

# Adoption Matters

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14 Liverpool Road, Chester CH2 1AE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this voluntary adoption agency

The agency has been established since April 2007, in its current model, following a merger with another voluntary adoption service with premises in Blackburn. Prior to the merger, both agencies had been established for many years.

The agency undertakes all required work in respect of the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters, both domestic and inter-country, and operates from five sites: Chester, Blackburn, Hale, Salford and Warrington. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services, including birth records counselling and intermediary work. The agency works collaboratively with another voluntary adoption agency to provide some of these services, in particular regarding adoption support services, the bespoke family finding service and concurrent care planning.

**Inspection dates:** 17 to 20 October 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>outstanding</b>
How well children and parents are helped and protected	good
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 and young people.

**Date of previous inspection:** 11 August 2014

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:**

None.

## Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- Staff are highly skilled in providing an individualised service across a range of adoption and adoption support services. They are passionate about their work and committed to providing the best service.
- Adopters benefit from an exceptional service throughout their involvement with the agency.
- Staff support careful matching of children with adopters. As a result, despite the complexity involved in many placements, there are few adoption breakdowns.
- Adopters and children benefit from receiving excellent support services.
- Children thrive in stable homes where they make good progress and develop a strong sense of identity.
- Leaders and managers are highly visible and provide inspirational leadership.
- The agency is involved in innovative research-based practice which influences adoption and adoption support practice.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- Ensure that all staff understand and implement promptly the safeguarding policy.
- Ensure that there is a clear audit trail for complaints management.
- Ensure that staff notify Ofsted promptly of significant events.

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

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, and the Adoption national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered provider and the manager shall prepare and implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption by the agency or by another adoption agency, but with prospective adopters approved by the agency as suitable to be adoptive parents in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983(1) (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies) (Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 2003 10(1)). In particular, that all staff understand the safeguarding policy and take prompt and robust action to implement the same.</p>	<p>01/12/2017</p>

### Recommendations

- The registered provider and the manager of the VAA have a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of significant events in accordance with regulation 19. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (National minimum standards 29.1)
- There is a system for keeping records of complaints made and for handling these confidentially and securely. Records of complaints and allegations are clearly recorded on the relevant files for staff, volunteers, children and service users – including details of the investigation, conclusion reached and action taken. Separate records are also kept which bring together data on allegations and on complaints. (National minimum standards 27.5)

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Adopters report feeling welcomed from the outset of their contact with the agency. They feel that they receive individual support which enables them to engage fully in the preparation and assessment process. The highly skilled staff team keep the adoption preparation group programme under close review. As a result, staff have responded to group feedback regarding the adoption support service provided, and added an extra day's training to ensure that prospective adopters are well prepared for the task of meeting the complexities of children's needs. Adopters value their preparation; one commented:

The assessment process was brilliant and easy, my social worker was always available and the preparation sessions were very good. I now attend as an adopter to share my experiences.

Staff work highly collaboratively with prospective adopters throughout the assessment and their attendance at panel. Prospective adopters feel exceptionally well supported and value their individual relationships with staff and the agency. They feel able to contact the agency at any time and advise that they always receive excellent support. The agency promptly informs prospective adopters regarding their suitability following their attendance at panel.

Staff and adopters help children to build trusting relationships with their carers. In the last year, staff matched three quarters of adopters with a child within a year of their approval. Staff go to exceptional lengths to ensure that they match children appropriately with adopters, including accessing local authority files, organising medical adviser meetings, and carefully planning children's transitions. As a result, the number of adoption breakdowns is very low. Since the last inspection, only 2.5% of children's placements ended prior to the adoption order being made. Staff learn from these experiences and ensure that they are proactive in ensuring that introductions meet adopters' as well as children's needs. They also ensure that they are meticulous in securing all possible information about the children prior to placement, including arranging 'bump into' meetings and life appreciation days where all professionals involved with the child meet to share information about their lives.

Children make progress in all areas of their development. The agency is particularly skilled at supporting schools to meet children's needs. Staff undertake training for schools and develop individual anxiety reduction plans for school staff to use. This is effective, with children engaging well with school and pre-school learning opportunities. Adopters are particularly positive about the support which is available around key transition points from primary to secondary school.

