

Clifton Children's Society

162 Pennywell Road, Bristol BS5 0TX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Clifton Children's Society is a voluntary adoption agency. It is a charitable, not-for-profit organisation that covers the South West of England. The agency carries out the recruitment, assessment, preparation and approval of adopters. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services for both children and adopted adults. The agency focuses on recruiting adopters who can offer a permanent home to priority children. These children are sibling groups and children who have additional needs. In 2018, the agency approved 23 prospective adopters and placed 32 children.

Inspection dates: 13 to 15 February 2019

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **outstanding**

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, young people and adults.

Date of previous inspection: 1 July 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- Adopters receive excellent preparation, support and training prior to adopting their child. They benefit from the extensive training and support provided by the agency that comprehensively prepares them for their parenting role. Assessments are high quality and fully involve the adoptive parents. They are undertaken in a timely manner.
- Adopters are actively involved in the matching process. They receive extensive support throughout this process. The agency specialises in finding adoptive families for 'priority' children. These are children who are part of a sibling group or have additional needs. The agency skilfully and carefully matches the children with the 'right' parent, who has the skills and qualities to meet the identified needs of the child. This thorough process is effective and results in a very low level of adoption disruptions.
- The agency succeeds in providing a centre of excellence for adoption services. It is extensively involved in adoption research. The agency is the first service to be awarded a national kitemark for its work and research to improve early permanency placements.
- The agency is an active partner in a regional adoption agency. The service provides high-quality specialist adoption clinical support for adopters and informs the strategy and design of this regional adoption agency.
- The agency offers a range of imaginative and creative clubs and activities for adopted children and their parents that are provided in the agency's children's centre and in the community. Children and their parents benefit from taking part in after-school clubs, forest club, holiday activities and a tots and parents club.
- The agency is working effectively with birth parents, foster carers and adoptive parents in a creative 'sharing stories project'. The staff gather information such as pictures and photographs for a child's birth family. Children benefit from having a quality life-story book that contains all the information children will need in later life to inform their sense of identity.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Adopters benefit from assessments and preparation provided by the agency that are highly individualised and of high quality. Adopters comment very positively about the adoption assessment process. Adopters commented that from their first enquiries, the adoption process was very well managed by the agency and that they were kept fully involved and informed at all stages.

The first point of call for prospective adopters is the 'front door' team. This team is described by adopters as being welcoming and responsive. The team is made up of adoptive parents, who bring their understanding and knowledge of adoption to the role. Prospective adopters are invited to attend information evenings where trusting and supportive relationships between the staff and prospective adopters are started. The emotional and practical readiness of prospective adopters is then assessed. If appropriate, they will progress to stage one of the assessment. Assessments are undertaken in a timely manner. Comprehensive, concise and evaluative final reports are presented to the adoption panel for a recommendation within agreed timescales.

The adoptive parents and children benefit from an excellent range of services provided by the agency. These include a children's centre, where a range of clubs and activities take place. Extensive therapeutic support is also offered if appropriate. The adoption support provided by the agency is individualised and wide-ranging. It helps adoptive parents to problem-solve and emotionally relate to their children. The proposed support is documented in a comprehensive adoption support plan.

The agency clearly demonstrates a long-term commitment to families throughout the different stages of a child's development. Practical and effective strategies are offered to parents to help them to overcome any difficulties that they are experiencing in parenting their child. Support workers from the therapy team visit families in their homes to provide practical help. One adoptive parent described this support as: 'a lifeline, the difference between keeping my child and not'.

The agency promotes education. Children make very good progress from their starting points once they are settled in to their adoptive families. The staff offer training to schools, so that teachers gain a deeper understanding of the possible difficulties that adopted children may experience in a school environment.

A strength of the agency is how staff are fully committed to furthering their knowledge and skills. The staff are currently engaged in innovative and creative projects. They share findings and good practice with other agencies and adoption professionals. A recent innovation in the agency is the creation of staff champions. Parents and children benefit from staff champions for minority ethnic parents and children and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adopters. There are also champions for children who have additional needs. The champions carry out tasks such as recruiting more ethnically diverse adopters by undertaking radio interviews and leafleting to raise awareness.

Young children at the tots club held at the agency were observed by inspectors to be relaxed and responsive with their adoptive parents. Games and songs in these sessions promote bonding and trust between the parents and children through eye contact and cuddling.

Children make excellent progress in all areas of their lives. The staff succeed in placing children who have been waiting a long time for an adopted family and ensure that the necessary support is in place so that the placement succeeds. Due to extensive support from the agency, such as the provision of therapeutic play sessions, children who previously demonstrated aggressive behaviours towards parents are now able to accept nurture and make good progress emotionally. Parents are supported to care for children who have attachment issues. Following extensive support from the staff at the agency, children who were previously unable to leave their adoptive parent are helped to develop the confidence to attend mainstream school and social groups alone.

