

# Catholic Caring Services (Diocese of Lancaster)

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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<b>Address</b>	Catholic Caring Services 218 Tulketh Road Ashton-on-Ribble PRESTON PR2 1ES
<b>Telephone number</b>	01772 732313
<b>Email</b>	
<b>Registered person</b>	Catholic Caring Services
<b>Registered manager</b>	Christine Sutherland
<b>Responsible individual</b>	
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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Catholic Caring Services is a well established voluntary adoption agency, which specialises in finding adoptive families for those children whom the local authority finds difficulty placing. It has four offices where adoption services are provided, which include the head office in Preston and three branch offices based in Barrow-in-Furness, Carlisle and Manchester. The agency recruits, prepares, assesses and approves prospective adopters who live in the area of Lancashire, north of the river Ribble, in parts of East Lancashire, Greater Manchester and in Cumbria. Adopters are offered a variety of pre and post support services, including regular support groups, social and training events. The service will also negotiate with a local authority for complex packages of therapeutic support to be provided. In certain circumstances, the agency will themselves commission therapeutic work to be undertaken with a child and family post placement. In addition, the service will undertake direct work with children, for example, life story work, if this is requested by the placing authority.

The agency operates and maintains a letterbox system to support the exchange of information in adoption placements. It also offers an independent counselling and support service to adopted adults on behalf of a neighbouring local authority. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service and intermediary service to adults adopted through the agency.

### Summary

The was an announced inspection. All the Adoption National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Regulations were addressed under the four outcome areas of Staying Safe, Enjoying and Achieving, Positive Contribution and Organisation, which were judged as good.

Catholic Caring Services adoption service is usually thorough in its approach to the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. The agency is extremely child focussed and works hard to ensure children are well matched with agency adopters. A range of support services is provided to adopters, both pre and post order. The provision of these services ensure families are able to access the necessary support to maintain stable and permanent adoptive homes.

The agency has a clear understanding of the life long implications of adoption and actively supports the inclusion of birth parents in adoption plans. Adopters are encouraged and supported, wherever possible, to meet with birth parents. The agency also seeks to plan, support and facilitate direct contact between birth families and children, providing it is in the child's best interests to do so. There is a letterbox system and assistance with letterbox contact is available. A counselling and intermediary service is provided to adopted adults and birth relatives. Catholic Caring Services provides a service to a large number of people who are affected by the adoption process, all of whom are highly respected, valued and receive an individually tailored, qualitative service.

The service is managed effectively and efficiently. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. However, quality assurance systems are not sufficiently robust in relation to the agency's records.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

The agency's last full inspection was carried out in October 2005, which resulted in three actions and seven recommendations being made. The service had made considerable efforts to address these matters, with the result that all the actions had been completed and only one recommendation remained outstanding. This recommendation related to quality assurance issues relating to adopters' assessments and agency records.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is not judged.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The agency's recruitment strategy reflects the importance of equality and diversity and is clearly based on an awareness of the children requiring adoption. Its effective recruitment activities has enabled children to be placed with adoptive families, who are able to meet their needs, for example, older children, children with special needs and sibling groups.

There are clear processes and procedures in place to handle domestic adoption enquiries and follow up any expressions of interest, which are compatible with the agency's equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice guidance. Adopters confirmed that the information provided had been 'very helpful' and 'effectively' met their needs.

The agency has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters, which fully complies with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 practice guidance. Preparation training is held on a regular basis and the materials used are appropriate and effective, with adopters becoming fully aware of the complexities of parenting and adopting a child from the care system. Adopters were extremely complimentary about the preparation training, which they stated was 'well organised and presented'. A number indicated that there was 'a warm, inclusive atmosphere' in the groups, which enabled participants to 'share issues more comfortably with each other'. A number stated that the information was really 'valuable', 'thought provoking' and 'helped them realise what was involved in becoming an adoptive parent.

The majority of adopters' assessments are well documented and of good quality; in so far as they are thorough, analytical and cover such issues as parenting capacity, life experiences, the impact of adoption and support networks well. Views of birth and adopted children are also obtained regarding their parents' decision to adopt. However, in a small number of assessments, these issues were not always as effectively addressed. For example, in one assessment there was insufficient exploration of the applicant's motivation to adopt. The service also obtains written references in relation to the adopters, employer references and checks with applicants' former partners. In addition, all necessary enquiries and statutory checks in relation to prospective adopters and other members of the household who are aged 16 years or over, are obtained. The agency ensures adopters are able to look after children in a safe manner through the use of comprehensive pet and health and safety risk assessments. Second opinion visits are also undertaken, which are thorough and well documented.

