

# Joanna North Associates

Inspection report for adoption support agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Joanna North Associates Ltd registered as an adoption support agency in 2006. Joanna North is the director and sole clinician and does not currently contract in other therapeutic services. The agency is supported by one administrator.

The agency provides counselling and psychotherapy in relation to adoption, therapeutic services for adopted children, support to help ensure that relationships between adoptive parents and children continue, assistance and independent meeting management when disruption has occurred and intermediary services for adults wishing to contact relatives. Birth records counselling is not provided.

Joanna North Associates also provides assistance to adoption agencies in preparing and training prospective adopters. The agency undertakes a variety of other child-focused services, such as reporting and expert witness services to the courts, which fall outside the remit of this inspection.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

The service is operated and managed by a sole provider who is passionate about delivering the best possible outcomes for children. The provider is a highly skilled and well-qualified psychotherapist who demonstrates a warm, positive, adaptable and exceptionally supportive approach to children and families. Her professional skills are informed and enhanced by high quality, on-going training and specialised supervision.

Outcomes are excellent, including outcomes for children with the most diverse and complex needs. In many cases, children are able to remain as part of a loving adoptive family, because they are so well supported. For example, parents said, 'Jo helps us believe that yes, we can do it.' Another parent said, 'We have really, really appreciated her help.'

The quality of care is outstanding. Professional practice is sensitive, reflective and well supported through regular consultation with children, parents and supervisors. This results in an exceptionally child-focused, flexible and creative service that consistently meets individual children's needs. Feedback from social workers, advocates, parents and children is enthusiastic and extremely positive.

Parents said that they had received an exceptionally good level of service, including support with meeting children's educational needs. One parent said, 'Jo keeps in touch all the time by email and consults with us at every opportunity.' Another parent said, 'You couldn't get anybody better. Jo is 100% behind you; she gives you confidence. Our son is always told 'if there's a problem, phone me.' She is absolutely brilliant.'

The provider has a keen interest in and commitment to safeguarding. This helps to ensure that children receive therapy from well-informed and skilled professionals who understand when safeguarding situations require the involvement of child protection agencies. Ultimately, this helps to keep children safe.

The service is very well managed and monitored, both professionally and financially. Service users are central to service development and the provider's plans for the future. The service is supported by an exceptional level of training, supervision and business consultancy. This helps to ensure that development plans are creative and financially viable.

The service, which was also rated outstanding at the last inspection, has now sustained excellence in practice over a substantial period of time. There are no identified shortfalls resulting from this or the previous inspection. Consequently, adults and children continue to receive an outstanding level of service that is adaptable to individual and collective changing needs.

### **Outcomes for service users**

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

Parents confirm that they and their children are regularly consulted. For example, children and parents benefit from an initial trial period of six sessions, when they work together with the provider to decide whether the therapeutic style is appropriate for their needs. Children and families therefore exercise real choice in negotiating and re-negotiating their own service. If the family's circumstances change between sessions, the service responds to this. This means that the work is tailored to children's and parents' individual needs in the most flexible manner.

Children receive a warm and compassionate service which places them at the centre of the therapeutic work at all times. For example, one parent commented that her son had a particular interest in fire engines and was disappointed that the service did not have one in its collection of therapeutic toys. By the next session, the provider had purchased a toy fire engine and allowed the young person to take it home with him. He was delighted and felt valued as a result of this experience. This helps to

build trust and to optimise therapeutic outcomes.

Children and parents have their therapeutic needs met through a responsive and sensitive service. For example, individual sessions may involve children, the parents or both. This enables the provider to address the parents' needs while at the same time, allowing children the space and time that they need to talk about anything that is worrying them. There is also excellent out-of-hours support. One parent said, 'Jo is there at the end of a phone. Just knowing that support is available is really good.' The provider confirmed that even a brief phone conversation can make a major difference to the outcomes for a family facing very complex issues.

All parents spoken to said that they had received an exceptionally good level of service which has helped to sustain family relationships. One parent said, 'There is no question; our child would not be with us if we did not have this support.' Social workers were also exceptionally positive about outcomes for children. Consequently, children and their parents are less likely to suffer the trauma of family breakdown. This means that the agency helps to promote children's mental health, stability and sense of identity as well as supporting optimal life chances.

Children benefit directly from the provider's assertive and knowledgeable support for their rights. For example, she has links with an advocacy service. She has also provided expert information to help parents to present their case to an education department for financial and other resources to enable their child to achieve their potential in school. A parent said, 'Jo is completely independent (of other agencies); she has my son's interests at heart. She has helped us to challenge the local authority's education policy. My son enjoys his time with her and he always wants to go. He has made real progress.'

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

All service users and social workers agree that the agency provides an excellent and constantly improving service to both adults and children. For example, the provider takes a keen interest in research in the field of adoption. She has undertaken her own original research and holds a masters' degree and doctorate in psychotherapy. She is a published author and has written a number of articles on post adoption support and attachment. Some publications are available to service users to help inform the challenging task of parenting children with very complex needs. This means that adults and children can continue their learning in between sessions, or after therapeutic involvement has ended.

The service is accessible to all, with the only restriction being limited local authority funding. Each service user receives carefully tailored, highly flexible support which remains negotiable throughout the period of service provision. This ensures that support can be adapted to any changing circumstances. Social workers value the service and welcome the professional liaison that the agency provides. The assessment is a two-way process and any further work is clearly negotiated with the

family and the commissioning agency.

