is approved, the social worker and adopters agree on a matching plan to ensure that expectations and roles are clearly defined. This is another example of excellent practice, as the post-approval period has no timescales and can be difficult to manage emotionally. The waiting adopters group is also helpful in keeping adopters' interests focused, as well as providing additional training to enhance their skills and knowledge.

Matching is very well considered, and adopters feel very well supported. Social workers are tireless in obtaining any additional information required to enable adopters to consider fully whether they have the capacity to meet the child's needs. Social workers also act as advocates to ensure that the plan for introductions takes into account the needs of all parties. One adopter commented: 'The social worker was good at keeping us grounded, and good at getting information.' This supports placement stability.

Children do well once they are placed with their adoptive families. From troubled early lives, they settle, they begin to develop attachments, and they improve their confidence and their general health and well-being. They make friends, they take part in a range of activities and they experience positive family life. One adopter described her child as 'really flying'. Another adopter said: 'There has been a massive improvement, he has settled beautifully.'

Support is an area of strength, both pre- and post-adoption order. Adopters say that they receive a prompt, non-judgemental response, and one adopter said of the social worker: 'She is at my beck and call!' Another adopter, commenting about her social worker, said: 'She has helped a lot. She provided lots of advice and ideas and was a godsend.' Another adopter commented: 'I could not have got through it without her. She reassured me so much and helped me carry on.' Adopters also have access to support groups, coffee mornings, training and social events, all of which provide opportunities to have contact with the agency and other adopters, and for children to meet up with each other at the social events.

The agency is able to provide play therapy and a therapeutic skills group because some staff have additional qualifications. These are highly effective interventions that attract very positive feedback from adopters on the difference it makes to their parenting ability and their understanding of what lies behind their children's behaviour and emotional trauma. The agency also has access to an independent social worker who is experienced in post-adoption depression. These specialist resources support adoptive parents when they are faced with challenges, and enable them to continue more positively. One adopter said of the group: 'I was running on empty and felt overwhelmed. I now feel well in control and can handle any ups and downs.' Support is perceived as 'a lifeline' and 'a lifesaver', and one adopter said: 'I know they are going to be there for us as long as I need them.' Both the therapeutic skills group and play therapy equip adopters with strategies to 'go it alone' and are beneficial in building better relationships and long-lasting attachments between adopters and their children.

The service level agreement with a local authority provides the agency with the opportunity to have the contact with birth parents that it otherwise would not have. This provides the agency with learning opportunities that it takes into its work with adopters and children to enhance their knowledge and understanding. The postbox is managed very efficiently and effectively. The postbox administrator is experienced, sensitive and empathetic, and her approach promotes positive contact arrangements for the benefit of the children. Likewise, the work with birth parents in helping them with letter writing is instrumental in supporting contact. One birth parent said: 'I probably wouldn't have written any letters without him. I am grateful that I have got that help.' Postbox arrangements can continue into adulthood, and there are still a small number of contacts that are facilitated between adults who were adopted through this agency's predecessor many years ago.

The agency also works with adult adoptees and their birth relatives, and this high-quality work makes a real difference to their lives. Social workers demonstrate significant commitment and passion, as well as knowledge, understanding and sensitivity. For example, one adult service user said of the social worker: 'From the first contact I felt so comfortable. Without her support I would not have got where I am today. I always got a quick response, she was professional, warm and understanding, and went the extra mile.'

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

This is a safe service, where the well-being of children and adult service users is placed at the centre of practice. Staff and panel member recruitment is robust, to ensure that, as far as possible, only people who are suitable and safe have access to children and adult service users.

The preparation training and assessment place a very strong focus on ensuring that prospective adopters have a realistic understanding of the impact of children's previous life experiences, trauma and abuse on their behaviour and attachments once placed within an adoptive family. This is reinforced through the matching process, home visits, and through accessing the variety of support available, such as the adopter skills course and play therapy. This enables adopters to develop the skills to parent in a therapeutic way. Risks from social media are also addressed in the adopter training and assessment process, and once children are in placement.

Adopters are well supported to keep children safe, when, for example, children display no awareness of stranger danger, or are overly and inappropriately demonstrative. Adopters are made aware of strategies to use, such as 'cuddle lists', to keep children safe and develop a better understanding and awareness. Adopters are also clear about the agency's no-smacking policy, and sign up to this during their training.

Adults also experience a safe service that balances the needs of all parties before decisions are made about disclosing information or facilitating contact. Social workers have a very good understanding of the potential risks to adopted adults and birth family members, and these are managed sensitively and safely. For example, one service user commented: 'The social worker held me back from releasing personal details at one point as it was too soon.' In another example, the social worker diligently sought information

from an involved partner agency before commencing any of the work, to ensure that the prospective service user's well-being would not be jeopardised by the contact.

