

Caritas Care (Head Office)

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC048438
Inspection date	07/10/2014
Inspector	Sharon Lloyd / Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	07/02/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Caritas is a well-established voluntary adoption agency, which specialises in finding adoptive families for those children whom the local authority finds difficult to place. It has four offices from which adoption services are provided. These include the head office in Preston and three sub-offices 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-adoption support services, including support groups, social and training events. The service also arranges therapeutic and psychological services for children and adopters where needed. This may be before or after adoption.

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.

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**.

Ninety five per cent of adopters report that the service provided is excellent. A typical comment is, 'Caritas Care have been excellent through our whole process and their aftercare support is second to none. We cannot praise them highly enough'.

Children make excellent progress in their development. They are very well matched with adopters who can meet their needs and provide stable and loving homes. There are very few placement disruptions and this demonstrates how well-matched and secure children are in their adoptive families.

The agency finds families for a range of children, including a high proportion of children with disabilities, sibling groups and those with complex emotional and behavioural needs. The agency undertakes timely assessments of adopters and it is above national comparators when it comes to the timeliness of matching adopters to children waiting to be adopted. It leads the way in the development and provision of concurrent care placements and fostering for adoption placements. This enables children to move to adoptive families at an earlier age so they build strong attachments and enjoy family life in stable and safe homes. Sibling groups grow up together and have a strong sense of identity and belonging. The lives of siblings adopted by different families are enhanced because adopters demonstrate a strong commitment to contact. An adopter whose children have siblings placed with another adoptive family explained, 'A match was sought that would best suit the siblings as well as ensuring that all the adults had something in common. This is wonderful and we meet up regularly.'

Excellent support is provided to children of school age. This results in improved progress at school. They are happier, interact better with their peers, and achieve better outcomes. Children's health needs are identified as far as possible prior to placement and adopters ensure children receive medical attention that promotes their good health. Adopters have very good information about children's backgrounds and their birth families which they are fully committed to sharing with children. This helps children to have a strong sense of identity.

Adoption support is exceedingly good. Children and adopters benefit enormously from individually tailored support packages that promote the development of strong attachments and help adopters to understand and respond appropriately to children's challenging behaviour. The high quality support from the agency enables adopters to provide nurturing, stable homes where children's emotional needs are extremely well met. Workshops and training events take place throughout the year and this enables adopters to refresh their knowledge and understanding of children's complex emotional needs so they can respond to developing needs whenever the time is right for their family.

The leadership and management of the agency are dynamic, ambitious and visionary. The agency has grown substantially since the last inspection. It has embraced the government's agenda for improvement by investing significantly in the recruitment, training and support of adopters. This has been possible because the agency has secured expansion grants from the Department for Education for its

pioneering work. As a result, higher numbers of children, including hard to place children are successfully matched with adopters and are enjoying family life in stable, secure homes.

The agency is at the forefront of regional and national developments and continues to drive improvement throughout the sector, including within the agency and in partner agencies such as local authorities. Year on year, it provides increasingly better adoption services. For example, recognising that children with complex health needs have not always received the high levels of support they need, the agency has engaged with the 'It's All About Me' project. It is targeting recruitment for specific children and providing high quality support and training for adopters so that more children with complex and challenging needs benefit from and enjoy family life.

There are three developmental recommendations to further enhance the quality of the service. These relate to minor shortfalls that have minimal impact on the quality of the service and outcomes for children.

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 children's guide is written in a format which is appropriate to the child's age and understanding (NMS 18.5)
- use feedback from adopters to inform decision-making about which services to provide. In particular, take their wishes and feelings into account when developing support groups (NMS 15.2)
- take action to address any issues of concern that you identify or which are raised with you. In particular, escalate any concerns about the practice of placing authority social workers where it may have a negative impact on children. (NMS 25.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children make exceptionally good progress in adoptive families that are carefully selected to meet their unique and often complex needs. Many are placed as a sibling group and some babies join their older siblings who are already in an adoptive family. This enables sibling groups to stay together and enhances their sense of belonging and identity.

Adopters have an excellent understanding of the importance of contact with birth families. They willingly engage with birth families for one-off final visits, providing birth families with the opportunity to say goodbye and to be assured that the child

will be well-cared for and loved. Photographs of these meetings provide many children with a lasting impression of a warm relationship between adopters and birth parents. This promotes a sense of well-being and security.

