

# Families for Children Adoption Agency

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Caroline Mary Davis OBE
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	25/05/2011

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Families for Children was established in 1993 as a joint venture between Exeter Diocesan Board for Christian Care and Plymouth Diocesan Catholic Children's Society. In January 2003, the agency became a separate registered charity.

This voluntary adoption agency has full office premises in Buckfast, Devon, and Dorchester, in Dorset. The service has expanded significantly since the last inspection. This has resulted in several smaller offices in St Austell in Cornwall, Filleigh in North Devon and Taunton, in Somerset.

The agency offers a full range of domestic adoption services to people who live in the counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, as defined by the Anglican Diocese of Exeter and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Plymouth.

There is a service level agreement in place with an adoption support agency in Exeter, which helps to support adoptive families through training, consultancy and direct work. Families for Children also works with adults affected by adoption to provide birth records counselling, birth relative-initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work.

There are also service level agreements with Poole and Bournemouth local authorities to provide counselling, advice and support to birth parents whose children have been placed for adoption. The agency is commissioned by other local authorities to undertake specific pieces of work with birth family members or adopters who require independent assessment.

The service approved 44 adoptive families between January and December 2014. 40 children were placed for adoption between April 2013 and March 2014. In the same period, the agency provided adoption support to 125 families and 62 adult adoptees.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but

these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This agency is outstanding because the assessment and preparation of adopters, and direct work with children, young people and adults is of exceptional quality. Social work practice in assessment and post-adoption support highly professional and of an excellent standard. The service has exceptionally skilled social work and administration staff and has access to a range of external consultants to provide tailor-made support services to adoptive families.

The large majority of children and young people achieve exceptionally good outcomes. On the rare occasions when placements disrupt, this process is managed as sensitively as possible. An external professional commented, 'the agency offers life long support for adopters and adoptive children and this is also offered in the cases where young people have left home prematurely. The agency is constantly looking at how they can improve outcomes for children, young people and families post adoption.'

Another professional said, 'I think it is a relatively small organisation which cares very much about the families and will go the extra mile to support them when necessary. Everyone I have met there appears dedicated to the idea of adoption and providing children with permanent families.'

Safeguarding has a very high priority for all staff, managers and trustees. Safeguarding practice is of a very good standard, informed by excellent training. When safeguarding situations have arisen, the service has responded appropriately and has worked with other agencies to achieve a balanced, risk-managed outcome for the children and adopters.

Children and adults are consulted at every opportunity to seek feedback on all aspects of the service. The agency is keen to improve and develop further, and consultation supports this process. The agency scrutinises practice to identify any areas that could improve. One member of staff said, 'we are proud of what we do, but not complacent. Adoption support for children placed from care is a continuing challenge. We aim to improve year on year.' This reflective style of practice helps managers and staff to learn from the challenges that arise in the course of their work.

Partnership working is one of this service's significant strengths. Creative, collaborative arrangements with a number of local authorities and voluntary agencies

combine skills from different organisations and ensure that adopters and children receive effective, timely and locally-based training. There are service level agreements with local authorities to provide birth parent support services and family finding for harder-to-place children. This shows that the agency uses its exceptional experience to engage with the most challenging areas of work, in order to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children.

The agency is extremely well led and managed. Leaders and managers are highly experienced, very visible and operate an 'open door' policy to encourage staff at all levels to discuss their work. There is strong and effective quality assurance, both internally and through the scrutiny provided by the adoption panel. Trustees manage the charity's financial and executive functions and maintain highly effective oversight of the service.

Staff confirm that they are exceptionally well supported, which in turn enables them to provide a skilled professional service to adults and children. The agency is creative, innovative and staff regard it as an excellent employer.

Adopters are unanimous in praising the agency's approach to their recruitment, assessment and preparation. One adopter said, 'Families For Children seem to be the gold standard for adoption agencies. Our experience has been positive in every way.' Adults receiving birth records counselling all strongly agreed that the service provided is excellent.

The agency is closely involved in research and monitors and disseminates developing knowledge in the field of adoption. Staff training is rigorous and readily available. The service has grown considerably since the last inspection, when it was also rated outstanding in all areas. This shows that the agency is able to sustain excellence in practice over time. Leaders, managers and staff all stated that growth has not been at the expense of the agency's ethos. Everyone interviewed confirmed that the service's deep-rooted and child-centred values continue to guide and inspire practice.