Appointments and locations are arranged to suit service users' differing needs. For example, the service is exceptionally good at offering flexibility to those with disabilities. The ground floor of the premises is generally accessible to people with reduced mobility. Staff are able to provide some basic assistance and are always willing to meet at a fully wheelchair-adapted or more convenient venue. The service willingly works with people whose first language is not English and also with people with sensory impairments. Translators are provided for those who need this service.

Young people's case files are well organised and contain brief, transparently-recorded notes. Children and parents can help to record their therapy sessions, which helps them to have an input in how the work and their feelings are described. The provider produces a written report at the end of the initial period of assessment. This enables commissioners to review the service provision and decide whether to continue to fund the service.

The provider has excellent working relationships with commissioning bodies. Through clear contracting arrangements, she ensures that valuable and limited financial resources are directed towards work with children and families and that financial resources are not expended on superfluous administration. Parents confirm that the service is very sensitive to funding issues. For example, the fee structure reflects the fact that some parents have to fund themselves. This means that fees are reduced if there is no local authority funding available. This helps to make the service accessible to a wider group of people, so that more children can receive help and support.

The provider works hard to maintain and develop her knowledge base by attending high quality, accredited training in a wide range of therapeutic techniques. This helps to ensure that service users have access to the most up-to-date information and a variety of therapeutic techniques to suit individual children's needs.

## **Safeguarding**

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The provider is totally committed to achieving very high quality practice in safeguarding. For example, she constantly strives to improve her own practice through openness, transparency, relevant training and consultation. She is aware of current and past research in child protection and keeps many key documents, including government guidelines, to inform her practice. The service's administrator is also aware of child protection issues.

The agency also has a clear vulnerable adults' policy. This contains all the information required to ensure that the provider and staff understand how to refer vulnerable adults to safeguarding services. The provider is well aware of the safeguarding issues affecting adopted adults seeking contact with birth family

members. The service is in contact with the Local Area Designated Officer (LADO) and has links with the neighbourhood police. This helps to ensure that the provider is aware of any current local issues that may impact on children or adults attending the service.

Staff files are well organised and contain all the required documentation, including detailed and complete curriculum vitae, references and evidence of Criminal Records Bureau and identity checks. This helps to ensure that service users are protected from contact with unsuitable staff.

The service has an excellent, accessible complaints policy which refers service users to alternative sources of support and redress. There have been no complaints. The provider explained that she would seek to resolve any queries and concerns through open discussion.

Because of the high quality support on offer, there have been very few situations which have led to safeguarding concerns. The provider is clear about the course of action required if a safeguarding concern did arise and she would refer the matter to the LADO. This policy is transparent and clearly stated in literature provided for children and parents, so that they understand safeguarding obligations and protocols.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the adoption support agency are **outstanding**.

As a sole provider, the agency's director and responsible individual engages in exceptionally rigorous monitoring. This is achieved through reflective practice, research, good record keeping and frequent, on-going consultation with children, parents and professionals. The agency's self-reporting is both effective and evaluative.

The director maintains very good relationships with commissioners and social workers. Social workers are very positive about the outcomes for children and one commented, 'Jo has done some excellent work with (my child). She has made a real difference to the sustainability of the placement.'

The agency has a clear and readable Statement of Purpose which accurately describes the range of work covered. There is also an attractive, child-centred and engaging children's guide. All documentation is available in different formats and languages. Consequently, the agency describes what it does very accurately and in a friendly, accessible manner, taking cultural and linguistic differences into account. This means that children, families and commissioners receive very high quality information and are clear about the services on offer.

The director works hard to ensure that local authority budgets designated to help children are not spent on additional administration. For example, she appropriately challenged an authority's request for her to prepare additional written reports, which

would have used some of the budget designated for therapy. This helps to ensure that children benefit directly from all the financial resources that have been identified to help them.

By working hard with other agencies, the director ensures that service users receive an informed and consistent approach, supported by practical help and adherence to children's rights. For example, she will contact schools to explain that adopted children are not on a level playing field with other school children in terms of their sense of security and behavioural expectations.

The business has been reviewed and adjusted to take into account the challenge faced by local authorities nationally in financing post adoption support. The director also engages in other therapeutic work and in writing reports for the courts. Consequently, the business has a broad base and the last three years' accounts show that it is clearly financially sound.

The therapeutic work is conducted in an attractive town house with a warm, relaxing and conducive room, plentifully supplied with soft toys and craft materials. The premises are extremely well suited to the work and are conveniently situated for service users arriving by road or rail. Records are kept appropriately and the building provides a safe and secure environment for children.

The director has over 20 years' experience of working with children, adults and families. Her work specialises in helping children with complex behavioural difficulties. The director is registered with relevant professional bodies and maintains their professional development standards. She attends three major training events every year as well as shorter courses. This ensures that the children and young people attending therapy receive the most up-to-date professional service, informed by current research.

The director is well aware of the regulations and national minimum standards relating to adoption support agencies. There were no recommendations or requirements from the last inspection. However, the director is ambitious for the service and is always striving for improvement to accommodate all children and families' diverse needs. This means that there is an exceptional degree of scrutiny which helps to ensure outstanding outcomes for children and families.



## 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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 adoption support agencies.