Wherever possible, children have regular contact with siblings in other placements, including those in foster care. A high number of children maintain letter-box contact with birth parents where this is in their best interests. Adopters have good information about children's backgrounds and recognise the importance of maintaining relationships with significant people. They show commitment to long term contact arrangements. One adopter explained, 'We have fabulous children who we adore. It's a really great match. They have siblings with another adoptive family. Great care was taken with them too. A match was sought that would best suit the siblings as well as ensuring that all the adults had something in common.'

Children are very well matched to their adoptive families and settle in quickly. This is because matching and introductions are exceptionally well planned and managed very carefully. One adopter said, 'Our social worker has a good understanding of us and was able to find a perfect match with our child'. The agency ensures that children's needs are paramount and that children's views are central to the adoption process. The responses of all children, including pre-verbal children are carefully considered in the transition to an adoptive family. The transition is dictated by the child's needs and proceeds at the child's pace. As a result, children settle very quickly into their adoptive families. An adopter of siblings said, 'They look like us and fit into our family better than we could ever have imagined'. This demonstrates the care and attention the agency gives to finding the right family for each child.

Children very quickly bond with their adoptive families who, in most instances, have an excellent understanding of their needs. The agency places great emphasis upon meeting children's emotional needs. Highly trained, knowledgeable social workers provide helpful information, sound advice and individually focused guidance that develops adopters' parenting skills. This has an extremely positive impact on the development of secure attachments between adopters and children. For example, one adopter said, 'I cannot praise my social worker highly enough. She is professional, supportive, understanding and achieves results'. Another said, 'When approaching crisis during placement, support was prompt, relevant and worked.' This demonstrates how outcomes for children and adopters improve as a result of the agency's support.

Many children and adopters benefit from exceptionally high quality direct work from an independent therapist and /or an independent psychologist contracted by the agency. This helps adopters understand and respond appropriately to individual children's emotional needs and presenting behaviours. It facilitates healing for children and reduces their antisocial and challenging behaviour. Such interventions enable families to successfully work through difficulties and to build resilience. Consequently, children live in stable and secure adoptive placements and very few placements disrupt. One adopter said, 'The aftercare is fantastic and on-going with many support groups on offer for advice/help and aftercare.'

Social workers are skilled and sensitive and provide effective support that promotes improved outcomes for children. One adopter reported, 'During placement we had some difficulties and our social worker came and spent the day with us, assessing the situation. She gave invaluable suggestions, reassurance, praise and advice which turned the situation - which had been approaching unbearable - around in a fortnight.' Another said, 'The staff were always available, especially in the important early weeks. Ongoing support groups are excellent.'

Children's health needs are identified and shared with adopters prior to placement. Having a very good understanding of their individual children's health, adopters take action quickly to arrange the health support that children need. This ensures children's good health is very well promoted and central to the care they receive. The agency monitors children's health until an adoption order is made. This ensures that each child's health needs are appropriately and effectively addressed.

The agency employs specialist education officers who ensure that children achieve good outcomes in school by intervening where necessary to provide training and advice for individual teachers and schools. Their intervention is highly successful in helping teachers to understand the needs and complexities of adopted children. As a result, children are happier at school, settle better in the classroom and make improved progress in school.

Where schools are full and reluctant to admit a child, the education workers successfully negotiate with head teachers so that children attend the school chosen for them by their adoptive parents. Children benefit from the pupil premium and many engage in extra-curricular activities of their choice. This promotes their social development, acquisition of skills and builds their self-esteem.

Each child's development and progress is regularly monitored and reported on at statutory reviews prior to an adoption order. This includes their education, health, emotional and social development. Records demonstrate that children make good progress in all aspects of their development.

Children receive a copy of the children's guide to adoption. This is not always appropriate to their age and understanding. However, they also have family books and life story books that are tailor-made for each individual child and designed to explain their own unique story. Additionally, adopters share stories with children about adoption. This ensures children learn about adoption from an early age.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The quality of service is of an extremely high standard. From the point of initial contact with the agency, the vast majority of prospective adopters feel welcome and highly valued. For example, an adopter said, 'We received such a warm welcome. The social workers were so friendly, chatty and approachable and put us at ease immediately. Having attended other agencies, this one stood out for us in how we

felt welcomed'.

