Together for Children Adoption - Sunderland

Together for Children Sunderland Limited

Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland SR3 4EN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency is owned by Together for Children Sunderland Limited, and provides adoption services on behalf of Sunderland City Council.

Together for Children Adoption – Sunderland is a partner of a regional adoption agency with two other local authorities that operate across the north of England. The adoption team undertakes the recruitment, assessment, training and support services for prospective adopters, children adopted, members of the adoptive family, birth families and significant adults.

The agency also provides post-adoption support to adoptive families, operates a letterbox facility, which enables indirect contact arrangements between adopted children and their birth families, and works with adopted adults, including undertaking intermediary work. Support to birth families is commissioned to another voluntary adoption agency.

Inspection dates: 1 to 3 November 2022

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	good

The voluntary adoption agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 24 September 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Adoptive families benefit from the wraparound service provided by a long-standing and stable staff team. This is a particular strength of the agency as there is continuity of support available to adoptive families from the first point of contact through to post-adoption assistance.

Early permanence is promoted by the agency when there is a plan of adoption for children. The adoption team works closely with Together for Children Sunderland social work teams to search for, and identify, prospective adopters. Children benefit from an increased pool of adopters through the agency being part of a regional adoption agency. Strong tracking systems and 'children waiting' meetings show the tenacity and ongoing efforts that the staff make to seek the right permanent families for children.

Adopters who approach the agency feel welcomed and are dealt with sensitively by staff. Adopters spoke of feeling understood and not judged. Communication is clear and adopters feel able to ask any questions. Their positive experience has led to adopters being strong advocates for others interested in adoption. One adopter said:

> 'We have felt welcomed and supported. Our whole experience from start to finish was fantastic; we recommended the agency to our friends, who have now been approved to adopt.'

The preparation process is timely, and assessments are thorough and evaluative. Adopters said that the assessment process and the training that they receive leave them feeling prepared to embark on their adoption journey. One adopter said:

> 'It was intense, but in a good way. The social worker couldn't have been better and we felt comfortable enough to open up and show our most vulnerable parts of ourselves.'

The agency recognises the importance of the adopter's family and friends in the preparation and matching stages of the process. The addition of the 'family network' meetings includes family and friends in the planning. This gives the agency an extra layer of reassurance that prospective adopters have the necessary support that they need when children move in with them.

Careful matching takes place and prospective adopters attend 'child appreciation days' and 'bump-into' meetings. One adopter said:

> 'These are absolutely invaluable. It has given so many fabulous insights into my child's life from birth to present day. This is important for life-story work.'

An in-house psychologist provides advice, training and support to staff and adopters at all stages of the adoption process. This includes post-adoption support as well as bespoke assessments, such as for those children needing educational support. This work provides a timely response, and, along with the staff's early intervention, helps to prevent adoption disruptions.

When necessary, the staff use partner agencies to undertake bespoke pieces of work, such as with birth parents, to assist with children's life-story work. The agency is also proactive and includes birth parents. This requires sensitivity, with adopters reporting positively about this involvement. One adopter said:

> 'The organisation of a meeting with her birth mother was invaluable and will allow me to provide my daughter with so much more vital life-story details regarding her identity.'

Fostering-for-adoption placements are used to support early progression of children's plans and to reduce delay. Adoption social workers oversee the fostering elements of these placements to avoid the introduction of extra professionals into the household. However, it is not always clear that adoption social workers fully understand or apply the relevant fostering regulations to these placements.

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

Adopters and prospective adopters have access to a wide range of training, which includes different aspects of safeguarding children. Adopter training also focuses on therapeutic parenting and enables adopters to understand and respond to children with complex experiences of trauma. As children grow and develop, adopters are supported to understand the potential risks, such as exploitation, through bespoke training. One adopter said:

> 'The adopter approval process was all about safeguarding all concerned but especially the children. Every form I completed, questions I answered, session I participated in was child-centred.'

Staff are all trained in Signs of Safety as well as wider safeguarding themes, such as around exploitation and the 'Prevent' duty.

The adoption panel is chaired by a knowledgeable and experienced panel chair who is confident in addressing any shortfalls. The panel is suitably resourced with people from diverse backgrounds and who have a range of experiences. The agency decision maker provides extra scrutiny, which includes challenge of the recommendations made where deemed necessary. The addition of a legal representative who looks at the panel papers provides the panel members with the reassurance that the relevant regulations have been met.

The agency is committed to identifying and then improving the safeguarding arrangements for children. There have been two recent placement disruptions for

children. A detailed and reflective review took place to look at the learning from these disruptions, in addition to the wider national safeguarding reviews.

The welfare and protection of children are promoted as safer recruitment of social work staff and panel members takes place.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The adoption team is passionate about its roles, and aspirational about the agency. There is a stable, experienced and knowledgeable staff team that is child-focused and keen to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Staff reported that they enjoy their work, which is evidenced in how long they have worked for the agency. The team is forward-thinking and creative. The agency has a number of developments under way, which are in the early stages of implementation and need embedding in practice before their full impact is known.

Staff spoke of feeling supported by their manager and by each other. Staff receive regular supervision, including access to group supervision. However, not all of the individual supervision records show the practice discussions that take place. This does not demonstrate the quality of the supervision that staff receive, and whether they are given the opportunity to reflect on their practice.

The management team has a range of systems in place to support their monitoring of the service in terms of their responsibilities to the local authority and the relationship with the regional adoption agency. This gives strategic oversight. However, day-to-day management decision-making is not always clearly apparent on case records. This leaves the agency without a full and accurate picture of the adopter's journey.

The manager has taken effective action to address the one complaint thoroughly. They have taken the learning from the investigation to make continued improvements to the service.

Feedback received during the inspection from adopters and professionals has been wholly positive. In particular, this includes praise for the work of the staff, who are described as 'going over and beyond to help' and of being 'professional, caring and informative'.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of managers and the registered person of the agency. In particular, ensure that staff supervision is provided and documented in line with the agency's statement of purpose. (Adoption: national minimum standards 2014 24.3)

- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. This particularly refers to ensuring that management decision-making is clearly recorded in adopters' records. (Adoption: national minimum standards 2014 25.2)

- The registered person should ensure that the managers, staff and volunteers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager and the lines of accountability should be clearly defined. This particularly refers to ensuring that, where adoption social workers are undertaking the responsibilities of fostering social workers in fostering-for-adoption placements, these staff are aware of the relevant regulations and guidance and that this is applied to practice during the course of the foster placement. (Adoption: national minimum standards 2014 25.4)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people, 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

Unique reference number: 1254834

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