
Nugent Care

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number SC049079
Inspection date 17/10/2016 to 21/10/2016
Inspector Mandy Williams and Sharon Lloyd
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype Voluntary organisation placing children

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Registered provider Nugent Care
Agency manager Martin Sadler
Responsible individual Anne-Marie Carney
Date of last inspection 07/02/2013

Service information

Brief description of the service

Nugent Care is a social care agency, providing a variety of children's and adult services. The registered voluntary adoption agency has its base in St Helens and operates across the North West.

A small, well-established agency, it provides a range of adoption services. These include the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval and support of adoptive parents. The agency also provides an inter-country adoption service and a service for adults wishing to access their birth records.

In the year 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016, the agency placed 12 children from local authorities for adoption, and 14 children were made the subject of an adoption order. In the same period, the agency approved 17 families for domestic adoption and five for inter-country adoption. On 1 April 2016, there were 21 approved domestic adoption families waiting for 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 is a good adoption agency. The assessment, preparation and support afforded to adoptive families are good. The agency's social workers are competent and experienced. They take pride in offering a good-quality service. Initial enquiries receive a warm welcome, and staff deal with these swiftly and competently. The agency successfully completes the large majority of assessments in a timely manner.

Agency staff are experienced social work practitioners, and safeguarding is at the forefront of their practice. Thorough assessments and good support ensure that children are safe.

The outcomes for children placed with the agency are positive. They are thriving and developing appropriate attachments. Placement stability is exceptionally good, and placements very rarely result in disruption. The agency provides substantial support if there are concerns and has successfully turned around some placements where concerns were evident. Similarly, support is available post adoption, and adult service users are able to access skilled assistance in accessing their birth records and family histories.

Good partnership working ensures that the agency is up to date with current issues for local authorities. It also collaborates appropriately with other voluntary agencies.

Leaders and managers are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the agency, although action to effect change has been slow. For example, the agency is in the process of recruiting new members to the panel central list, although it has been evident that this was necessary a long time ago.

There have been a number of breaches of regulation identified at this inspection. These include shortfalls in ensuring the safe recruitment of staff, staff training and appraisal, and implementing the qualifying determination process, when the agency is considering not to recommend the approval of adopters. Additional recommendations relate to the development of a children's guide to adoption support, managers' monitoring and consultation with children and adopters to help to inform the development of the service.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meet(s) the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>14: Fitness of workers</p> <p>Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to individuals employed to work for the purposes of the agency. ('The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003', Regulation 14(3), Schedule 2)</p>	01/12/2016
<p>15: Employment of staff</p> <p>Ensure that all persons employed by the agency receive appropriate training and appraisal. ('The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003', Regulation 15(2)(a))</p>	14/12/2016
<p>4: Review of statement of purpose</p> <p>Ensure that any revision of the statement of purpose is notified to the registration authority within 28 days. ('The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003', Regulation 4(b))</p>	01/12/2016
<p>27: Pre-assessment decision</p> <p>Ensure that the agency follows the qualifying determination process when it proposes not to approve a prospective adopter. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005', Regulation 27(4))</p>	01/12/2016

4: Constituting an adoption panel Ensure that the adoption agency has sufficient members on the central list. ('The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005', Regulation 4(2))	14/12/2016
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Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service. (National minimum standard 1.6)
- Ensure that prospective adopters are given the opportunity to be heard at all adoption panel meetings, which discuss their suitability. (National minimum standard 17.5)
- Develop a children's guide to adoption support services. (National minimum standard 18.6)
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies. Specifically, this refers to the auditing of case records and the gathering of adopters' views to inform the development of the agency. (National minimum standard 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children placed with the agency's adoptive parents make good progress and experience positive outcomes as a result. The agency works well with local authority social workers to ensure that they are confident that the family is able to meet the child's needs. Good matching results in a high level of placement stability. The agency has not been involved in a disruption for over two years. Consequently, children are able to grow up in stable and secure families, enabling them to thrive.

Adoptive parents provide children with stimulating experiences that encourage them to reach their full potential. They acknowledge children's past experiences and provide them with age-appropriate explanations about their pasts. This enables children to talk openly about these issues. One adoptive parent commented, 'I did ask for guidance about how to tell my child about adoption. I was given good and helpful advice, examples and ideas about how to get going. It worked really well, and now my child asks a lot of questions, just as staff said they would. They are just normal questions, and we are all comfortable with it.'