Rigorous recruitment processes ensure that prospective adopters are fully informed and very well prepared, checked and assessed. The introduction of the new two-stage process of assessment has resulted in faster assessments than in previous years, with most assessments completed within timeframes. Prospective adopters receive a fast, helpful and informative response to initial enquiries. One adopter reported, 'We made a call on a Tuesday and on Friday, our social worker was in our house, talking to us about our application'. This gives prospective adopters the message that the agency is interested in and values them.

Adopters receive comprehensive and helpful information at the start of the process and know exactly what to expect and the likely timeframes involved. This is illustrated by one adopter who said, 'The approval process was thoroughly explained, including the agreement, which we both signed. Our social worker was always available at the end of the phone if we had any questions or concerns'. Ninety five percent of adopters reported that the assessment, support and training provided are excellent. A typical comment was, 'We were supported every step of the way, not only by our own social worker but also others within the team'.

Through the excellent preparation and training, which is grounded in research, adopters gain a very good understanding of the needs of an adopted child and clearly understand their role and responsibilities as adoptive parents. A very high number of adopters said the assessment and training was comprehensive, informative and extremely valuable in helping them to understand the needs of adopted children. For example, one adopter said, 'It was eye-opening and sometimes shocking, but always supportive and developmental. We were provided with helpful reading material, which - most importantly- was tailored to our characters and learning styles'.

Experienced adopters make valuable contributions to new adopter training, providing prospective adopters with a realistic and honest view of adoption. This helps prospective adopters to make a well-informed decision about whether to proceed with an application.

A particular strength of the training is the focus on the impact of early trauma, separation, abuse and neglect. It helps adopters to understand the importance of supporting children appropriately to express their emotions, overcome attachment difficulties and develop resilience. Adopters learn how to build attachments and emotional security through responding effectively to presenting challenging behaviour.

The vast majority of prospective adopter reports are clear, concise and analytical. They are presented in good time and contain all the required information and analysis needed for the panel to make a clear recommendation about approval to the agency decision maker. Effective monitoring and routine quality assurance of the prospective adopter reports leads to continuous improvement in quality. For example, specific training in writing prospective adopter reports has further increased

the skills level among social workers and independent social workers who carry out these assessments. Where shortfalls are noted, the agency takes prompt action to address this so that full and comprehensive information is available to panel. The administration of the panel is robust. Additional panels have been introduced in response to the increasing number of assessments coming to panel. This ensures there is no delay in the approval process.

Children make smooth and successful transitions to their adoptive families because of careful matching and well-managed introductions. Most adopters are extremely well briefed about individual children's needs and are fully engaged in drawing up suitable adoption support plans that specifically address each child's needs. As a result, prospective adopters can make an informed decision about their capacity to parent a particular child. A typical comment is, 'Any information that was not readily available to start with was chased up so that we had a great deal of information about our children'.

The agency is highly pro-active in seeking and securing life-story books from placing authorities so that children have a personal record of their own story, written in a way that helps them understand how they have come to be adopted. In most cases, the agency is successful in obtaining life-story books before or very soon after an adoption order is made. Social workers are tenacious in their efforts to secure this information, but on rare occasions are not successful. This means that a small percentage of children do not have this important tool that helps them understand the past, until after they are adopted.

Where life-story books are written in a style that is not age appropriate, social workers work closely with adopters to re-write the child's life story in a simpler format to meet the child's current communication needs. This is an extremely successful and valuable method of helping adopters to share information about the past with children from an early age. It helps adopters to talk openly with children about adoption, so that children grow up with a good understanding of why they are adopted. Some children have photographs of the birth parents and adopters together, in a warm embrace. This helps to provide emotional security and a feeling of self-worth.

The provision of adoption support makes an exceptional difference to the lives of many children and their adoptive families. The agency undertakes high quality direct work with children who need this support and provides information, training, advice and guidance to adopters. This assists adopters to understand their children's emotional needs and respond appropriately to challenging behaviour. It leads to the development of secure, life-long attachments, as evidenced by the very low rate of disrupted adoptions.

A high proportion of adopters are extremely satisfied with the level of support provided, describing it as 'brilliant', 'fantastic', 'invaluable' and 'excellent'. It helps them to bond with their children and enables children to achieve improved outcomes in all aspects of their lives. One said, 'The agency has been excellent through our whole process and their aftercare support is second to none. We cannot praise them

highly enough'.

