

Centre for Adoption Support and Education

Centre for Adoption Support and Education Ltd
162 Pennywell Road, Easton, Bristol BS5 0TX
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this adoption support agency

This adoption support agency is a registered charity. Management, administration and finance services are shared with a voluntary adoption agency in the same building. The two organisations have close links, but are registered separately with Ofsted and have separate inspections. The agency's work is overseen by a board of trustees.

The agency provides a wide range of services to children, their adoptive families and a small number of foster carers. Services include groups, workshops, courses and individual therapy. Families may either refer themselves, or be referred by adoption agencies, health professionals and local authority children's services.

The agency does not undertake:

- birth records counselling
- intermediary work with adopted adults
- counselling for birth parents whose children have been adopted.

The number of people accessing services varies from week to week. During the inspection week, 70 adults and children used the service.

Inspection dates: 11 to 13 July 2017

Overall experience and progress of service users, taking into account:	Outstanding
How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Outstanding

The adoption support agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the adoption support agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for service users.

Date of last inspection: 24 March 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This adoption support agency is outstanding because

- Parents and children love coming to the adoption support agency. They find it welcoming, non-judgemental and they highly value the service.
- The agency excels in preventative and therapeutic work. This makes an invaluable contribution to the quality of family life for those who use its services.
- The work helps to reduce the risk of family breakdown and further trauma for the children and young people.
- The agency is highly responsive to children's, young people's and parents' views. Groups and courses are constantly adapted in response to their feedback and ideas. This ensures that participants' educational needs are met.
- The agency collaborates with other voluntary organisations and local authorities to obtain government funding for much-needed projects. The choice of projects is guided by relevant bespoke research.
- The agency is exceptionally well led and managed. Links with a partner voluntary organisation provide strong administrative and financial support.

The adoption support agency's areas for development:

- Two staff files did not contain a fully documented employment history. There appeared to be gaps in employment history and this shortfall was addressed during the inspection. The agency should ensure that this information is complete before staff start to work there.
- Fire alarms are tested on average every two weeks instead of the weekly intervals recommended by the local fire service.
- The service does not keep records on children or adults who use their support groups, only on those who receive therapeutic services. There are sound reasons for this policy, but the managers should consider keeping more written information to provide evidence of the quality of their work.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the agency consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of staff and volunteers. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. In particular, ensure that prospective staff have a fully-documented employment history before they start work for the agency. (NMS 21.2)
- Ensure that all records kept by the agency are monitored to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents, and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. In particular, ensure that the fire alarms are tested at weekly intervals in line with the local fire service's recommendations. (NMS 25.2)
- Ensure that the agency has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the agency's files. In particular, ensure that records are kept to document children's progress, so that evidence may be produced regarding the agency's effectiveness. (NMS 27.1)

Inspection judgement

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Adoptive parents and their children are exceptionally well supported by this agency. The service provides a responsive, flexible approach to adoption support. Current research informs practice and inspires the wide range of educational events on offer.

Much of the agency's growth and success has been due to word-of-mouth recommendations. Adopters can refer themselves for groups, workshops and therapy.

The adoption support agency, known to children and parents as 'the Centre', has strong links with CCS Adoption. This is a voluntary adoption agency located in the same building. The two services share management, social work, marketing and administrative functions. This provides the adoption support service with strong leadership and financial security.

Adopters value the opportunity to meet and speak with other adoptive parents. Many of the children have experienced traumatic histories. This contributes to their complex needs and occasional distressed behaviour. Parents say that they feel confident in bringing their children to the Centre, because the staff understand and accept them.

The Centre has helped the children and young people to make exceptional progress. They are more confident and enjoy meeting others who face similar challenges. One parent told the inspector that their child loves coming to the Centre. Another said that their toddler is now much more sociable than they were before they came. For traumatised children who find it difficult to meet and interact with others, this is very good progress.

The adoption support agency is highly innovative. For example, the Sharing Stories project was set up with government Practice Improvement Funding (PIF). The project is led by an experienced professional, who also has personal experience of adoption. She meets birth family members whose children are subject to early permanence arrangements. She gains their trust and encourages them to share stories about their child's early life and background.