Staff have a robust understanding of safeguarding procedures and their roles and responsibilities to keep children safe from harm. Safeguarding procedures have been recently updated to reflect risks from extremism, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour-based violence, as well as sexual exploitation. This has been supported by staff training that included risks from radicalisation and extremism. There are appropriate links with the designated officer, who has seen and commented on the updated procedures. Although there have been no recent safeguarding concerns, there are clear procedures to ensure that these are reported promptly to the relevant agencies.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: good

The agency is led and managed effectively by an appropriately qualified and experienced director, who is supported by a similarly qualified and experienced team manager. Together they form an approachable and accessible management team that is well respected by the staff, both for its knowledge and its management style. The staff team is qualified, experienced, knowledgeable, skilful and passionate about ensuring the best possible outcomes for children, families and adult service users.

There is a culture of high expectations, innovation and ambition that permeates throughout the agency. Staff feel well supported by the agency in terms of regular, reflective supervision, access to training and the agency's commitment to enable the therapeutic practitioners to have clinical supervision, external training and peer supervision to enhance their practice. This has been particularly beneficial for the adopter skills group, as the staff concerned really benefit from the additional support to reflect on and improve that course. As a result of this supportive environment, staff demonstrate a high degree of passion and commitment for the work that they do, as well as a very good knowledge and skill base.

The agency has faced some challenges since the last inspection because the numbers of children requiring an adoptive placement have decreased considerably. The trustees have made some difficult decisions in relation to the staff complement in order to ensure that the agency continues to function and remain financially viable. It is to everyone's credit that this has had no impact on the commitment and passion of staff to continue to produce work of the highest standard. Children and adult service users have remained at the centre of their practice, and ways to improve the service are always under consideration. This ensures that adopters continue to support their children to do well.

The agency is a learning organisation, and managers and staff reflect on things that have not gone so well, including complaints, in order to improve practice. Managers use a variety of monitoring systems to identify strengths, shortfalls and areas for development, including feedback from service users. This is being formalised, extended and improved to make it more wide-ranging and meaningful. The annual adopter well-being checks are a good model of practice that facilitate feedback from people who may no longer have a formal or active relationship with the agency. Trustees also provide robust oversight, and receive regular reports to enable them to fulfil their role effectively.

Tolerance, equality and diversity underpin all of the agency's work. Enquirers are welcomed without prejudice, regardless of sexual orientation, marital status, gender identity, ethnicity or disability. The agency has taken part in two projects that actively promoted inclusion for people with a disability, and those from other ethnic backgrounds. This has resulted in an increased number of approved adopters with more diverse characteristics, and although some projects have ceased, the inclusive ethos remains. Specific information for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender enquirers reinforces the agency's commitment to inclusivity.

Professional relationships are of a high quality. There is a long standing and effective service level agreement with a local authority to administer the postbox, and provide independent birth parent support. This is viewed positively by the local authority, but it also brings benefits to this agency by enhancing social workers' practice through the knowledge that working with birth parents and contact issues brings. There are good links with the consortium that have been enhanced by the director's active involvement with the regional adoption agency agenda. There are also effective links with other voluntary adoption agencies to share good practice. However, the agency is not afraid to challenge partners if it feels that children are being let down and not getting the service that they are entitled to.

The recommendation with regards to case records has been met, and social workers now ensure that they note when they request information from local authorities. Formal file audits have been introduced, and this is being embedded into practice. The electronic system that has been introduced since the last inspection is generally working well, but it is being adapted to make sure that it is fully fit for purpose. This ensures that an accurate and appropriate record of the agency's actions and decision making is available for service users, should they request it in the future.

The agency recruits adopters who can meet the needs of children waiting for adoption, and it is responsive to the needs of local authorities. Because of the decreasing numbers of children requiring adoptive placements, a number of approved adopters have been waiting for placements for over a year. Reviews of their approval have not always been undertaken within the necessary timescales, and although this has not had an impact on children, it is a breach of regulatory requirements.

The adoption panel provides robust oversight of the work of the agency. It is administered well, the panel chair is very experienced and knowledgeable, and panel members provide a breadth of knowledge and experience, both personal and professional. This promotes the approval of safe and secure adoptive placements. The agency decision is made in good time, based on the panel's considered recommendation, and thorough and timely minutes. However, although the agency decision maker has a social work qualification and relevant experience, he is not registered with the Health Care Professions Council and is therefore not a social worker, as recommended by the adoption national minimum standards. This has not had an impact because of the individual's knowledge base and experience, but it is a shortfall that has gone unnoticed.

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 differences 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

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Ros Chapman, social care inspector



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