

Caritas Care

Inspection report for Voluntary Adoption Agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny
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Setting address	Caritas Care, 218 Tulketh Road, Ashton-on-Ribble, PRESTON, PR2 1ES
Telephone number	01772 732313
Email	
Registered person	Caritas Care Limited
Registered manager	Susan Bernadette Swarbrick
Responsible individual	James Patrick Cullen
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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 overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced inspection considered all the national minimum standards under the four outcome areas of staying safe, enjoying and achieving, positive contribution and organisation. Enjoying and achieving was judged as outstanding and all other outcome areas were judged as good.

Caritas care is an agency that is totally committed to ensuring children's futures are safeguarded through adoption. Its recruitment strategy promotes equality and diversity and actively seeks to recruit a diverse group of adopters to meet the needs of children requiring adoption.

The agency is thorough in the recruitment, assessment and approval of adopters. It is an extremely child focused agency and works hard to ensure children are well matched with its adopters. An extensive range of support services are provided to adopters both before and after an adoption order is made. These services are of an extremely high quality and often complex packages of support are provided in order to enable families to maintain stable and permanent homes for their children.

The agency's holistic approach to adoption ensures it has a very good understanding of the life long implications of adoption. It actively supports the inclusion of birth parents in adoption plans and 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. The agency provides a high quality, timely service to all people, who are affected by the adoption process. They are highly respected, valued and receive an individually tailored package of support.

The agency is well managed operationally and strategically. Both the management and staff team have considerable knowledge and experience in adoption. They also receive good quality training and support. There are number of quality assurance systems in place. Agency's records are well organised and in good order. However, decisions by supervisors are not always consistently recorded.

There is a robust recruitment and selection procedure which safeguards children. There are written financial policies and procedures in place which govern the agency's financial management. The robust application of these ensure the agency's viability.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last full inspection was carried out on 1st December 2008 and two recommendations were made. These related to the agency's quality assurance system and the recording on agency files of the supervisor's case decisions. The agency had addressed the first recommendation, however, there was some inconsistency in relation to the recording of supervisor's case decisions and a further recommendation has been made regarding this.

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.

Since the last inspection, the introduction of a regional database system has enabled the agency to obtain clearer information about children, locally and regionally with an adoption plan. This has resulted in the agency developing and refining its recruitment strategy. Its recruitment activities are aimed at securing adoptive families that are able to provide for children with complex, challenging needs and circumstances. The agency has its foundations in the Christian faith but its work is clearly grounded in

meeting children's and families' needs regardless of faith, culture or heritage. Indeed, much of the agency's success has been with people from a range of different backgrounds and circumstances. It works closely and tirelessly with colleagues from many different local authorities to secure the most suitable matches and has achieved good outcomes for children.

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

Caritas Care has a thorough preparation, assessment and approval process of adopters, which fully complies with the Adoption and Children Act 2002 practice guidance. The service ensures preparation training is held regularly. The materials used are appropriate, effective and fit within a framework of equal opportunities and address anti-discriminatory practice. Preparation training is held on a regular basis and at a variety of times and venues to meet the needs of adopters. The agency is currently designing its preparation training to meet the varying needs of adopters, for example, second time around adopters.

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. Several stated that the information was insightful and thought provoking. Others said that it had enabled them to realise the reality of commencing on the adoption journey and taking a child into their lives.

Prospective adopters undergo a thorough assessment of their suitability, which is clearly focused on their ability to parent children who may have complex backgrounds and challenging circumstances. Staff have a good understanding and are skilled at analysing applicants. Assessment reports are well presented, detailed and thorough. They provide an analysis of applicants' backgrounds and an awareness of adopting a child, with its associated life-long commitment and responsibility.

Adopters are positive about the assessment process. Staff were said to carry out their work in a professional, knowledgeable, skilled and sensitive manner. All adopters have the assessment document prior to going to the adoption panel to check for accuracy and to make comments. Adopters stated that their report was accurate, portrayed them realistically and given them in the required legislative timescale.

Adopters receive written information regarding the matching, introductory and placement processes. Information is also provided regarding the National Adoption Register. This information is reinforced to adopters throughout the adoption process. Adopters confirmed that the agency's information was helpful and enabled them to gain a good understanding of the adoption process.