Adopters are committed to maintaining children's identity. Adopters support children to have contact with their birth families, including brothers and sisters and those who have been important to them, where that is safe and in their best interests. This promotes children's emotional resilience and sense of identity. For those prospective adopters who are approved for concurrent care planning, the intensity and level of contact requires

considerable tenacity; however, this programme achieves exceptional outcomes for children who are either returned to their birth family or can remain with the same family and be adopted. This prevents multiple placement moves for the child and ensures that prospective adopters have a wealth of information and knowledge about the birth family.

Staff ensure that adopters have the support available which best meets their needs. This ranges from a buddy system for prospective adopters matching them with an experienced adopter; support groups for adopters with pre-school age children; individual social work support and therapeutic support and training from the centre for adoption support. Adopters and professional stakeholders alike value the agency's support. Adopters report that this makes a significant difference to children's lives. One adopter said: 'My social worker has been a superstar I couldn't have done this without her support... she's done things over and above.' And another said: 'Without the support of the agency we would have had school and family breakdown.' A local authority social worker commented:

Thank you with your help with this case, your insight into the family has been invaluable in providing them with the right support to look after their child.

The adoption support service has grown rapidly since the last inspection, with over 300 families offered support in the last year. The range of highly effective support is spread across individual consultations, group training and specific therapeutic intervention, as well as more general events such as picnics and parties which adopters find offer them and their adopted children valuable opportunities to broaden their support networks. At times, adopters report that specialist help is delayed, as adopters rely on children's placing authorities to complete and submit the adoption support fund applications. Staff provide challenge to local authorities to progress these applications, and support families during the intervening period.

The agency provides services to adults through birth records counselling and intermediary work, and birth parent counselling. Service users feel that they receive an exceptional service, which for many exceeds their expectations and has a positive impact on their lives. One birth parent service user said: 'My social worker has been amazing. She came to court with me and has been dead supportive. My baby has everything she needs now and I have a copy of it all too.' The agency receives many requests for access to birth records and intermediary work. This is well organised and easily accessible for adopted adults and their birth families, with staff supporting them to sensitively understand their experiences. They feel that they receive an outstanding service. One adoptee said: 'I was surprised how well supported I was, always felt I was their first priority.' Another said:

I fully trust my social worker; she has a close bond with myself. She is always understanding of the situation and extremely helpful. It was exactly what I needed. To understand my adoption and to meet my birthparents. And reconnect with them.

The agency continues to assess and support inter-country as well as domestic adoption. This represents a small proportion of their prospective adopters; however, the growth of regional adoption agencies will see the agency collaborate further within this field. The agency places continual development and learning at the centre of its practice and service

users benefit from a myriad of opportunities. It provides innovative, research-informed practice which enhances children's life chances and improves outcomes for its service users. As a result, individuals and the agency receive national awards.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

Prospective adopters are well prepared for being able to understand the potential impact that abuse and neglect has on children. This begins at their preparation training, some of which is more specific to children's identified needs, such as foetal alcohol syndrome, and continues once they have children placed with them. Adopters understand the training they receive and are able to put it into practice to safely care for their children.

Staff within the adoption support services create plans for managing children's behaviour and risks at home and at school. This supports children to make good progress in managing their own behaviour. One child commented:

The work has been most beneficial. It has enabled me to judge situations with a much cooler head... I am able to handle extremely strong emotions in a much more controlled and safe way. Thank you... this work has changed me for the better.

All staff and adopters work in a therapeutic way to ensure that they provide unconditional care and regard for children. Staff develop specific courses to meet adopters' and children's needs, in particular regarding managing children's physically challenging behaviour. Adopters really value this support; one said:

This is a very special place. Social workers really 'get it' and are non-judgemental. They are proactive and don't wait for the family to be in crisis.

On occasion, when adoption plans dictate this, the support for children and adopters should be in place quicker. Some children, that adoption support staff encounter, are at risk of going missing, and are at risk of child sexual exploitation. Staff have a good understanding of these circumstances, however, their recording lacks clarity about how the agency supports children and adopters who are affected by these issues.

