

DFW Adoption

Inspection report for independent adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC049020
Inspection date	17 July 2007
Inspector	Jayne Ivory / Marian Denny
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	4 October 2006

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

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. 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. D F W Adoption have a service level agreement with Darlington borough council for provision of their adoption service. This includes management and supervision of the Darlington employed adoption social workers and referral of all Darlington adoption matters to the D F W Adoption panel. D F W Adoption also provide training for adopters jointly with Durham county council and run a support group for adopted young people in partnership with Durham call the 'Past of Today' group.

Summary

The inspection was well prepared for with all required pre-inspection material being forwarded as requested. The agency provided the best facilities available to them and engaged willingly in the process. The programme that was arranged was well coordinated and manageable. This enabled the inspection to be carried out efficiently and with the minimum of disruption. The inspection was carried out over three days, with one extra day being allocated to the observation of the adoption panel and feedback. During the course of the fieldwork, interviews were held with key managers and staff. The independent panel chairperson of the adoption panel was also interviewed. An examination of personnel files was undertaken. Visits were made to four adoptive families. Three of the families have recently been approved as adopters by the agency and the fourth family was accessing the Preparing Children for Adoption (PCFA) service for a birth child. In addition to this, service users in receipt of adoption support services, agreed to participate in the inspection. The views of adopters and their children are incorporated into the text of this report. Completed questionnaires were received from 13 adopters/prospective adopters, four placing social workers and two specialist advisers. An adoptive family who had participated in the Connected for Life project were also interviewed as part of the inspection. The case files of the adopters visited were read and the files of children placed with them. Other case files were also examined. Written materials relating to the operation of the agency were read, including policies and procedures, protocols and information provided to prospective and approved adopters and social workers.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has been pro-active in ensuring that the majority of requirements and recommendations have been met from the action plan, which came as a result of the first inspection. The service has invested additional resources in the management of the agency with the appointment of a part time director of development. The agency has reviewed the work of the agency and integrated the two separate teams into one. This has had clear benefits for the availability of staff to undertake a broader range of work, whilst ensuring that staff retain their existing expertise.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

D F W Adoption has an effective written recruitment strategy based upon the types of children needing adoptive placements. They have a broad range of children to place through their service level agreement with a neighbouring local authority. However, D F W Adoption also offer placements to children from the regional consortium or from the national adoption register. D F W Adoption focus their recruitment on adopters for older, more difficult to place children. Children are placed with siblings wherever possible and with families who can meet their cultural needs. The agency gives very clear, readable information to prospective adopters, which outlines the eligibility criteria and the process of application and assessment. Adopters interviewed confirmed this was accurate and reflective of the process they had gone through. The preparation and assessment is very thorough and adopters commented on the usefulness of the groups and professionalism and sensitivity of staff. The approval process is also very timely and is supported by effective administrative systems. The agency have recently reviewed their Preparing Children for Adoption (PCFA) work to develop a more integrated approach to approving prospective adopters who have birth children. Children and their parents told us that they had really benefited from this work, which takes place alongside the assessment of the adults. The views of the children are regarded as intrinsic to the preparation and assessment process. Work completed by a child and their PCFA worker is then presented to the parents and the adoption panel as part of the approval process. In one case, the PCFA work had identified that the birth children had some anxiety about being matched with an older child. This information had been fed back to the parents who had accepted that their children may feel better about being matched with a much younger child. This work acknowledges the risk factors associated with placing children for adoption with families who already have their own birth children. PCFA work ensures that the wishes and feelings of children already in the household are gathered and listened to by the parents and the agency. This work has massive potential and has already provided evidence of excellent outcomes to birth children and any child matched with them. This work is innovative and is judged as an outstanding aspect of this provision. Matching of children is good and there was evidence of excellent practice in relation to obtaining as much information as possible about a prospective match. There is a commendable level of support to adopters once they are approved and social workers were spoken of in glowing terms by the adopters interviewed. They felt support was available at any time. There is planned contact following approval and this includes newsletters, training and social events. The birth children of adoptive parents also receive ongoing support from their PCFA worker as part of the post placement period. The adoption panel is properly constituted and includes members with personal and professional experience of adoption. It has appropriate policies and procedures in place. The agency have longstanding experience of inviting prospective adopters to attend the panel. Panel members have an induction and undertake training and they feel well informed and up to date. The panel meets regularly and the minutes are good and reflect the decision making process and reasons for the recommendations. The independent panel chairperson facilitates discussion and contributions from all panel members, to ensure that recommendations are jointly arrived at. The panel presents as welcoming to social workers and adopters who attend. One adopter said 'Although we were nervous, we understand the importance of the decision making process and the part the adoption panel plays. We were well prepared by our

social worker and thought that the panel were really friendly, particularly the chairperson, who came out to meet us before we went in'. The adoption panel has developed a feedback form to ensure that the social workers receive information about the strengths and areas of development in their assessments. The decision is usually made in a timely manner and conveyed to the adopters verbally and in writing by the adoption practice manager. The agency would benefit if adopters were informed in writing of their approval by the agency decision maker and not the practice manager, given the significance of the decision. D F W Adoption has sound recruitment and selection practices, which ensure that vulnerable children and adults are safeguarded. D F W Adoption ensure that children and adults receive an adoption service that keeps them safe however, adoption panel members files should be audited to ensure that they meet the regulations and the National Minimum Standards (NMS). The safeguarding policy and procedure should also be reviewed and amended to ensure that social workers and other members of staff in the service are clear about the identification and management of cases of historical abuse in accordance with the additional adoption support the NMS.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides excellent support for adopters. All the adopters interviewed spoke very highly of the support they receive from their social worker. They said they were available and approachable and they are able to contact them at any time. One adopter said 'Our social worker has always been there for us. They are easy to contact and always get back to us quickly. We have had some difficult times and think that their support has made it possible for us to keep focused on the children and not just get overwhelmed with all the problems'. The PCFA worker remains involved with the birth children in the family after placement. There are a range of ongoing support groups and training events that adopters and their children can access. The agency has a clear recognition of its moral responsibility to anyone who has had involvement with it and the service it offers in this respect is exemplary. The adoption mediation team is now delivered by social workers who were part of a specialist team but who are now integrated into the rest of the service. This has not diluted the expertise that is evident in the quality of intermediary work that is undertaken. Examples of work presented as part of the inspection were outstanding. The quality and sensitivity of the work demonstrated excellent outcomes for individuals using this service. Given that this work does not generate much income, the commitment of the agency in relation to this remains commendable. However, the agency had recognised the need to map out the true cost of providing this bespoke service and was half way through a 12 month monitoring exercise.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