A very small percentage of adopters report they did not receive as much information about children with complex needs as they would have liked. Nor have they received the level of support they would like to meet the needs of children with disabilities and complex health needs. The agency has taken steps to address this; clear adoptions support packages are provided and agreed and social workers assist adopters to apply for additional, specialist support from health, social services and specialist agencies where children have special needs. Adoption support services are available to adoptees throughout their life.

A small number of adopted adults approach the agency for intermediary services and counselling. This is provided by dedicated workers with a high level of expertise. As a result, adopted adults and birth relatives receive an excellent level of support to understand their histories.

The views of adopters and children over eight are regularly obtained and shared with trustees. Adopters and social workers advocate on behalf of babies and young children and provide feedback on their behalf which contributes to service development. For example, the agency has developed new parent groups which enable new adopters and their children to mix with other adoptive parents and children. The groups are professionally led and provide adopters with support and advice which helps them to develop confidence and build lasting friendships. Adopters who live far from such a group are linked in with local authority groups that provide a similar service. However, some adopters would like the agency to provide more support groups, including greater support for adopters and children with disabilities and more local delivery of training.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Safeguarding children is at the heart of the agency's practice. Through highly effective and rigorous recruitment of social workers, adopters, panel members and partner professionals, the agency ensures that children are protected as far as possible from having contact with unsuitable people.

Adopters are well prepared and know how to respond to child protection and safeguarding concerns. Confident, knowledgeable staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities in response to allegations or disclosures of abuse or any concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children. Good links are maintained with local authority safeguarding professionals and comprehensive policies and procedures underpin practice.

Adopters learn about the impact of neglect, abuse and trauma through highly effective training during their preparation. This helps them to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills to recognise behaviour emerging from early life experiences and manage it appropriately and effectively. They are further supported

in the early stages of placement and post adoption, in accordance with their needs and those of the children.

Adopters are well aware of the risk of unsolicited contact with birth families and others through the internet and social media. Preparation training includes a focus on the teenage years and the risks to children who may be missing from home or at risk of sexual exploitation. Adopters have access to further support through the adoption support centre for excellence. They benefit from workshops on parenting children and in particular, teenagers who present challenging behaviour and may be at risk. Most adopters are confident that the agency will provide any support they or their children need after adoption.

Health and safety assessments are routinely completed on prospective adopters homes and pet assessments are completed where necessary. This helps to ensure that children live in safe environments and that adoptive parents know how to keep children safe from physical harm. To further enhance the safety of children, the agency is introducing safe-care family policies for new adopters, with a focus on addressing the individual and specific safety needs of children placed.

Adopters know how to complain about the agency. There have been no complaints about the agency and no concerns relating to children's safety in adoptive families.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The leadership, management and governance of the agency are very strong. Trustees, managers and staff are extremely committed to providing a high quality adoption service that successfully promotes good and improving outcomes for children. Senior managers are leaders in regional and national initiatives. They effectively influence developments in practice and thereby improve many children's lives. They fully embrace the government's agenda for adoption and are leading the way to reform and improve practice.

The agency's ambitious and inclusive vision has led to new and exciting developments. For example, its total commitment to improving outcomes for children with complex health needs and disabilities has led to the delivery of a specific project, 'It's All About Me'. Recognising that children with disabilities have not always received the high levels of adoption support they need, leaders and managers are passionate about providing an excellent recruitment, training and support package for families engaged with the scheme.

The service perseveres where others give up and its commitment, tenacity and creativity enable it to successfully recruit adopters for hard to place children, including sibling groups. This greatly enhances children's lives by enabling sibling groups to stay together in their adoptive families and into adulthood.

Pro-active recruitment and highly successful, creative marketing campaigns have led

to an increasing numbers of initial enquiries year on year. The agency has embraced the government's agenda for change and prioritised recruitment of adopters through imaginative and innovative means. For example, the agency works in partnership with a marketing company and this has enhanced the quality of marketing and effectiveness of recruitment. Using a 'mobile adoption hub', the agency successfully raises awareness of adoption in local communities. These strategies have contributed to a significant increase in the recruitment of new adopters. The agency has a high profile in the region and nationally and this gives prospective adopters confidence and helps to keep adoption in the public arena.