There were no requirements or recommendations from the last inspection, and no breaches of regulations on this occasion. One recommendation has been made in relation to the timing of notifications to Ofsted.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that the registered provider and the manager of the VAA has a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with Regulation 19 or Regulation 24. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (NMS 29.1)

## **Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people have outstanding experiences and outcomes, because the service recruits excellent adopters and matches them carefully to children's individual complex needs. Close collaboration with local authorities means that there is a high degree of networking, which often leads to matches. Over the years, the service has built up excellent relationships with other agencies and a high level of local knowledge in terms of their own adopters, the communities in which they live and the therapeutic resources on offer. This knowledge and experience, together with exceptionally skilled assessments, informs the whole adoption process.

As a result, children live in safe and stable families, where they can begin to settle and work through previous trauma. For many children, including those who were the most challenging to place, the level of stability and nurturing care helps them to make exceptional progress from their starting points.

The service is dedicated to children receiving high-quality life story work, which helps to establish a sense of identity. Social workers go above and beyond the level of service expected in order to achieve exceptional outcomes for children. One parent said, 'I cannot praise them enough. They are always there to help in whatever way they can. One of my adopted children is nearly 21, and yet the support is still there. I couldn't ask for more...the level of support I receive is incredible.'

Many children settle in school and begin to improve their educational attainment. For some children, there is exceptionally good progress. They have contact with brothers and sisters when this is considered appropriate. Children and adults' needs are assessed very carefully before they have access to any records about their past care and adoption history. Staff gave many examples to show that each person's individual needs are taken into account to provide a uniquely tailored adoption support service. For example, a young person who would not normally have been able to access birth records before he was 18, was helped to meet his birth mother, because his birth father had already died and he was worried that he may lose the opportunity to do so. This was extremely well planned and managed, which led to a very positive contact meeting. There is now annual contact, which has helped the young person and his adoptive and birth family.

Outcomes for birth records counselling clients can be disappointing, because there are so many human variables involved. Service users who do not benefit from positive outcomes are helped and supported to make sense of the information available, and put it into context.

### **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service provides an exceptionally high standard of practice in recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. The agency also values and contributes to the body of research in the field of adoption, with published work on disruptions and understanding the needs of children adopted from care. The agency has also contributed to research conducted by others and has commissioned a study from the University of Exeter to inform practice. This strong culture of involvement in research contributes to the service's ability to create a sustained and marked improvement in children's and adults' lives. The agency is represented at government all party committee level and is therefore in a position to have an impact on national policy.

Adopters feel very positively welcomed and valued. Recruitment is targeted on meeting the needs of harder-to-place children of all ages, but with an emphasis on those aged over three, on sibling groups, children with disabilities and children from Black and other minority ethnic backgrounds. Adopters are accepted on the basis of their skills and aptitude for the task. This means that there is no discrimination in relation to sexuality, ethnicity or any other factor. For example, although the service is a Christian organisation, it welcomes adopters from any creed or none. Adopters have informed the service through their regular feedback, that this feature of the service is valued. This undoubtedly increases the number of potential adopters who express an interest in the assessment process.

Clear timescales are set out at the start of Stage 1 of the assessment process. Prospective adopters experience no delays in social worker allocation and everyone interviewed found their social workers to be helpful, clear and reliable. Customer standards are extremely high and rigorously maintained. One adopter said, 'they are very speedy and effective. We were visited once a week for home study, after four days of prep. group.'

Preparation courses are well managed and often run in conjunction with local authorities to increase resources and provide a local venue for those attending. Adopters say that the agency is extremely well organised and reliable. One adopter said, 'although my husband and I are still going through our assessment, every appointment is already booked in in advance for our social worker to visit. We also have our panel date booked.'

The agency targets training carefully so that it provides an introduction to the many skills that adopters will need to help them to build their new family. For example, the child development module of the training includes up-to-date research on the impact of emotional abuse, trauma and neglect on brain development. Adopters confirmed that they received information about the birth parents' perspective and found this to be valuable in understanding their views. All were very complimentary about the quality of training. One adopter said, 'they have provided excellent and informative training days helping us understand the adopted child's needs and provided us with basic PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy) parenting skills.'

Leaders and managers ensure that prospective adopters' reports are prepared to a very high standard. Consequently, reports contain relevant, detailed information and excellent evaluation. The adoption panel chair confirmed that reports are of a good

standard and stand up well to close scrutiny. There is an effective panel-to-agency feedback system in place to help social workers continue their professional development and ensure that quality standards are maintained.

