

SSAFA Forces Help Adoption Service

SSAFA Forces Help Enterprises Limited
SSAFA Forces Help, 4 Dunstons Hill, London EC3R 8AD
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

- SSAFA Forces Help Adoption Service was registered as a voluntary adoption agency on 1 July 2003.
- SSAFA recruits, assesses and trains prospective adopters from serving military families living anywhere in the United Kingdom. Its focus is on approving prospective adopters for older children and sibling groups of children who are in local authority care.
- The agency also supports adoptive military families throughout the UK, regardless of whether they have adopted through the agency.
- The agency offers support and advice to those interested in adoption who are based overseas. However, assessment, approval and placement support are only offered once applicants are UK based.
- There is a permanent team of five social workers and an additional five sessional workers and a full-time, post-adoption support worker employed by SSAFA. This is in addition to two senior managers, a business development manager and two panel administrators.
- The agency is also registered in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- In the year to the end of the last quarter, the agency had approved 18 prospective adopters and placed 14 children for adoption, six who are now subject to an adoption order. There are currently five adopters waiting for a match.
- The manager has been in post since 31 March 2019.

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 November 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: 5 December 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the agency has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for persons on the central list that includes:
 - identity checks,
 - DBS Disclosures, including the level of the Disclosure and the unique reference number (in line with the eligibility to obtain such checks),
 - checks to confirm qualifications which are a requirement and others which are considered by the agency to be relevant,
 - at least two references, preferably one from a current employer, and where possible a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children,
 - checks to confirm the right to work in the UK,
 - where the person has lived outside of the UK, further checks as are considered appropriate where obtaining a DBS Disclosure is not sufficient to establish suitability to work with children.
- (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 61, paragraph 21.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

This is a highly family-focused agency whose values are embraced by all staff throughout the adoption process. The agency places older children, sibling groups and those children who have more complex needs. The agency is making a significant difference to children by building strong and resilient adoptive families.

Children and their adoptive families are offered exceptional services by this agency. They receive highly individualised and bespoke assessment, training, matching and support services. There is a strongly held sense of trust in the relationships developed between the agency workers, children and prospective adopters/adopters. This creates an atmosphere where adopters feel that they can share any issues without being judged, in the knowledge that they will receive unconditional support.

Children make very good and, in some cases, exceptional progress in a short period of time living in their adoptive families. Progress reports demonstrate many examples of children learning new skills, succeeding in education, settling and developing strong attachments. This helps them to enjoy and achieve in their new family environment. In one case, two siblings who had been separated in foster care were successfully reunited in their adoptive placement, thereby having the opportunity to grow up together.

Prospective adopters had no hesitation in reporting to inspectors that they chose this agency because they felt understood as military families. They felt that this agency offered a non-judgemental approach and saw strengths which other agencies had considered as weaknesses. Many adopters return to this agency as second-time adopters. Adopters reported to inspectors they felt that they were given excellent information and had all their questions answered through telephone contact and information exchange sessions in their own homes.

The agency is inclusive and, in the past two years, has increased its same sex couple recruitment to 45% of all recruited families. As an agency, it is aware of its need to increase recruitment of black and ethnic minority families and plans to target these families in a new recruitment campaign.

The agency offers a bespoke residential training for prospective adopters that is held over four days. The training is presented by a very experienced social worker and the content and delivery is exceptional. It focuses on understanding the challenging needs and behaviours of children who have suffered developmental trauma. It also helps prospective adopters to think about strategies to understand and manage behaviours for when they may parent children in their own homes.

The agency completes meticulous and well-planned matching of children to prospective adopters. The impact of this is that children are enabled to develop attachments and identify quickly within their adoptive families. The agency works closely to consider needs, age, background, ethnicity, religion, culture and language as well as likes, dislikes and preferences. This has led to an agency where placement disruption is rare and where children settle quickly and fit into their new families.

The agency offers an outstanding ongoing support package. Support plans are considered

early in the adoption process and there is a well-planned transition to the supporting social worker post placement. Support plans are prepared in conjunction with placing authorities and include therapy, educational support, training, information, support with applications to the adoption support fund, support in meetings and just 'being there' and 'being available'. Adopters' feedback about the support that they receive is 'fantastic'. They described feeling 'held' and 'contained' and describe the agency workers as 'like family' and the 'backbone' of the agency. Social workers offer exceptional advocacy for children and work tirelessly to promote what they believe is in children's best interests.

Children's views are listened to by workers, who give them the utmost priority. Many examples were seen during the inspection where children's views are informing and shaping the services provided. The agency has made two short animations to promote awareness of children's feelings when they move to a new family. Children's views about what makes a good adoptive family are included in questions asked to prospective adopters during the adoption panel process. Workers actively and positively engage with children during visits to the home and also during residential and training activity events for families together.