D F W Adoption has concluded the Connected for Life project in March 2007. The project had met the targets set for it by facilitating 16 foundation events with local authorities in the region. The report demonstrated excellent outcomes for children and their families by capturing detailed information from birth families and professionals involved in the early years of the child's life. The information is then shared and collated into a child friendly book. One adopted child took great delight in sharing their book and telling me their story. The adopted parent could also use the book as a resource with the child and spoke of her child's resemblance to their paternal grandmother. Birth families get a copy of the parts of the book that are relevant to them, so also get a keepsake from the work they have contributed to. The project worker had written a

draft report recording the benefits from the scheme and the lessons learned. It is hoped that this exemplary work can continue and be developed. An adoptive parent who had participated in the project, spoke compellingly about the impact that the foundation day and the project had made on them. They said 'You worry sometimes that you won't be good enough to bring up other people's children. The foundation day helped me to see that adoption is in the best interests of both my children and that although their birth parents love the children, that our care will help the children to achieve their potential'. It was clear from talking to adopters, that they appreciate the importance of the child's heritage and all are or will be involved in face to face meetings, indirect contact, have life story books and other information. Inspection of the letterbox for D F W Adoption adopters confirmed that the letterbox is well organised and supported. The agency's letterbox system is managed by one of the social workers, with the administrator offering administrative support. At present, they have around approximately 60 on the system. They always ensure that they send an anonymous letter to check out the recipient's address and send if necessary a reminder about the letterbox contact when it is due. This reminder letter is sent first class and if there is no response to the first letter, then they write again a month later. Any response they receive, for example a letter is photocopied and placed on the file. Letters received either from the adopters or the birth parent is seen by the social worker who checks the contents and confirms the correspondence can or can not go out. If necessary, the social worker will visit the adoptive or birth family and talk through with them any difficulties that they may be having with the letterbox system. D F W Adoption had been commissioned by a local authority to provide independent social work support service for birth parents. This work was developing but was not formally judged, given that it is provision commissioned by a local authority.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

D F W Adoption have a Statement of Purpose that reflects the operation of the agency, the experience and qualifications of the staff and the arrangements for the monitoring and control of the organisation. D F W Adoption plan to enhance the range of information in the D F W Adoption's children's guide, although this is not a statutory requirement, and other range of information for adults who have approached the service. The agency has experienced significant internal changes, at a time of great external change in the legislative framework in adoption and adoption support. It is a credit to the agency and the trustees that staff report that they feel revitalised by the changes and that organisational integration has provided positive effects on the service provided. This was evident in the review of the PCFA work and in the newly integrated social work team, which allowed social workers to maintain their specialist skills, whilst developing insights into new areas of work. D F W Adoption is run efficiently and lines of communication and accountability are clear. There are procedures in place for monitoring and the trustees meet on a bi-monthly basis and receive a written report about the work of the agency at each meeting. The financial management group also meet monthly to monitor the financial aspects of the agency. D F W Adoption is financially viable and there are contingency plans in place to enable the agency to meet its obligations in a financial crisis. There is an annual external audit and these accounts were available for inspection. D F W Adoption have invested additional resources into the management of the agency. A Director of development has been appointed to work for 20 hours each week to develop new funding

sources for the agency. The Director of development had also developed strategies to modernise the computer system for the agency and to resolve longstanding issues concerning the safe storage and backup of the D F W Adoption archive. The Director of development, the business manager, the Chair of the Trustees and the practice manager meet regularly to ensure that each part of the agency's work is integrated and informed by the others. The practice manager has many years experience in adoption and will be embarking on management training in the autumn of 2007. Social work staff reported that they were well supported by the practice manager, who provided clear operational direction and support in addition to effective strategic management. Social work staff have access to excellent training opportunities to keep them up to date. The staff within the team use their knowledge and expertise by presenting training to other agencies and contribute to good practice within the field of adoption. The manager monitors the work of the social work staff through regular supervision, which is planned and of a high standard. The agency benefits from excellent administrative support, and staff within the administrative team demonstrated considerable expertise and said that they felt well supported by their manager. All adopters spoke of the friendly and sensitive response they received from the staff answering the phone. The inspection confirmed that case files were well ordered and case recording was of a generally high standard. The manager signs and dates all recordings however, the case decisions made in supervision between the practice manager and the social worker are not recorded on file. The agency should develop a system to ensure that the manager's involvement in caseload decisions is captured on file.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure the adoption panel members files are be audited so that they meet the regulations and the national minimum standards
- review and amended the safeguarding policy and procedure to ensure that social workers and other members of staff in the service are clear about the identification and management of cases of historical abuse in accordance with the additional adoption support national minimum standards
- develop a system to ensure that the manager's involvement in caseload decisions is captured on file.

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent adoption agency