As a result of the high priority given to recruitment, the agency received 335 enquiries in 2013-2014 from which there were 87 adoption applications. Forty eight children were placed with adoptive families and 34 adoption orders were granted. This demonstrates the agency's excellent contribution to providing adoptive families for children. These included sibling groups and children with complex health and emotional needs. This enables children who might otherwise not be considered for adoption to experience family life and to build attachments in stable, loving homes.

The agency has embraced the government's agenda for concurrency and dual approval. It is working tirelessly and successfully in partnership with local authorities and another adoption agency. It has provided high quality information and excellent training that has influenced improved practice within local authorities so that concurrent placements are beginning to be considered early on in care planning. As a result, children are moving to adoptive placements much earlier and are having more stable and secure early lives. Several children are already benefiting from this service. For example, some very young babies have been placed with adoptive families and this greatly enhances their early life experiences and enables strong bonds to develop without the disruption of placement moves.

Adopters appreciate the way the agency intervenes with partners such as local authorities and health professionals to improve outcomes for children. Comments include, 'The agency has been exemplary in their approach. I have been particularly impressed by their handling of other agencies involved in the process'. Another said, 'The agency has been our intermediary with the local authority when they have been resistant to thinking outside the box'.

Adopters describe the agency social workers as 'excellent, professional, passionate, friendly, very knowledgeable and committed'. The agency contracts with experienced and competent professionals including a psychologist and a therapist who provide a highly effective service to adopters, social workers and children. The impact of their interventions is marked and children benefit enormously from the clear and insightful guidance they provide. One professional commented, 'I like working with this agency because it is needs-led. I can see better relationships developing between the parent and child. It means outcomes for children are better and quicker'.

Having secured funding for two years from the Department for Education, in partnership with another agency, the agency delivers specialist adoption support

from 'The Adoption Support Centre for Excellence'. A range of helpful and relevant training, reading materials and workshops are offered from different venues across the south of the region. In addition, the agency works collaboratively with local authorities to ensure that adopters in the north of the region have good quality local adoption support services in addition to those provided by the agency.

In most cases, the agency successfully secures information and a reasonable level of service from placing authorities so that children and adopters receive the support and services they need. On occasion, the agency has been unsuccessful in its attempts to secure an improved service or life-story book before an adoption order is made. This is despite chasing placing authority social workers and their managers. On at least one occasion, this has meant a child has not received a reasonable service from the placing authority for an unsatisfactory length of time. Although the agency has attempted to secure a better level of service, it has not been sufficiently tenacious in pursuing this. For example, it has not escalated this concern to the Director of Children's Services. The agency has compensated for some of the placing authority's poor practice by providing the adopter with increased social work support, expert advice, training and specialist therapeutic intervention. This has sustained the placement and helped to develop a strong bond between the adopter and the child.

The manager undertakes regular and insightful review of the service and this informs comprehensive reports to the Department for Education, HMCI and the trustees. The capacity for continuous improvement is excellent. To address the rising gap between the number of prospective adopters and the numbers of children needing adoptive families, the agency has grown substantially since its last inspection. Its successful recruitment strategy is exceeding its own ambitious targets, recruiting more adopters and placing an ever increasing number of children, many of whom are hard to place children. Recruitment is driven by research and is targeted to meet the needs of the children currently waiting for adoptive placements in the 22 local authorities with whom the agency contracts.

The introduction of an additional layer of management means that each area office has a dedicated, experienced and competent practice manager responsible for the management, supervision and oversight of social work practice in that area. Social work staff are experienced, well qualified and suitably trained. They report they are very well supervised and supported by caring managers with an open-door managerial style. The growing number of social workers, dedicated recruiters and ancillary staff receive clear and effective direction which keeps them highly motivated and contributes to the extremely good quality of service delivery.

Panel members are competent, experienced professionals and independent members are suitably knowledgeable about adoption and contribute effectively to the panel. The panel provides regular and helpful feedback to the service which drives improvement in service delivery. This ensures that a very high proportion of prospective adopter reports are of a good or excellent standard. The agency has taken action to improve the quality of these reports further through specialist training with a focus on balancing evaluation and description.

The agency has addressed the one recommendation made at the last inspection. Case files are maintained to a very high standard and clearly demonstrate safe and robust recruitment and assessment, consistently good levels of support, pro-active collaborative working and effective decision-making.

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.