

ARC Adoption North East Limited

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Marian Denny
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Provision subtype	Domestic and inter-country adoption

Setting address	Unit 29, Business & Innovation Centre, Wearfield, Sunderland Enterprise Park, SUNDERLAND, SR5 2TA
Telephone number	01915166466
Email	info@arcadoptionne.org.uk
Registered person	ARC Adoption North East Limited
Registered manager	Terence Anthony Fitzpatrick
Responsible individual	Terence Anthony Fitzpatrick
Date of last inspection	09/03/2015

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This voluntary adoption agency is operated as a limited company by guarantee and is operated on a 'not-for-profit' basis. It is based in Sunderland though recruits adopters within the North East of England, as well as Yorkshire and Cumbria. It also recruits in the Scottish Borders and has the potential to recruit UK wide.

The agency assesses and approves adopters to provide homes for children from a range of local authorities who need new families. The agency approves adopters for domestic and inter-country adoption. It also provides adoption support, advice and guidance to adopters approved by the agency and also adult adoptees who have been placed with ARC adopters, by another agency.

The agency provides life-story work with children and young people. It is also able to offer independent assessments for those foster carers wishing to adopt and relative assessments. It can provide independent chairpersons of panels and disruptive meetings. It can also provide a consultancy service regarding practice issues in relation to foster to adopt and concurrency carers/ adopters. In addition, the agency can prepare and support those considering foster to adopt and also those wishing to consider being concurrent carers.

The agency are members of the Northern Consortium of Adoption Agencies; the British Agency for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF); the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies (CVAA); New Family Social (the UK network for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adoptive and foster families); and Adoption UK.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had approved 23 adoptive families. There were also 11 in the process of being assessed some of whom were to be presented to the adoption panel in March. Six children had been placed with adopters and a further eight children were linked with adoptive families; two of these were in foster to adopt placements.

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: **good**.

This adoption agency has only been registered and in operation a relatively short time. It is therefore currently developing its services, particularly in relation to its support services. The agency though has made remarkable progress in the time it has been in operation and was found to be an extremely effective adoption agency, with some outstanding features.

The agency has very positive relationships with local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, service users and other professionals. All of whom spoke very highly of the agency. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the comment of one local authority manager, who said, 'I have a high regard for the manager and staff of this agency. Their standard of practice is exceptionally high.' Another said, 'The manager and the staff in this agency are really good and have a very good reputation in the region.' Adopters also spoke extremely highly of the staff and the quality of service they have received. A typical comment was, 'I cannot fault them. The service provided has been superb.'

The agency has recruited a large number of adopters in a very short time. This is partly due to the manager and staff's excellent reputation but it is also due to the fact that a large number of adopters have recommended them to their work colleagues, friends and relatives.

The preparation given to adopters is extremely good, as illustrated in the comment made by one placing social worker who said, 'I did not need to explain it to them. They had already been well prepared for the difficulties.' Another said, 'I was amazed at the research they had done about (name of child) medical condition and their understanding of it.'

Similarly, the agency's assessment of adopters is very thorough and prospective adopter reports are of a very high quality. All adopters spoken with confirmed the robust nature of their assessment. They also indicated that it had been undertaken very thoughtfully and in a skilled way. Adopters said their reports had been a very accurate portrayal of them. Painting a realistic and honest picture of adopters is of a great help to placing social workers who are looking for an adoptive family for a child. It also greatly assists in the matching process.

A number of local authority staff commented on the robust nature of adopters'

assessments and the very high quality of their reports. They also said that the agency works very hard, to ensure there is effective matching of a child with adopters. Several in fact described this as a key strength of the agency and this is important as effective matching supports children to live in secure, stable homes.

Agency staff develop close working arrangements with partner agencies, such as, specialist health services and schools. As a result, children receive very good support to meet their educational and health needs and make good progress. Several adopters said that the support they had received from staff in the agency had been, 'Excellent', others said, 'It could not be faulted' and, 'Staff always go out of their way to help. They really care about us as a family.'

