

D F W Adoption

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Valerie Shephard
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Service information

Brief description of the service

D F W Adoption (DWF) is a voluntary adoption agency, which has operated in the Diocese of Durham since 1907.

The agency offers a comprehensive range of services in relation to current and past adoptions. This includes the recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters, adoption support, training and consultancy.

The agency is registered as a voluntary adoption agency, offering intermediary services under Section 3 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and operates under the terms of the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005.

The agency works exclusively in the field of adoption and provides a wide range of services in relation to current and past adoptions.

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**.

The agency has an exceptionally strong track record in providing high quality services to all parties connected to adoption. The recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adoptive parents is robust and subject to efficient scrutiny by a highly committed panel. This ensures that only those prospective adopters, who demonstrate they have the ability to parent effectively and safely, are able to do so.

The agency is highly effective in ensuring that there is no avoidable delay in placing children with approved adoptive families. The practice of commencing family finding early enables potential links to be made often prior to adopters' approval. This ensures the speedy placement of children who are awaiting a family.

Successful working relationships with other agencies ensure that children's individual needs are promptly met. Effective links with therapeutic and child and adolescent mental health services provide support to adopted children. Wherever possible the

agency seeks children's views and these inform practice and the development of services.

All work with adults, either birth relatives of adult adoptees, is carried out in an extremely sensitive and supportive manner and is highly valued by the service user.

The agency is exceptionally well managed and administered, and staffed by professional workers with extensive knowledge and experience in adoption. The agency has proved to be highly effective in the delivery of adoption services over a number of years. There is a clear focus on achieving the best outcomes for all service users and the agency continues to adapt and develop to meet these needs.

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 entries in records clearly evidence efforts made by the agency to obtain important information for children, and that actions and decisions are clearly expressed, signed and dated. (NMS 27.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Children make excellent progress in all areas of their development supported by adopters who have a comprehensive understanding of their needs. Outcomes in relation to health and education are extremely good and staff ensure adopters obtain the best provision for their children. Children benefit from the agency's parenting programme which offers families an excellent opportunity to forge and strengthen relationships and consequently attachments. The hosting of social events for adoptive families offers the chance for children to meet other adopted children. This is of benefit to their social and emotional development in the short and long term.

Overall placements are stable and outcomes are superb in relation to the sustainability of adoptive placements. Where placements are fragile, the agency can access a range of support services to assist with specific issues. Social workers are strong advocates for adopted children and ensure that those who receive adoption support are having their needs met. They act as champions to ensure that children and young people benefit from effective support. Direct work with children is skilled, sensitive and purposeful. The provision of a play therapist within the team assists families who are experiencing problems with their children's behaviour. For example, support is offered to children and their families where bullying in school, or anger management are evident.

As a voluntary adoption agency, the service is not responsible for care planning for

children. Consequently it is not involved in adoption plans including decisions in relation to contact with birth families. Nevertheless, the agency is proactive in promoting contact and supporting adoptive parents to fulfil their obligations in this respect. Children benefit from having contact with significant people from their past which assists with their identity and the maintenance of established attachments.

In addition to the provision of counselling, the agency undertakes exceedingly creative and sensitive work with birth families. For example, they are often able to engage family members in the collation of meaningful life story material. This assists children in later life in their understanding of their backgrounds and reasons for adoption. They also help birth families to write compassionate letters to their children; which enables adopted children to gain a fuller picture of their history.

Quality of service

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

The agency has an effective and committed approach to the recruitment of prospective adoptive families. They successfully recruit families from all sectors of society who can provide homes for children with diverse and complex needs. The agency deals with initial enquiries promptly and efficiently and adopters say they feel valued by the agency from the outset.

Rigorous preparation, training and assessment of adopters equip them with the knowledge and skills to parent adopted children effectively and sensitively. The preparation thoroughly covers the effects of neglect and abuse on children and the types of problems which may arise. The provision of a 'waiting adopters group' assists prospective adopters to remain focused and involved during the period they are awaiting a placement. Children consequently benefit when placed with adopters who have maintained their enthusiasm and are ready to parent them.

The agency supports the adoptive family, both before and after placement. While the agency is not responsible for the preparation of the child, they are responsible for the whole adoptive family. The agency undertakes innovative preparation work with existing children to prepare them for the realities of living with an adopted sibling. This preparation is highly valued by parents and children. Adopted children benefit from moving into a family prepared for their arrival. This increases the opportunities for healthy attachments to develop and consequently for the placement to sustain.

The agency develops excellent relationships with adoptive families. This enables social workers to vigilantly monitor the emotional needs of all family members, including any existing children. They respond to any needs with sensitivity and act promptly at the early signs of difficulties. This ensures the early identification of problems and potential support needs. Social workers are excellent advocates for children and families and have well established links with education and health services.