The adoption panel is very well managed and chaired by an experienced professional who has vast experience in the field of fostering and adoption. Adopters who had already been to panel meetings were very positive about this potentially harrowing experience. They said that they were put at their ease and questioning was sensitive and appropriate. One panel member who responded to a survey said, 'the agency is sensitive to people's needs and panel business is conducted in a very respectful and timely way. All the information provided is comprehensive and well documented and adequate time is allowed to ensure it can be read and processed fully...I have been very impressed by how well the panel is run and how much emphasis is placed on the positive strengths of prospective adopters and ensuring that people feel as comfortable and at ease as possible when attending.'

The agency is excellent at using their contacts to link children with adopters, using a combination of strategies to effect an eventual match. One couple commented, 'at panel, we were confident that we would get approved, that was down to our social worker. After panel, we were matched within one month and our child moved in two months after that. Families For Children are a fantastic agency and I have recommended them to others.'

The agency works hard to obtain detailed information from placing authorities about the children they are seeking to place. Agency social workers travel extensively to read children's files and speak to placing social workers to ensure that adopters have full information. One adopter said, 'my social worker made good relationships with my daughter's social worker and was able to add additional information to what we already knew about my daughter and her situation.'

A member of staff commented, 'effective recruitment and assessment helps to promote sound and stable placements for children and young people and help to keep the disruption rate to a low level.'

The adoption panel chair prepares a six-monthly report for the agency to provide an oversight of approvals, reviews and all other panel work undertaken. This provides leaders and managers with an independent view and an important additional check to help them to monitor the agency's performance.

Adopters are well aware of adoption support provision and many stated that they chose this agency because of its commitment to providing this for the rest of the child's life. All who had received an adoption support service were full of praise for the agency's support. One parent said, 'I have twice called FFC in a crisis, and have received immediate help. I can't imagine a better response. With Families For Children, the passion they have for the job they do is ever evident, and deserves to be recognised.'

The agency has access to a wide range of internal and external resources to support

children and families. This includes training events covering safeguarding, attachment, behaviour management, internet safety and sexual abuse. There is also a full programme of social events across the south western counties to bring children and families into contact with other adoptive families and the staff, panel members and trustees who work for the service. For example, there is an annual barbeque, Easter egg hunt, summer picnic and Christmas disco. The agency has a partnership with a local church which provides financial support to enable children to attend annual summer camps. Through this exceptional support, over 100 places at camp have been made available to adopted children over the last three years. Children find this extremely beneficial because it provides them with fun activities, and also the opportunity to meet and talk to other adopted children.

There are agreements in place with adoption support services and psychological services to provide skilled professional support. One parent said, 'my daughter struggled with loss, grief and bereavement and this effected her behaviour. Families for Children immediately referred us to a sensory occupational therapist when I first raised concerns...this was invaluable and helped me to manage my child's behaviour whilst supporting her emotionally.' Another parent said, 'the support they offer should be the benchmark for other agencies.'

The agency also supports adoptive parents to help them to work with their children's schools to help staff prepare for the challenges of teaching looked after and adopted children. For some children, this has made the difference between being able to remain in that education placement and being excluded.

The service also runs support groups for single carers, adoptive fathers and adoptive parents whose children are leaving home. This highly creative and flexible approach ensures that the service reaches as wide a range of adopters and their children as possible.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service is outstanding because safeguarding training is extensive, informed by the latest research and of the highest standard. All staff in the service are regarded as of equal importance in training delivery; for example, the administration staff receive dedicated training in safeguarding, because they may well receive the initial phone call and have a very important role to play in protecting children.

Adopters are clear about their responsibilities and the principles of safer care. They fully understand the impact of abuse and neglect on children's neurological, physical and emotional development. The agency ensures that adopters are taught about the opportunities and risks arising from access to social media during preparation training. Training provision is under constant evaluation and review to ensure that the information is current.

The agency ensures that adopters, staff and panel members are recruited safely.

Staff files are well organised and appropriate checks are carried out to make sure that there is complete information in relation to prospective appointees. This includes an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service check on all staff and panel members, irrespective of their role.

The service conducts an initial health and safety check of each adopter's home, with annual updates to reflect any change in circumstances. Checks are robust and include risk assessments on pet animals to ensure that any risk that they may pose to children is evaluated and managed.

Children are aware of advocacy services through excellent quality written information. The agency's adopters are strong, competent and assertive people who are well able to challenge individuals and organisations who do not fully understand their children's needs.

On the rare occasions when safeguarding concerns have arisen, the agency has managed the situation sensitively with placing authorities and the local area designated officer to ensure that children are safeguarded from harm. They have risk managed the situation well and balanced child protection with the need to avoid further trauma by preventing precipitate and reactive decision-making. For example, removing a child in a non-urgent situation would cause considerable distress and potentially irreparable harm, and where possible, this has been avoided. This pragmatic, child-centred approach makes a major difference to outcomes for children.