Children and their prospective adopters who are involved in early permanence arrangements face specific challenges. Protracted court proceedings mean that they can live with many months of uncertainty. Background information on the child may be scant and difficult to obtain. By gaining the birth parents' trust, the project worker helps them to contribute to their children's understanding of their history. This makes a lasting difference to the children's lives.

The staff and managers are extremely skilled and experienced. They recognise how early trauma can damage children and young people's lives. They understand that adopters undertake an extraordinary task, which may well require a high level of support. The agency believes that adopters should have access to such support at an

early stage. The focus is on prevention, because waiting until there is a serious problem may lead to further trauma for the family.

Children, young people and adopters are consulted on every aspect of the service. Their feedback is not only sought and recorded, but forms an active part of service planning. The agency sets up groups in response to specific requests. There is a wide range of support, tailored to need. The Centre's own feedback process has resulted in many positive comments.

One parent said that the Centre provides 'a safe place to play and chat to parents'. Another parent responded by saying that the impact on family life has been 'enormous'. The group they attend is 'really important in managing stress levels. Like walking into a big warm hug.'

Groups include support for adopters who educate their children at home. Adopters say that this is invaluable. Children and young people are sometimes excluded from school, due to a widespread lack of understanding about their problems. Others are withdrawn from public education because their needs are not being met.

Adopters say how valuable it is to have adult conversations with parents in a similar situation, while their children are cared for nearby. If children need reassurance, they can come in to see their parents. This makes them feel less anxious, because they can see that their parent is still in the building.

The Centre has access to a clinical psychologist and a qualified therapeutic social worker, who provide individual therapy to family members.

The Centre runs very successful toddler groups during school term times. Parents and children attend these interactive sessions together. Leaders use music, dancing, artwork and crafts to provide a fun activity. Songs and movements are carefully chosen to help reinforce family attachments. The toddlers can try out a wide range of musical instruments.

Children sing along with their parents. During the inspection, the musician who leads the sessions brought in a microphone and amplifier so that the children could sing songs to the whole group if they wished to do so. Some children were very enthusiastic and sang several times. These children were very shy when they first came to the group. Some had found it difficult to speak to other children or adults, so their progress is remarkable.

Children and parents are encouraged to express themselves through artwork. Examples displayed in the Centre include a picture of a tree, which changes through the seasons. The tree was originally completely bare. Children and parents added sheep and lambs to the scene. There are now leaves and cherries on the tree.

Members of a group for adopted children and young people have completed a picture of a tree which contains their hopes and aspirations. One young person expressed a wish to become a group leader. The staff at the Centre are helping her to achieve this.

Another young person, who is now at university, volunteers at the Centre. She confirmed the invaluable service that the Centre provides to children, young people and parents. The Centre's managers have expanded the number of groups from four to eleven in the past year.

The Centre also runs workshops for adopters and professionals. Feedback from participants shows that these workshops are highly successful. Examples include 'The Whole Brain Child'. This course focuses on the impact of trauma on children's brains.

In conjunction with a voluntary adoption agency, the Centre also offers much-needed courses on non-violent resistance. Some adopters have to contend with high levels of extreme behaviour.

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

The children, young people and adults who visit the Centre are safe from harm. There are enough staff on duty to ensure that the children and young people are safe. Risk is managed very effectively. The Centre has good risk assessments for all aspects of the group and therapeutic work.

The staff receive updated training in child protection and first aid. They have a good understanding of child safeguarding. Staff know how to respond if a child or young person should disclose that they have been harmed. There have been no safeguarding concerns since the previous inspection.

The majority of children and young people attend the Centre with their parents. The only exception is the group for adopted young people. This group meets monthly and parents may leave the Centre while the group takes place. Parents of younger children provide any personal care required, so the staff do not have to do so.

With government grant funding, the service has expanded over the past two years. The building is relatively new and was commissioned since the last inspection. It is very well designed. This was done in consultation with parents and young people.

The building has been specifically adapted for people who require disabled access. Rooms are colourful, clean and inviting, with child-friendly furniture. This is adaptable and can be easily moved to allow flexible use of the space.

The process of moving was handled very sensitively. The artwork currently on display includes a large flower, the petals of which were cut from paper which had been used when adopters and children expressed their hopes and aspirations for the new building. These are now incorporated into the decoration of the new premises. Like the pictorial tree, these petals continue to evolve and change as the project develops.