Adopters were very positive about their experience of the assessment process, stating that the assessments had been carried out by extremely professional, skilled and sensitive staff. All

commented on the accuracy and realism of their written assessment, which had been given to them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive good written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. This information is also reinforced throughout the preparation, assessment and approval process. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register and the Adoption 22 consortium. Adopters confirmed that the information provided was 'very helpful' and ensured that they had a 'good understanding of the process'.

The adoption agency's practice is extremely child focussed and a great deal of thought and care is given to determining if their adopters can be effectively matched with a child. Several adopters commented on this practice stating 'the agency is about finding families for children and not the other way round'. Nevertheless, whilst the child is at the centre of the agency's practice, their responsibilities to adopters are also fully recognised. Consequently, staff work hard to obtain up-to-date, qualitative information about a child and thoroughly discuss this with adopters, prior to any match being agreed. In addition, the agency uses a variety of specialist advisers, who can meet with adopters to discuss specific issues relating to a child, so enabling adopters to consider the full implications of these issues for themselves and their family.

There is a clearly written policy and procedures which govern the adoption panel's function and operation. This documentation contains all the information required under the adoption National Minimum Standards and Regulations. There is a well established practice of adopters being invited to attend the adoption panel. Good preparatory work is undertaken with them prior to their attendance. Adopters stated that the chairperson and panel members 'welcomed' them, did their best to put them 'at ease' and the questions asked were 'relevant'.

The panel is appropriately constituted and arranged at a frequency that avoids any delay in considering the approval of prospective adopters. It is well organised and effectively chaired. Panel members are well prepared, make appropriate observations and ask pertinent questions. Panel minutes are well-structured, informative and meet the adoption National Minimum Standards.

The agency's decision maker ensures all information relating to a case, as well as the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision. Notifications of the decision are always sent out within the necessary timescales.

Staff recruitment practices are robust, which ensures children are effectively protected. The manager and all staff working within the adoption service are appropriately qualified, extremely knowledgeable, skilled and experienced in their work.

There is a clear written complaints policy and procedure, which is given to adopters. There has been one complaint in the last 12 months, which was appropriately dealt with, in accordance with the agency's complaints procedure. A complaints system is in place, which enables the manager to collate and monitor all complaints. This information is incorporated into the agency's annual adoption report.

The agency has a safeguarding policy and procedure, which meets the Adoption National Minimum Standards and Regulations. There is a good recording system in place to enable staff

to record safeguarding issues effectively. All those working in the agency are well supported to handle and manage any safeguarding matters which arise.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The agency fully recognises the importance of providing qualitative support to adopters in order that stable and permanent homes are maintained for children. It is proactive in its support to adopters and if necessary, will actively advocate and assist adopters in negotiating a required support package from the local authority.

The agency has also developed a full range of pre and post adoption support services, for example, adopters retain their social worker following approval and until the adoption order is made. There is a regular adopters newsletter, an informal peer support scheme, support groups, as well as social and training events. Guidance and assistance is provided to adopters in writing letters, under letterbox agreements. Adopters are also able to learn about various parenting strategies in the management of their child and if required, a worker from the agency can undertake direct work with them. The service will also, if necessary, negotiate with a local authority and commission individual therapy for an adoptive family. In addition, the agency has a variety of specialist advisers who can meet with adopters to provide them with any required information, advice and support. Support provided to adopters is of a high standard, with work thoughtfully planned, prepared and undertaken in a sensitive and skilled manner.

Adopters are made aware of the various support services available at an early stage in their contact with the agency. Requests for support are responded to 'promptly' and the support provided is described as 'very good'. A number of adopters commented that the 'support was available whenever needed'. Some adopters stated that 'I could not have got through without the worker, whose support was brilliant', others said 'I could not have had a better service'. All adopters confirmed that they had been informed of the support package available to them and those that had not required support from the agency stated that they were confident such support would be provided, if required.

The agency has access to a variety of specialist advisers and written protocols are in place regarding their roles. The range of specialist advisers available and their accessibility ensures adopters receive appropriate support at all stages of the adoption process. Staff indicated that the specialist advisers provided a good service and an invaluable asset to the agency. A similar view was also expressed by adopters, who had used their services.

There are appropriate systems in place for people affected by adoption to receive specific services according to assessed need. These services are provided in a thoughtful, sensitive manner and people are fully involved in any decisions affecting their life.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The agency has a clear understanding of the life long implications of adoption and are committed to providing a high standard of service to all those involved in the adoption service. This is demonstrated in their recognition of the vital importance of a child's heritage and the maintenance of contact agreements. These issues are dealt with in depth during adopters' preparation training and throughout the adoption process.