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

Safeguarding is at the centre of this agency's work. Research and current relevant issues are informing practice, such as digital safety and safer caring practice. Children are protected by the agency's clear safeguarding and child protection policy, which gives staff guidance and processes if there are any child protection concerns.

Extensive suitability checks are undertaken in respect of prospective adopters. At times, these checks can delay the adoption process, especially when families have moved a considerable amount of times and worked overseas. These checks are robust and help to ensure that no unsuitable people get into a position when they can cause harm to children.

Similarly, recruitment checks are robust for staff members and the central panel list members. The agency works on two systems for checking suitability, one for staff and one for central list members. However, the central list system, while ensuring that all checks are completed, does not keep an accurate record of those checks.

Prospective adopters are provided with an opportunity to speak directly with an adoption social worker at their first contact with the agency. They describe being given good-quality, accessible information. The agency website is also a source of helpful information. This information includes the checking process and outlines the types of behaviours that can be expected and the types of risks that may be encountered in seeking to adopt a child. This helps prospective adopters to gain a basis of understanding of behaviour management and reasons behind behaviours from an early stage.

A topic of the preparation training offered is about safer caring and protecting children from social media and keeping them safe in the virtual world. The preparation social worker has a strong understanding of safeguarding in this area. She has attended child exploitation and online protection training which highlights how to protect children from

social media and ensure digital safety.

All prospective adopters are expected to do the online level 1 safeguarding training. Bespoke training packages are arranged for specific individual children's needs such as 'Non-Violent Resistance' for challenging behaviours and therapeutic training, 'Playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy training'.

Panel members and staff have completed training on the risks of radicalisation, risks of extremism and sexual and criminal exploitation. Safeguarding training is regularly updated, and the agency has an organised system to record when training is completed and when it is required to be reviewed and refreshed. This ensures that staff are up to date with the most recent themes in safeguarding practice and research.

Wider safeguarding themes are brought into the preparation training to ensure that adopters hold a basic understanding of risks of radicalisation and extremism. If these issues arise at a later stage, bespoke training packages are negotiated.

Records of child protection issues are thorough and well organised. Notifications are reported appropriately and the agency's policy for child protection has been shared with and adopted by the host borough's designated officer.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Outstanding leaders and managers are confidently leading this service. They are passionate about providing stable, secure homes for children with military families. They are ambitious about what they can provide and hold high expectations of their staff. They have continued to lead creatively and know their strengths and areas for development. They have demonstrated excellent collaborative relationships with many placing authorities and in the development of regionalisation in London, the North and the South West.

Leaders and managers continue to break down the stereotypes to ensure that military families can adopt. This opportunity for families also provides placements for children to be placed who have complex needs such as sibling groups, black and ethnic minority children and those children with complex or special needs.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for the number of prospective adopters they can recruit and organise services to ensure ongoing recruitment, assessment and approval of a target of 10 to 12 new families each year.

Leaders and managers oversee services to ensure the ongoing support of adopters. They have raised the profile within the organisation of the need for ongoing support for adoptive families. They have made this a priority and have worked hard to ensure that this profile is maintained to ensure ongoing funding both via grants and charitable fundraising. At the inspection in 2016, the organisation was doubtful about its ability to continue and compete in a challenging and changing adoption world. With proactive leaders who have raised the profile of the service, there is increased confidence in its approach and ability to succeed.

Leaders and managers support staff through regular monthly supervision sessions. In addition, monthly team meetings are an opportunity for the staff to come together. They

engage in understanding the issues of the agency and spend reflective time thinking and talking about the priorities of the service. The agency offers staff a good induction, probation and annual appraisal. This ensures feedback to the agency and is an opportunity to address any practice issues. The staff team is extremely experienced and highly competent. It provides a very good-quality service in the preparation of assessment reports and the support and training that it offers adopters.

Leaders and managers are aware of their strengths and proudly talk about these. They also understand the areas where further development is needed. They take these issues to the senior management team and continue to keep these issues on the agenda for funding and development.

The agency has updated and sent the regulator a statement of purpose which identifies the services on offer and how they will be delivered. The agency no longer provides inter-country adoption and an application for a minor variation is currently in progress.

As well as having close working relationships with placing local authorities, the agency taps into other voluntary providers for specialist services such as early permanence and Non-Violent Resistance training. The agency is well thought of by placing authorities and has positive links to many of these nationwide.

The agency offers competent challenge to other agencies where this is needed. Leaders and managers spend time working collaboratively to achieve what is in children's best interests. Where this doesn't work, then challenge is offered, for example pushing for proper discussion, reporting and understanding of a recent placement breakdown.

The leaders and managers promote equality and diversity. The pool of prospective adopters is mainly white UK, with very limited black and ethnic minority carers available. However, the agency proposes to target these areas for recruitment as it has effectively done with same sex couples and single carers. The agency has consistently raised the profile of military families and works hard to break down myths and stereotypes associated with these families.

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

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