The director of the agency and all the staff are extremely knowledgeable, experienced and skilled in adoption. They are also extremely committed and passionate about adoption and ambitious for their service. As a result, the service provided is of a very high quality. However, both the manager and staff are deeply committed to drive through further improvements to develop the agency.

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This agency has only been operational for just under 12 months and it is currently developing its services. Despite this it has already approved 23 adoptive families and placed six children with families and a further eight children are linked to adopters. The agency specialises in finding appropriate placements for children, where the local authority has struggled to find adoptive families. Children referred to the agency come from a variety of backgrounds, some are part of a large sibling group and others have complex physical, emotional or behavioural needs. As a result, they often require considerable support from the adopters and sometimes other professionals to ensure their needs are effectively met. In view of this, the agency is considering employing a clinical psychologist to undertake therapeutic work with children and their families, should this become necessary.

The agency works extremely hard to prepare adoptive applicants, concurrent carers and those wishing to foster to adopt, about what it means to become an adoptive parent. They also take considerable care, along with the local authority, to ensure children are well matched with adopters. This results in children being placed with parents who are able to meet their needs and enables them to live in secure and stable adoptive homes.

Despite the fact that some children have only been in their adoptive placements a relatively short time, they present as being very happy with their families. They are clearly enjoying warm and loving relationships and are developing secure relationships with them. Adopters also ensure all their children's needs are met. For example, they meet their health needs in registering them with the appropriate medical services and making sure they attend their medical appointments. They also ensure children make educational progress by supporting them in nursery and pre-

school provision or in exploring an appropriate choice of school and encouraging good attendance. As a consequence, there is an improvement in their overall development and emotional well-being. Their confidence, self-esteem and social skills are also beginning to increase, so enabling them to integrate into their local community. One social worker said, 'It is a very good match, the adopters are excellent and the children are developing really well.' Another said, 'It is clear that this placement was right from the start. I have complete confidence that should any difficulties emerge the adopters will overcome them.'

Children have memory boxes and have life story material provided by the social worker from their own local authority. However, the agency also has a member of staff who is passionate about this work and undertakes it to a very high standard. In situations where the work has not been fully completed or to a sufficiently high standard, she is able to undertake direct work with children and their families to address these shortfalls. This ensures children have all the necessary and important historical information to assist them in understanding their identity as they grow up.

They also maintain a strong sense of their heritage because adopters understand the importance of this and positively promote contact in the best interests of their adopted children. This enables children and young people to be informed about any significant developments in their birth family and can reassure them about their well-being. Children also develop a very positive view of themselves as adopted people because they have opportunities to engage with other adoptive children through regular social events.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding.**

The quality of service provided by this agency is outstanding. The standard of the agency's customer service is of an exceptionally high standard. All staff in the agency, including the administration team are fully engaged in welcoming prospective adopters to the service and are most attentive, caring and helpful to them. A large number of adopters were spoken with during the inspection, and they were fulsome in their praise of this agency. They said, 'In approaching the agency we always have a warm, welcoming, friendly and courteous response.' Some adopters said, 'The response to our adoption enquiry was very helpful and the information provided was excellent.'

A number of adopters said that in contacting other local authorities and agencies, 'They had been very disappointed by their unhelpful response and had chosen this agency as it was so welcoming, helpful and positive about their enquiry.' Some approved adopters had actually left the local authority and some voluntary agencies as they felt they had not been proactive enough in matching them with a child and felt really disappointed. However they stated that in contacting and being approved by this agency they had felt highly valued and respected. In fact a large number of families commented on the exceptional warmth, care and help they had received from individual staff by name and commented on the exceptional quality of the staff.

The recruitment, selection, preparation and assessment of adopters is extremely robust and is of the highest quality. Adopters have an extremely good understanding of parenting an adopted child. This is gained through their excellent preparation, as well as the very effective assessment of adopters which is undertaken. The agency also ensures through the preparation and assessment process that adopters fully understand the impact that children's early lives have on their development. Adopters are also very well aware of their children's needs and they help them to overcome their past experiences and deal with their feelings of loss.