The agency makes real efforts to ensure the local authority provides up-to-date and comprehensive information regarding the children placed with adopters. Adopters recognise and appreciate the agency's efforts, stating that the information obtained increased their ability to care for their children and effectively meet their needs. Adopters clearly understand the importance of keeping and sharing information about the birth family and demonstrate an openness in talking about adoption.

The agency prepares prospective adopters to meet birth relatives, wherever possible. These meetings enable adopters to receive information from the birth parents first hand and can provide them with a firm basis for future contract arrangements. The agency ensures adopters are carefully prepared for such meetings and that they are sensitively handled and well managed.

The agency operates a small letterbox service, which is well organised and effectively managed. This scheme provides a real opportunity for birth parents, as well as their families to contribute to the maintenance of their child's heritage. In addition to this, the agency provides a birth records counselling service to adult adoptees, whose adoption was arranged by the agency. They also respond to requests to access information from their adoption records, as required by the adoption regulations. The agency fully recognises the importance of this task and gives considerable thought to the preparation and presentation of this information. Consequently, all work is undertaken in a sensitive, skilful manner and to a high standard.

The agency also undertakes tracing, intermediary, as well as reunion work and provides support during and after this process. The experiences and learning derived from this work is used effectively to inform the agency's adoption practice.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is good.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose, which contains all the information required under the Adoption Agencies Regulations. Its written policies and procedures have been revised in accordance with the Adoption and Children Act 2002. These documents are of a good standard and accurately reflect the agency's Statement of Purpose. The agency has a children's guide, which is in a child friendly format and exceeds the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

Information provided to adopters is well written, clear and provides comprehensive information regarding the adoption process. The agency literature indicates that people who are interested in becoming adoptive parents will be welcomed without prejudice. This is clearly reflected in their practice, as shown in the increased diversity of adopters and provides local authorities with a greater choice of adoptive placements. This is of particular benefit to those children whom local authorities are finding difficulty placing in an adoptive family.

The agency has a clear management structure, which encompasses the Board of Trustees, the Chief Executive and management team. All the agency's managers are appropriately qualified, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in adoption law and practice. The agency is operating in accordance with its statement of purpose and in an effective, efficient manner, ensuring good outcomes are achieved for children and adopters.



There are clear written procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the adoption agency and a number of quality assurance systems are in place. There is a supervisory and appraisal system in place, which is used to monitor staff's performance and ensure a quality service. Staff are supervised and appraised in accordance with the agency's policies. The agency's administrative support is of a good standard and enables staff to carry out their work in an effective and efficient manner. The quality assurance systems in place are generally effective in monitoring the agency's performance, though some improvements are required.

Catholic Caring Services has sound employment practices and sufficient staff with the appropriate experience, qualifications and skills to meet the needs of the agency. There is a clear commitment to developing staff's knowledge, skills and ongoing professional development. Records confirm staff receive good training opportunities and support. Staff regard the agency as a good employer.

There is a complaints policy and procedure, which is available to all staff and service users. This documentation fully meets the Adoption National Minimum Standards. A separate system to record complaints is kept. Records are detailed and fully comply with the standards and Regulations. The complaints procedure is regularly reviewed to ensure it is operating effectively and checks made to identify if there is any pattern to these complaints. Any complaint received is viewed in a positive and constructive manner and any learning gained from this is used to inform and improve agency practice.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised, in good order and a file audit system is in place. However, the system used to record case decisions is not clear or consistent. The agency's current and archived records are stored securely and in a manner to minimise harm from the risk of fire and flood.

There are clear written recruitment and selection procedures. The personnel and panel members' files contain all the information required under the adoption National Minimum Standards and Regulations.

Three of the four branch offices were visited and were found to be well resourced. There is space, storage, good information technology and communication equipment. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose. All four offices have the necessary insurance policies in place. The agency has a disaster recovery plan, which fully meets the Adoption National Minimum Standards.

There is a clearly written set of financial policies and procedures governing the agency's financial management, which are properly operated.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good.

The agency is committed to providing a service that values and supports people's differences. This is underpinned by its policies and practice. Recruitment of adopters is prioritised to reflect needs of children awaiting adoptive placements. The agency focuses on the specific needs of children when considering matches with adopters. Children's needs arising from their religion, culture or disability are carefully considered. Good support is provided for children who need therapeutic services. The agency is non-discriminatory in considering the suitability of people to adopt.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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### Recommendations

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

- improve the agency's quality assurance systems (NMS 17)
- improve the system used to record supervisor's case decisions (NMS25).