Safeguarding arrangements to protect children are generally sound, with adopters and prospective adopters understanding the need to refer allegations of harm. The agency supports this process promptly with referrals to placing and hosting local authorities. Most staff recognise safeguarding issues and take adopters' concerns seriously. However, on an isolated occasion this did not occur, with individuals being slow to recognise that practice around trying to keep children safe was not appropriate. While the agency, once it was aware of the incident, promptly referred the relevant information to statutory agencies to keep children safe, there was a delay in this process. Agency records of staff supervision and appraisals relating to this case, do not consistently demonstrate that leaders and managers have addressed the reasons for the delay in information sharing by the case worker.

Adopters, adult service users and children are aware of how to complain. This has

occurred infrequently since the last inspection and all complaints have followed the agency's policy. The agency uses a combination of paper and electronic recording which is not helpful in providing an audit trail of complaint management. Staff make good use of varied methods to gain feedback from service users throughout their engagement with the agency. This feedback informs improvements in practice. The agency informs Ofsted of significant incidents; however, there is delay at times, which prevents the regulator from being able to monitor patterns and trends as they occur.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and manager: outstanding**

Leadership and management of the agency is very strong. The manager has a wealth of experience and is suitably qualified. The leadership team is ambitious and has developed a culture of high expectations for children and adult service users within the agency. The leadership team members are key stakeholders in adoption services, both regionally and nationally, leading innovative developments across the range of adoption services. This has led to the dissemination of research-informed adoption practice developments. For example, in working collaboratively with another adoption agency to provide a centre for adoption support and in being actively involved in the development of a number of regional adoption agencies.

The agency is growing and there are effective continuity plans in place which ensure there is strength throughout the leadership structure. The agency has robust recruitment processes in place. The agency employs only suitably vetted and qualified social work staff, panel members, therapists and volunteers who can meet the needs of all service users. The highly skilled and experienced staff team is a real strength of the agency. An adopter said: 'The post-adoption support is "excellent" as staff have the experience, expertise and real empathy.'

Leaders and managers ensure that new staff benefit from an effective induction into the agency. Staff report feeling well prepared for this specialist role through good-quality training and regular formal and informal supervision. Staff are skilled at working collaboratively and there is a shared sense of highly aspirational practice. All service users report positive experiences whether they are speaking to their allocated social worker or other team members, and whether they are prospective adopters, adopters or adoptees accessing birth records and intermediary services.

The quality of assessment, matching and support is exceptional. Leaders and managers regularly seek feedback from prospective adopters during the assessment process and afterwards, which leads to improvements in this process. The agency uses its extensive experience in providing adoption support, to inform and develop the training for adopters. This ensures that prospective adopters receive additional preparation training to ensure that they have increased emotional resilience and skills in order to meet children's and young people's complex needs. The agency responds really well to trends and patterns in the adoption field and the results of court decisions and government policy and disseminates this to their staff and adopters. The agency recruits a range of adopters who are able to meet the needs of children, in line with its statement of purpose. This recruitment has supported the specific development of bespoke family-finding and concurrent care planning, which require prospective adopters who are exceptionally

resilient and flexible. Leaders and managers value diversity and promote engagement with the LGBTQ community and the BME community. They are innovative in their approach to recruiting a diverse range of prospective adopters, with positive effect. Adopters report that staff consider their individual needs and make them feel welcome from the outset.

Leaders and managers ensure that experienced and skilled panel chairs lead the adoption panel. They recruit panel members from a range of diverse backgrounds, which ensures that there is the necessary knowledge and skill to make child-centred decisions. The adoption panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function which is also supportive to prospective adopters. Panel members address all issues sensitively and carefully. One referral to the Independent Review Mechanism has concluded since the last inspection; this upheld the panel's decision.

The agency develops excellent professional relationships which allow children and young people to fulfil their potential regardless of their specific or complex needs. The agency meets children's individual needs through partnership working with local authorities, groups of local authorities and other adoption agencies to provide concurrent care planning, adoption support and the bespoke family-finding service. This is exceptional and demonstrates ground-breaking practice which is widely shared. The agency acts as a leader within the local, regional and national voluntary adoption agency community. The agency is committed to further development, and has the capacity to sustain its position as a practice leader, as the arena of voluntary adoption agencies evolves.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. 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 and young people 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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