There are well established and effective working relationships with a number of local

authorities. One local authority commissions the agency to provide specific adoption services on their behalf. These are in relation to birth family counselling and support, and the management of their post box service. There is fruitful engagement with birth families referred for counselling and the agency undertakes this work in a highly sensitive manner. Birth records counselling and intermediary work meets the needs of those using the service. Imaginative and sensitive work completed with birth relatives can lead to the provision of valuable information for adopted children in later life. Social workers assist birth relatives to write their own stories and sensitive letters for the children. This enables adopted children to make sense of their heritage and assists in the development of their identity.

The agency also offers a bespoke service to adult adoptees who request counselling and access to their adoption records. The preparation of comprehensive file packages includes copies of original adoption documentation and a narrative which provides a historical context. This ensures that adopted adults receive as full a picture as possible of their background and history.

The agency comprises a staff team who are experienced and who have extensive knowledge and understanding of adoption and its effects on all parties involved. Exceptionally high standards of practice are evident in all the core areas the agency is involved with. The agency is highly valued by service users and outside agencies.

Overall, those involved with the agency are immensely satisfied with the service they receive. Very effective and lifelong support is available to the whole adoptive family, birth relatives, adopted children and adults. One adoptive parent said, 'the staff go over and above what is expected.....you feel that nothing is too much trouble for them'. Evaluation sheets completed by birth relatives indicate they are happy with the service offered.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Robust recruitment practices are in place in relation to the assessment of prospective adoptive parents. The agency ensures that all required checks and references are completed which helps to ensure that children are protected from people who could cause them harm. Adopters have a very good understanding of the potential impact of abuse on children and are fully aware of safe caring practices.

The agency has active links with a local university and are currently collaborating on a research project into 'virtual contact'. This arose from concerns expressed by social workers and adoptive parents about potential safeguarding issues for children making contact via the internet. The research will consider the risks and benefits of 'virtual contact' on all parties involved in adoption. Findings will inform the agency's future practice in relation to contact and safeguarding for all involved in adoption.

The well constituted adoption panel provides a wide range of expertise amongst its

members. The management and administration of the adoption panel is excellent. The panel minutes are meticulous and accurately portray the thorough discussions and clear recommendations made. This highly detailed information enables the agency decision maker to make a confident judgement on the suitability of prospective adopters.

The agency deals with allegations promptly and efficiently. Staff and adoptive parents are fully aware of the procedures to follow in the event of an allegation or disclosure by a child. This helps to ensure the protection of children from abuse, or risk of abuse, as far as possible. Staff are fully aware of the protocols to follow in relation to disclosures of historic abuse made by adopted adults.

The agency is rigorous in its recruitment and vetting of staff. This helps to ensure that people who could harm children are not employed by the agency.

Leadership and management

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

Highly effective recruitment strategies ensure that a diverse range of adopters are available to meet the complex needs of older children. This enables children with a plan for adoption to become part of their new family as speedily as possible. The agency has enjoyed an increase in the number of approved adoptive families during the last year. There have been no disruptions in pre-adoption placements.

The manager uses a range of creative tools to monitor the delivery of the service. She undertakes a thorough and comprehensive annual review of all aspects of the agency's work. The agency's plan for development is challenging but realistic and aims to build on progress already made. An example of this is in relation to their successful parenting programme. This is currently under review to consider extending the provision to reach more adoptive families.

The agency is highly successful in retaining appropriately experienced and qualified staff who have extensive understanding and knowledge of adoption. The commitment to on-going training ensures that staff continue to be equipped to fulfil their roles with service users. The staff learn from problems such as disruptions or allegations. Academic research has a strong role within the agency's operations. Staff are passionate about keeping abreast of current thinking and research, and constantly reflect their learning in relation to practice. These initiatives mean that children and other service users are constantly at the forefront of any changes in policy and practice.

The administration of the business side of the agency is excellent. While there are clearly designated responsibilities within the administrative team, workers step in and cover for each other as necessary. This ensures the agency's operations can continue unheeded for the benefit of all service users. Consideration is underway regarding the digitalisation of the agency's extensive adoption files which would provide extra

security for adults who wish to see their records. There is excellent oversight of the agency's financial situation. Regular precise scrutiny by staff and an outside accountant ensures the continuing viability of the agency.

The working environment is pleasant and the premises provide suitable accommodation for a range of purposes, which adoptive families and other service users enjoy. Plans to improve the fabric of the building further are under consideration. One adopter said, 'when you come here you feel part of a big supportive family.'

There is very effective management at all levels within the agency. The dedication and support of the trustees ensures that there is close scrutiny of the agency's activities. The manager routinely and rigorously monitors all aspects of the service in relation to the quality and timeliness of provision. A comprehensive range of policies and procedures underpin excellent practice. Case records are comprehensive and up to date, and provide a narrative relating to the placement of a child with the agency's adopters. The agency is pro-active in its attempts to obtain information from placing agencies for children, for example life story material. This can be a challenge and efforts are not always successful. It would be helpful if recording within the files provided evidence of actions and decision made in this respect.

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 the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.