Adopters spoken with felt the preparation training was informative, of excellent quality and really provided them with the necessary knowledge and understanding to be adoptive parents and successfully care for their children. The preparation training also addressed the individual needs of adopters and was greatly valued by them. They also stated that the assessment process had enhanced their understanding and ability to parent their adoptive child successfully.

The agency's prospective adopters' reports are of a very high quality. They are reflective, thorough and analytical. This ensures the prospective adopters' reports informs and enhances the matching process. All adopter assessments are subject to an internal audit process, as a result there is a high level of independence and scrutiny to assessments. The agency has fast tracked some assessments and all others have been completed well within the required statutory time scales.

All adopters spoken with confirmed the robust nature of their preparation and assessment. They stated though that it had been undertaken by very professional, knowledgeable and skilled staff and as a consequence, had been well planned, well organised and of an excellent standard. One adopter said, 'the assessment was thorough but it was not intrusive as the worker was extremely professional and carried out the assessment in a highly skilled manner.' They all stated that their assessment report had been a really accurate picture of them and they had been really, 'Surprised at the insight workers had of them and its accuracy.' However, they were also pleased about this as they felt it meant social workers had a clear picture of them as a family and the sort of child who would be best matched with them. The agency also ensures adopters have a good insight into the past and current difficulties birth families and relatives have encountered. As a result, adopters demonstrate a high degree of empathy for the birth family and are supportive of one-off meetings, contact arrangements and having mementos for the child to readily access.

The agency's panel is robust and provides an extremely good oversight of the agency's functions in order to provide appropriate challenge and scrutiny. The panel is chaired by a very experienced, effective and independent panel chair. She is very effectively supported by an experienced and diverse group of professional and independent panel members. All those on the panel have the interest of the child at the heart of their discussions and this is clearly evident. The panel provides an additional level of scrutiny to the work undertaken by the agency, commenting on reports and on the quality and timeliness of assessments.

Administration of the panel is excellent and the panel minutes are extremely thorough and detailed. The panel's conclusions and the reasons for their recommendations are very clear. This would prove very helpful to an adoptee perusing their file and trying to understand the reasons for their parents' approval as adopters and why they were placed with them. The panel's recommendation is given on the day of the panel and there is prompt and effective decision making.

Prospective adopters' experiences of the panel process are extremely positive. Those spoken with stated that they were well prepared for their attendance at panel, as they receive written literature regarding the panel. They also said their social worker and the director of the agency had also very effectively prepared them to attend the panel.

Adopters do not generally wait long for a suitable match. This is because the agency very quickly and effectively uses the National Adoption Register, local authority profiling and adoption exchange days to ascertain whether any of their adopters can be linked with children who require adopting. This has resulted in children being matched very quickly and effectively with adopters.

Children experience careful and well planned introductions to their families. The agency social workers provide intensive support and offer advice and guidance to adopters during this period. This ensures a smooth, well-planned transition for the child during the introductory period and early weeks of placement. A clear strength of the agency is the continuity of support which is provided to adopters throughout the assessment process through to matching and thereafter.

A number of commissioners and social workers from other agencies referred to the agency's holistic approach to working with the child and family, informed by excellent, evidence-based practice. One professional said that the agency 'Meets the needs of both children and adults. They are incredibly flexible in their approach and are very open and honest with both the adopters and those they work with.' 'There is excellent communication and staff are friendly, approachable and knowledgeable.' Another professional said, 'They are also very open to discuss issues, never defensive and as a result difficulties can be very effectively resolved.'

Adopters demonstrate a high degree of understanding for the birth family and are supportive of one-off meetings, contact arrangements and having mementos for the child to readily access.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Safeguarding children is central to the work of this agency. The agency therefore has a very strong focus on the protection of children. The assessments of prospective adopters are robust with all the necessary checks and references taken up as required. Children's safety is ensured in practical terms through the completion of

health and safety assessments of prospective adopter's home environments.