The adoption agency's practice is child focused, as demonstrated in the care and thought given when determining whether adopters can meet a child's needs. Nevertheless, although the child is at the centre of the agency's practice, their responsibilities to adopters are also fully recognised. Staff work hard to obtain up-to-date and qualitative information about a child, which is thoroughly discussed with adopters prior to any match being agreed. In addition, the agency can access a variety of specialist advisers, who can meet with adopters to discuss specific issues relating to a child. This enables adopters to fully consider the implications of such issues for themselves and their family.

The adoption panel has a clear written set of policies and procedures which govern its function and operation. There is a well-established practice of adopters being invited to attend the panel. The adoption panel is well managed by an experienced chairperson who carefully scrutinises the reports placed before them. Panel members are thorough in their analysis of the material presented and discussions are focused on the information provided. The panel's membership brings a wide range of expertise and understanding, enabling them to make informed recommendations. The organisation and administration of the panel is very efficient and clear, detailed minutes of proceedings are made. The agency's decision maker takes the responsibility of the role extremely seriously and ensures all information relating to a case, including the panel minutes, are thoroughly scrutinised before making a decision.

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 no complaint in the last 12 months. 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's safeguarding policy and procedure fully meets the adoption national minimum standards and regulations. There is a recording system in place to enable staff to record safeguarding issues effectively. Those working in the agency are supported to handle and manage any safeguarding matters that may arise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for adoption support are outstanding. The agency has an excellent understanding of adoption as a holistic process. At the centre of this is a clear focus on children and adopters' needs and recognition of the life-long implications for all those affected by adoption. Support is, therefore, recognised as being of vital importance and is clearly focused on the needs of people, regardless of the particular stage that they may be at in the adoption process.

The agency's extremely strong commitment to support has resulted in extensive and high quality pre- and post-adoption support services being developed. 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. 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. Guidance and assistance is provided to adopters in writing letters under letterbox agreements. 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. In situations, where there is a shortfall, the agency has commissioned individual therapy for an adoptive family itself.

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 quickly and the support is described as excellent. Those adopters who have not required any support from the agency stated that they were confident such support would be provided, if required in the future.

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 were 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 is proactive in ensuring local authorities provide up-to-date and comprehensive information regarding the children placed with their adopters. Adopters recognise and appreciate the agency's efforts, as they recognise that such qualitative information increases 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 contact arrangements. The agency ensures adopters are carefully prepared for such meetings which 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 promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency ensures that the promotion of equality and diversity is clearly reflected in their policies and procedures. It is an integral part of its practice, as the agency is totally committed to providing a service that values and supports people's differences. The agency's recruitment focuses on approving adopters from all sectors of the community, who are able to provide loving families for children with complex needs, backgrounds and circumstances. Prospective adopters' assessments address the applicants' views on disability, ethnicity and culture; both in terms of the types of children they are being assessed to adopt and their suitability to bring up children to have balanced, fair and non-discriminatory views. The agency works extremely hard to ensure adopters are appropriately matched with children and provides very effective adoption support services to them. The service greatly respects birth parents and indeed all those affected by the adoption process and this is clearly reflected and demonstrated in their practice.

An up-to-date Statement of Purpose is underpinned and informed by a range of policies and procedures that guide the work of the service. The agency has a children's guide, which is in a child-friendly format and this 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 well qualified, skilled, experienced and knowledgeable in childcare and 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 are effective in monitoring the agency's performance.

The agency has sound employment practices and sufficient staff with appropriate experience, qualifications and skills to meet the needs of the agency. Its policies and procedures encourage staff retention, which assists the agency to provide a consistent and continuous service to children and adopters. It has sufficient staff with appropriate experience, qualifications and skills to meet the needs of the agency. There is a clear commitment to developing staff knowledge, skills and providing ongoing professional development. Records confirm staff receive good training opportunities and support. Staff regard the organisation as a good employer.

There are appropriate policies and procedures in place for case recording and access to records. Case records are well organised and in good order. However, they do not consistently contain a record of supervisor's case decisions. The agency's current 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. Personnel files demonstrated a rigorous approach to recruitment and selection, all files included the required information, were well ordered and securely stored. Panel members' files contained all the required information.

The agency's premises are well resourced with sufficient space, storage, good information technology and communication equipment. The premises are accessible, have sufficient parking and are fit for purpose. All the premises have the necessary insurance policies in place. There is a disaster recovery plan, which fully meets the national minimum standards.

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

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure decisions by supervisors are consistently recorded on case files. (NMS 25.5)