

Adoption Focus

TS3, Pinewood Business Park, Coleshill Road, Marston Green, Birmingham B37 7HG
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Adoption Focus is a registered adoption agency which previously operated as Families Through Adoption, part of Father Hudson's Society, a Roman Catholic organisation. It became registered on 12 May 2009 under its new name. It is no longer affiliated to either Father Hudson's Society or the Roman Catholic Church. The main office is in Coleshill, but the agency has two other office bases, one of which is in Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire and the other in Witney in Oxfordshire.

The agency provides a comprehensive range of services, both pre- and post-adoption, to families and children. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents, post-approval and post-placement support and post-adoption support services to children and families. The agency has an early permanence project that is also subject to inspection as a fostering service.

From 31 March 2017 up to the date of this inspection, the agency had placed 56 children with 37 families.

Inspection dates: 14 to 21 February 2018

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 **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 and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 15 February 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:

- There is an exceptional range of training and workshops available to adopters through the agency's 'nurture the journey' programme.
- Adopters are offered extensive adoption support that makes a significant difference to children's lives.
- Children build trusted and secure relationships with their adoptive parents and make significant progress in a relatively short time.
- Social work staff are highly skilled. They have developed expertise in many different areas of practice. As a result, they are able to provide services to adopters and their families above and beyond what is normally expected.
- The agency uses research to inform and understand the behaviours and responses of children to trauma, loss and attachment.
- The management team has a wealth of experience, and is ambitious, with high expectations for children.
- There are vigorous systems of reporting to the board of trustees that ensure clear governance and a continual drive for improvement.
- The agency works exceptionally well in partnership with other professionals. Social work staff offer presentations to schools to help teachers to understand the trauma faced by adopted children.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Adopters feel well prepared to look after their children. This is because staff work collaboratively with them throughout their assessment and post approval. Adopters value the individual relationships that they have with staff and the agency. They feel they receive excellent support at all stages of the process. Prospective adopters are given clear information at the point of enquiry, throughout their assessment and beyond. The agency's website is particularly informative and gives adopters information on training, workshops, events and the development of the agency.

Prospective adopters' assessments are thorough and of a very high standard. This ensures that adopters are suitable to care for children. The assessments give an accurate reflection of adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities, enabling effective matching to take place. Adopters speak highly of the preparation and assessment process and feel that it has prepared them well. One adopter said, 'We have been really impressed right from the start... the training was interactive and the assessment was thorough.' Another adopter stated, 'The preparation we had was very good, as we knew what we were trying to achieve when the children arrived.'

Children are able to build trusted and secure relationships with their adoptive parents. They make significant progress in a relatively short time. They are given a wide range of positive experiences in their adoptive families. They make friends, take part in lots of activities and experience family life. As a result, children settle well in their new families. They begin to develop strong attachments and improve their confidence and sense of self.

Children are making considerable progress in school. For example, one child lacked confidence and was behind academically in school when he first came to live with his adoptive family. Within four months, following support from the agency and his adopters, he has progressed tremendously and is now academically in the middle of his class group. His self-confidence has increased to the extent that he regularly plays in team sports, such as rugby. This is exceptional progress in a very short period of time. Social work staff work closely with teachers, adopters and placing social workers. They help them to understand attachment issues and how best to respond to the challenges children may face in school. Children are also supported to have their healthcare needs fully met. Adopters ensure that children attend routine and specialist health appointments. Complex health needs are identified and addressed quickly.

Matching children to their future families is very well considered. As a result, placement stability is very good. Due to the high level of adoption support given by the agency, there have only been two families in which placements have been disrupted over the last three years. Given the children's highly complex needs and the significant numbers of harder-to-place children that the agency places with adopters, this is a high achievement and testament to the thorough assessment and ongoing support offered by the agency. Staff play a very active part to ensure that adopters have all the information that is available. This helps adopters to make the right decisions. The level of support during introductions is excellent. Staff act as advocates to ensure that introductions are well planned and meet the

needs of the children. One adopter commented, 'They have been so professional and amazing with us... and honest.'

The child's voice is clear. Their feedback is regularly sought and they have an active role in groups run by the agency. The agency has developed its children's guides, including a DVD version, and started a 'tween' group as a result of listening to children. The agency has a clear complaints policy that is available to prospective adopters. Information about how to complain is made clear to children in their children's guides.

There is an exceptional range of pre and post adoption training and workshops available to adopters through the agency's 'nurture the journey' programme. This aims to build adopters' knowledge, confidence and capacity to meet the developing needs of their children. Topics covered in the training and workshops include managing teenage behaviour, understanding challenging behaviour, theraplay and undertaking therapeutic life story work. One adopter stated, 'We have been to theraplay workshops prior to the children being placed with us and we are using the techniques suggested... things are progressing well.'

Social work staff are highly skilled. They provide services to adopters and their families above and beyond what is normally expected. Theory is fully embedded in social work practice. The agency uses research to inform its response to understanding the behaviours of children and their responses to trauma, loss and attachment. These areas of informed practice are helping adopters to keep children safe and support their development. Examples include considering the impact of brain development on children's behaviour.

Children are able to receive excellent therapeutic life-story work, which sensitively helps them to understand their backgrounds and past histories. As a result, children have their needs very well met by adopters, who understand how to parent children in a therapeutic way. This level of extensive adoption support offered is a strength of the agency. Adopters report that this makes a significant difference to children's lives and has resulted in sustained improvements being made, even where there are complex challenges. The ongoing support and training provided make this agency a leader in providing adoption and support services.