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

The agency ensures that the welfare of children is at the forefront of staff's practice. The staff have a comprehensive understanding of the agency's safeguarding policies and procedures. The staff demonstrate their understanding of the importance of safeguarding and take prompt action to take safeguarding action if necessary. The agency has strong links with safeguarding professionals and refers incidents to them if necessary.

The staff, including the panel members and trustees, benefit from regular safeguarding training that is of high quality. The safety of children is assured through a rigorous assessment of prospective adopters. Checks and references are sought and verified. Any issue that may affect the prospective adopters' ability to provide a safe and nurturing home for a child is fully explored. This process is undertaken in a transparent and professional manner that fully involves the prospective adopters. A comprehensive health and safety assessment is undertaken of prospective adopters' homes, including pet checks and identifying and making safe potential hazards to a child such as a garden fishpond.

The adopters are provided with full, honest and informative training and discussion during their adoption preparation process about the impact that abuse and neglect can have on a child's behaviour and how best to safely manage this behaviour. Information and training regarding holding a child as a last resort to ensure that they are safe are provided to adopters.

Children benefit from the agency's comprehensive assessment of risks. Parents are given clear plans of how they should manage any identified risks. The staff have developed an innovative risk-matching tool and have been awarded government funding to develop it. Staff are working with a university to pilot the project. This tool is being used and evaluated as part of the project to determine how matches between parents and children are made, evaluation of the associated risks of the match, and how these can be better understood. The outcomes of this project are being shared with other adoption agencies and professionals.

Parents report that the staff take their views and any concerns, complaints or feedback seriously and act on them. Complaints to the agency are rare. If a complaint is received, it is addressed within the agency's complaints procedure timescales. A comprehensive response to the complaint is sent to the complainant. This is a learning agency. If an element of learning or improvement is identified from feedback or a concern, it is promptly put into action. One adopter reported that she highlighted a minor issue for improvement during her assessment. This was quickly addressed to her satisfaction and procedures changed as a result.

Leaders and managers ensure that recruitment procedures are comprehensive and rigorous to ensure that only suitable people are employed by the agency.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers have an ambitious vision for the agency. They succeed in providing a centre of excellence that provides high-quality adoption services to parents and children. There is a shared sense of purpose from all the staff and expert knowledge of how to achieve very positive outcomes for adopted children and their parents. There are many innovative and creative projects successfully being undertaken by the agency that are further improving outcomes for adopted children.

The agency benefits from strong governance and quality-monitoring systems. The manager and responsible individual compile extensive monitoring reports every three months. These reports are provided to the trustees, who scrutinise and provide oversight of the operation of the agency in an effective manner. An improvement plan is regularly updated and is child-centred.

Leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the strengths of the agency and the areas they wish to develop further or to improve. They act promptly to analyse, evaluate and implement any learning, such as from adoption disruptions. They use this learning to inform future practice. The recommendation from the previous inspection is fully met. The agency now asks that prospective adoptive parents spend time volunteering at one of their clubs so that they can gain first-hand experience and understanding about how best to care for a child.

Leaders, managers and the staff demonstrate excellent working relationships with other professionals. The staff will challenge other professionals if necessary. One member of staff recently successfully advocated for the family they were working with and challenged a placing authority that was failing to provide an adopted child with their passport.

The staff report a very positive working environment. The agency is expanding and recently recruited two additional assessing social workers. The staff benefit from regular and comprehensive supervision. The staff also receive an hour of clinical supervision monthly that supports them with their emotional well-being. The staff receive an extensive programme of training that equips them with the skills and knowledge that they need to undertake their roles. They report that they are well managed and led, they are listened to and any issues they raise are promptly addressed by managers.

The adoption panel provides a rigorous quality-assurance function. The agency decision-maker appropriately challenges panel recommendations if necessary. The panel chair reports that assessment reports provided to the panel to inform its recommendations are of a high standard. Panel members are suitably experienced and qualified. The panel is very well organised and runs efficiently. Adopters are encouraged to attend the panel, which has recently been made less formal so that adopters feel at ease during the process.

The agency recognises that the panel could be more diverse and is currently encouraging more diversity among its members by inviting suitable people from diverse backgrounds to join the panel. The agency decision-maker, who sits on other adoption panels in the area, describes this agency as 'streets ahead' in terms of its quality of work and outcomes for children.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences 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 help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families, and adult service users. 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, young people and adults 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

Unique reference number: SC048462

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Inspectors

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