All sessional staff and volunteers have undergone the necessary recruitment checks to help ensure that they are suitable to work with children and young people. The staff files are very well organised. The last inspection found gaps in recruitment records. These have now been addressed, but this inspection found a new shortfall.

Two of the four files sampled did not contain a full employment history. One file had employment history recorded in whole years and not months and years. A second staff file had significant gaps in employment history. The manager followed this up immediately. Both files, once amended, had no gaps that are unaccounted for. The impact of this shortfall on children and young people is minimal. A recommendation has been made.

The health and safety in the building is generally good, but there is a minor deficit in the fire alarm testing schedule. Alarms have been tested, on average, every two weeks instead of weekly. Other health and safety checks have been carried out at recommended intervals. The manager said that she would ensure that alarm tests take place weekly in future.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The service is exceptionally well led. The registered manager also manages CCS Adoption, the voluntary adoption agency located in the same building. The two agencies work together for the benefit of all who use their services.

The registered manager has considerable expertise in adoption. She is ambitious for the Centre and has led service development since her appointment in 2016. The registered manager has exceptionally good links in the wider adoption community. For example, she chairs the South West Adoption Consortium adoption support meetings. This provides her with strong networks.

The agency works with other voluntary organisations to produce innovative research. For example, they worked with a national organisation to survey adoptive families. This collaboration resulted in the publication of 'Adoption Support in the South West: A Survey of Adoptive Families' in March 2016. This paper informed decision-making about targeting areas of need. The service's links with six local authorities in the area helped to support the bid for government funding. The government-funded projects have now been set up and are already producing very positive results.

Governance is secure and strong, with an experienced board of trustees. Trustees are actively involved with the Centre. Some are also adopters and can bring their personal experiences to the task. The trustees receive comprehensive six-monthly reports and management accounts, which help to guide their decision-making.

The Centre does not employ its own social workers. The sessional staff can consult with the social work staff from their partner agency. The sessional staff are very experienced and skilled. They receive very good-quality support and regular supervision. The Centre also employs volunteers, including some prospective adopters.

The staff receive good-quality training, including regular updates in safeguarding and attachment. Training needs are identified during their supervision meetings. Sessional staff particularly value training undertaken with other professionals and adopters.

The managers and staff are well aware of the need to promote equality and diversity in everything that they do. Groups for children and young people are highly inclusive. Adopted children often face oppressive attitudes in their daily lives, so anti-discriminatory practice is integral to the Centre's success.

The agency has a very clear and well-written statement of purpose which explains the ethos of the Centre. Children and young people have their own colourful guide, which can be adapted to suit different communication needs.

The agency is financially secure. Like many charities, it has to rely on external grants and internal fundraising to survive. To this end, the service has established a dynamic fundraising and marketing team. The fundraisers have already submitted applications for substantial funding.

The marketing professional promotes the Centre's services to a wider audience. She is qualified in digital marketing, which brings a fresh perspective to her work. She has redesigned the website to improve accessibility. This meets the recommendation from the previous inspection, which was to disseminate the Centre's work to a wider audience.

A second recommendation was to seek feedback from adults and children who use the service. This practice is now well established.

The third recommendation concerned the need to verify staff references by telephone. Managers were also reminded to check qualifications and photographic evidence of identity. The agency was asked to ensure that staff responsible for recruitment had relevant training. This has all been completed.

The agency does not keep records on individual adults and children who come to sessions. A record is kept of the session as a whole. The manager and sessional staff evaluate each session immediately afterwards. They review the children and young people's progress. The manager may make suggestions for the next session to help an individual child or adult. While the lack of formal records is part of the Centre's appeal, it reduces its ability to gather objective evidence on the outcomes of its work.

Information about this inspection

During this inspection, inspectors looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work with children, young people, adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of the help provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people, adults and their families. In addition, inspectors have tried to understand what the adoption support agency knows about how well it is performing and what difference it is making for the children, young people and adults who it is trying to help.

This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, using the 'Social care common inspection framework', to assess the effectiveness of the adoption support agency, how it meets the core functions as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Adoption Support Agencies (England) and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2005 and the national minimum standards.

Adoption support agency details

Unique reference number: SC473793

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Inspector

Heather Chaplin, social care inspector



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