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

Adoptive families are well prepared for the task of parenting children and keeping them safe. Adopters are helped to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect on children, including the risks associated with child sexual exploitation, radicalisation and online safety. They have a clear understanding of the action to take if they have any safeguarding concerns. All adopters have access to the agency's safeguarding procedures, which have been updated to reflect risks from radicalisation and sexual exploitation.

Adopters are able to access research-based training and therapeutic support. A wide range of training courses and workshops help adopters to develop appropriate strategies to manage children's behaviour that results from abuse. This gives adopters good insight into historical abuse and how this impacts on behaviour. Excellent support is given to adopters

to manage children's behaviour at home, and this is continued at school. Adopters and prospective adopters are helped to establish clear boundaries about what is safe and acceptable, and to understand the triggers for children's behaviour.

Children do not go missing. They 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. The agency supports this process well. Staff recognise safeguarding issues and take adopters' concerns seriously. Over the past year, there have been five recorded safeguarding concerns that have all been passed on appropriately for further consideration. Managers challenge external professionals when safeguarding issues are not acted on by other agencies in a timely way.

Inspectors found that the quality of recruitment practice varies depending on who is being recruited, for example whether it is permanent staff, panel members or independent assessing social workers. Gaps in one independent social worker's reference checks were rectified immediately during the inspection. Managers undertook safer recruitment training and reviewed systems to prevent this shortfall from happening again.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The management team has a wealth of experience, and is ambitious, with high expectations for children. Managers are dynamic and always looking at ways to improve. The agency is well staffed and resourced to meet the needs of the children and adopters it works with. There is a huge amount of experience within a highly trained social work team, with expertise to support and develop adopters' skills. There has been significant investment by the agency in their staff team. Staff have developed expertise in many different areas of practice, such as dyadic developmental psychotherapy and therapeutic life-story work.

There is effective induction and training of staff to meet the needs of the children. Staff have access to a wide range of training, including specialist training using established theoretical models. This ensures that staff have the knowledge and understanding to successfully support adopters and their children. Staff supervision and appraisal are thorough and comprehensive. The staff team works collaboratively to provide consistency and stability. Staff report that they are well led and managed. One member of staff stated, 'Every year we have our practice observed by managers... managers outline areas of development and comment on strengths... feedback is constructive... focus is on our training and development.'

Governance is exceptionally strong. There are vigorous systems of reporting to the board of trustees that ensure clear oversight and a continual drive for improvement. The agency has excellent systems to quality-assure and monitor its performance. Systems include regular audits within the agency, reflective practice sessions, quality assurance at panel and regular reporting on the progress of the agency from panel to management, and to the trustees. The agency regularly seeks feedback from adopters and children, which helps to inform and change practice. This ensures that, at both an operational and strategic level, there is a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and needs of the service.

Managers have continued to develop and improve their service. They are continually learning through evaluating the quality of their service, following feedback from adopters and children, and following learning from complaints. For example, the agency has developed attachment-style interviews for prospective adopters undergoing assessment. The agency has also changed the way it oversees the progress for prospective adopters who are in stage one of the assessment, so that people have a point of contact should they experience any problems. Managers have developed panel processes following feedback from panel members, and a buddy scheme to support new adopters. Children's guides giving children clear information about the adoption order process have been developed. This is following consultation with children, and following research where it was identified that children have a real fear of court as it takes them back to where they started from. Most recently, the agency has developed its commitment to early permanence through registering an independent fostering agency to work alongside the adoption agency. This is excellent practice, and is a response to minimise drift and delay for those children awaiting adoption.

The agency works exceptionally well in partnership with other professionals. Staff offer presentations to schools to help teachers to understand the trauma faced by adopted children and how best to support children in school, and to develop their skills and knowledge in this area. This is welcomed by schools. One headteacher commented, 'This was well received in school and staff have already asked whether an additional session on theraplay strategies could be arranged in the future.'

The agency is an active member of the local consortium. The agency continues to have excellent relationships with local authorities and has well-established links in the local and regional adoption community. Recruitment of prospective adopters is effective and targets those willing to offer homes for the harder-to-place children. There is a diverse recruitment of adopters in partnership with faith organisations and LGBT groups. The agency's statement of purpose clearly outlines what it is trying to achieve. The website is informative and easy to use. The agency has embraced social media as a form of promoting and advertising, using the skills and knowledge of staff and adopters.

Therapeutic support is effective and has a positive impact on children's lives. Adopters said that this provides benefits to their children. One adopter stated, 'I can see a huge difference in her behaviour. It is really positive.' Staff work in partnership with placing social workers and other agencies very well. For example, social worker staff conduct statutory visits for local authority social workers. This has worked particularly well with one child, who has a fear of social workers and of being moved. One placing social worker stated, 'We worked well together to support the adopters. The adoption social worker is always taking an active role in children's reviews... we cooperated and liaised well together.' The development of the linking and matching coordinator role has been particularly welcomed by adopters and local authorities, who feel they have a clear point of contact for family finding.

The adoption panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function. There is a strong scrutiny of prospective adopters' assessments, and clear recommendations are made. The decision-making process is also strong. The agency decision-maker makes clear, reasoned

decisions, with qualifying determinations. On one occasion, when she disagreed with the adoption panel recommendations, she wrote to each panel member to explain her reasons. This is excellent practice, and ensures complete transparency.

The agency has met the previous recommendation set at the last inspection. It has developed systems that clearly show that children's wishes, feelings and views have been taken into account in the monitoring and developing of its service.

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 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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