The service handles complaints well. These are very rare, and are vastly outweighed by compliments. When a complaint is received, it is well recorded, investigated and analysed so that the service can learn from the situation.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Leadership and management are outstanding because the service makes an exceptional difference to children's lives at every stage in the adoption journey, from matching to placement and life-long post adoption support. This demonstrates the highest level of commitment to children and adult service users, irrespective of their cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for the service and are currently reaching the conclusion of a five-year development plan. Supported by an exceptionally effective and dynamic fund raiser, they applied to receive a government expansion grant and achieved a significant sum. These funds have enabled the agency to undertake a major strategic expansion since the last inspection.

The team has an overall target of 70 approvals in the next budget year, which is a substantial increase on the figure for 2013 to 2014. This has involved targeting services in areas where there was a need for more adopters; for example, by

opening three new sub-offices to make the more accessible to a wider range of prospective applicants. The leadership team has worked hard to create these new opportunities, but has ensured that the agency's core values of a friendly, family-style approach and high levels of customer service have been preserved.

The agency performs well against national comparators. In 2013-2014, 19% of applicants took longer than nine months to reach approval. The social work service is efficient and keeps to targets well, so any apparent delays were for very good reasons. In fact, compared to national comparator groups, the agency performed well in this area. In the previous year, the agency outperformed national comparators for all voluntary adoption agencies (VAAs) by 27 percentage points.

Staff praised the managers' 'open door' policy and willingness to discuss new ideas. One staff member said, 'this is a strong element of the organisation's ethos, and is a reality'. For example, the service holds an 'annual Agency Day when all staff, panel members and trustees are consulted about achievements and disappointments over the previous year and given the opportunity to identify priorities for the coming year.' Staff contributions are considered as part of the Agency's strategic plan.

The agency has established and maintained exceptionally effective professional relationships with local authorities and other partner organisations. For example, the agency has initiated an innovative project to target recruitment on one local authority's hardest to place children. There is now interest in extending this to another local authority within the region.

There is detailed management analysis of any disruptions, complaints and safeguarding incidents to provide learning for staff and panel members. Annual quality and data analyses are sent to Ofsted regularly, to ensure that the inspectorate is fully aware of service performance and developments.

The service is adaptable, flexible, positive and continually strives for improvement. There is an enthusiastic and energetic programme of fundraising in order to finance the agency's vital adoption support work. The hard work involved in creating financial resources ensures that this lifeline of support is available to all who were adopted through the agency, throughout their lives.

The service has a clear and effective Statement of Purpose, which is available in a variety of formats and is also on the web site. Children's guides to adoption and adoption support are extremely well designed and contain all the required information to advise children of their rights.

Adopters frequently praised the service's staff, who were described as highly effective, professional, calm and exceptionally skilled. There are sufficient staff to meet the agency's needs, subject to the current recruitment campaign to staff the new offices. The service is well aware of potential pressure points in post-adoption support as the work increases, and has a strategic plan to address this.

Staff are well trained and qualified. They value the service's training programme,

saying 'training is extremely good.' One member of staff gave an example of how training had had an impact on outcomes for children. 'Training by a consultant children's occupational therapist in relation to sensory integration and development, has enabled me to argue for adoption support services for children who have suffered early developmental trauma.'

A panel member commented, '...training for adoption panel members and social work teams covered presentations and opportunities to experience exercises relating to the stage one and two training for adoptive parents. This was presented in a very professional way and was very helpful...enabling me to understand more fully the training required for prospective adopters prior to approval.'

There is close and effective management monitoring to ensure excellence in practice, but with a confident, professional approach which trusts experienced staff to do their jobs and consult when necessary in addition to the regular, high quality supervision provided. One staff member said, 'supervision has been on a regular monthly time table. It has a set agenda and I have found it constructive. I am able to access support at other times as well.'

The agency uses an effective electronic recording system. Records are clear, evidence-based and up to date. The service is always mindful that records can be a very important resource for adults seeking information about their adoption. The quality of life story work seen during the inspection is exceptionally good.

Notifications are detailed and appropriate. They have, until now, been sent in to Ofsted when complete. This was because the service's managers wanted to provide an update and a clear outcome before submitting them. This means that although exceptionally well recorded, notifications have sometimes arrived later than the recommended 24 hours after the incident. This was well intentioned and has had no impact on children and young people. The manager undertook to send them in promptly in future, and a recommendation has been made.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.