Staff receive excellent training in safeguarding which ensures they are fully conversant with current safeguarding issues and have a very clear understanding of effective, safe practice in keeping children safe. The safeguarding policy is comprehensive and addresses historical abuse, as well as social media safety and child sexual exploitation. Both the manager and staff are fully conversant with the agency's safeguarding policies and procedures, as well as current national safeguarding procedures. They are also well aware of what to do should a safeguarding allegation be made. The agency is well aware of the various local authorities' safeguarding policy and procedures with whom they work. They also have good relationships with the Local Safeguarding Children's Boards, including the one where they are located. However, since the agency's registration no allegations or safeguarding issues have been made.

Prospective adopters understand the importance of safeguarding as this is fully discussed during their preparation training and assessment. This ensures adopters are fully aware of the action to take should a child disclose possible abuse. Adopters also build good levels of trust and communication with their assessing social workers which helps them to seek advice promptly in the event of any concern. Adopters also have a good awareness of the need for confidentiality and the dangers of contact through social networking and other means. As a result, adopters are well prepared for the role, including how to protect children in their care while encouraging them to take age-appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up.

The agency has a clear complaints policy and procedures. Adopters and children are made aware of their right to complain and how to make a complaint through the written procedure which is given to them. The children's guide also outlines other sources of independent support. Since the agency's registration though there have been no complaints.

Recruitment is robust for all staff, panel members and independent social worker assessors. There is a clear system in place which ensures all staff working in this agency are suitable to work with children and this prevents unsuitable people having access to children, vulnerable service users and their information.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The leadership and management of the service are outstanding; it makes a really positive difference to children and parents who use it. The director of the agency and the staff are reflective and use evidence-based research to evaluate their work. This results in good outcomes and experiences for children and families. The ethical, compassionate ethos, as well as the high quality environment underpins the service's identity. This has a tangible impact on children and families visiting the service, as well as creating a stable, highly-motivated staff team.

Both the director and staff in this agency have a deep, personal and professional commitment to adoption and provide a very high quality service. They have a clear vision for the agency, based on the national adoption agenda and have an excellent understanding of the needs of children and families. They are also extremely well respected by other professionals working in adoption and have good relationships with local authorities and other voluntary adoption agencies. This has already resulted in them entering into a service agreement with one local authority and has led to an increase in the number of children being placed with adoptive families. At the time of the inspection, the agency was also in the process of developing a closer working relationship with another local authority. One local authority service manager commented, 'We have shared values in that both ourselves and the agency are child centred and have high standards. I have been impressed by the flexibility of the agency and how quickly they have responded to our needs; as a result we have increased the number of children we are placing for adoption.'

The agency has a high calibre staff team. They are all well-qualified, extremely experienced, knowledgeable and skilled. Staff receive regular supervision and their annual appraisals are planned. They have access to high quality training and are able to use each other to reflect upon and develop their practice. Staff are fully aware of the latest adoption research and are able to reflect on their practice and share insights appropriately with the families they assess. All staff said the manager promotes their continuous learning and they are well supported, both formally and informally. They said this enabled them to provide a high quality service to adopters and their children. Everyone working in the agency is clearly passionate about their work and totally committed to providing an excellent adoption service.

There are clear arrangements for monitoring the activities of the agency. These include regular reporting to the trustees. The manager also works closely with the adoption panel and responds positively to their suggestions for improvement. The financial position of the agency is also carefully scrutinised and this ensures its financial viability. The agency's rigorous monitoring processes also involve obtaining feedback from service users, staff and professionals. This information is used to inform agency practice and future agency developments.

The service has extremely clear, well-designed written material to inform prospective adopters, families and local authorities about the service. The Statement of Purpose provides a detailed and accurate picture of the service provided, and there is a wide variety of guides for children and young people with differing needs.

The agency's records are secure and very well managed by an excellent administration team. Files are well ordered and easy to navigate, which promotes children's access to high-quality information about their lives.

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.