Children settle well with their families. All prospective adoptive parents receive advice on how to promote bonding and attachment as part of their preparation. Adoptive parents speak positively about the techniques that they have learnt. One commented, 'The techniques that we learnt have come in really handy. You can draw on them when you need them. I would never have thought of doing these things, but my child loves them and asks to do these things now.'

Similarly, staff have delivered attachment training in schools. Teaching staff are consequently more aware of the most appropriate way to respond to the children in their care, and this is consistent with responses that the child receives at home. Children are happier and make better progress in school as a result.

Many children are able to live alongside their brothers and sisters as sibling placements are frequently considered. Meaningful contact also takes place with those that are unable to live together. Adoptive parents understand the importance of maintaining these connections. Similarly, many keep in contact with the child's former foster carers, appreciating the significance of this relationship for the child.

Adult service users also benefit from the service that they receive from the agency. They receive effective and empathetic support to access their birth records and develop an understanding of their histories. One service user commented, 'I have been receiving help and support in connection with my adoption. This has been a

complicated and emotional process. The social worker has been extremely competent and professional, demonstrating great empathy and inter-personal skills.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Anyone wishing to access a service from this agency receives a prompt, welcoming and responsive service. This engages those interested in adoption effectively. Some adoptive parents report making approaches to a number of different agencies and making a positive decision to pursue their enquiries with Nugent Care as a direct result of the welcoming response that they received.

Enquirers receive helpful information on the adoption process. The agency is also in the process of developing a more informative website as a means of accepting enquiries and providing additional information to potential applicants. Recruitment is targeted on meeting the needs of the children waiting for adoption placements. These include older children, sibling groups, children who have complex needs and those from a Black or other minority ethnic background. The service accepts applications from those who demonstrate that they are able to meet the needs of children. Although the service is a Christian organisation, it values diversity. There is no discrimination in relation to sexuality, ethnicity or religious persuasion. Prospective adopters clearly understand and value this.

The agency has clear timescales for the two-stage assessment process. It enters into a written agreement with applicants so that they are clear about what is expected of all parties during this time. Preparation training is provided in both stages and includes the opportunity to meet with an approved adoptive parent early in the process. The training provides applicants with information about the needs of children waiting and the skills that they will need to parent them effectively. This training takes place in the evenings, because of feedback from applicants who requested this. The agency undertakes statutory checks and references on applicants with due vigour, to ensure that they have the capacity to embrace the challenges of adopting a child.

The agency staff complete the majority of assessments within recommended timescales, unless further exploration is required or they are waiting for information from third parties, which is outside of their control. Assessments conclude with the production of good-quality analytical reports ready for presentation to the adoption panel.

The adoption panel comprises a central list of panel members who bring a range of experiences both personal and professional. However, currently the number of members is insufficient to ensure that each panel is quorate. As a result, the agency has been forced to re-schedule two panels in the last twelve months. The agency is in the process of recruiting new members. The panel chair is an experienced and knowledgeable adoption professional. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on the quality of reports and the performance of social workers on a regular basis. Applicants receive an invitation to attend the panel and generally speak positively about their experiences. However, on one occasion, when issues in the application were evident, the applicants were invited to the panel but not afforded the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. As a result, they felt angry and disappointed. Furthermore, on this occasion the panel and the agency did not follow clear decision-making procedures, so that the applicants were denied the right of appeal to the independent review panel. Agency decisions are made in a timely manner and communicated to applicants.

Following approval, social workers proactively search for potential matches. They use a range of matching tools to assist them. These include web-based matching tools, regional adoption exchange days and established links with local authority teams. Approved adoptive parents speak positively about the effectiveness of this. One commented, 'We didn't wait at all. We were linked the month after we were approved, and the child was placed the following month.' When potential matches have not proceeded to placement, the adoptive parents receive support to understand why and continue to be enthusiastic about the process. They feel part of any decisions about proceeding to placement. Agency social workers ensure that they have access to detailed information on children and visit social work offices to read information on children's files, prior to matching. This ensures that they are aware of all historic information held by the local authority. Consequently, adoptive families are well prepared with appropriate details.

Adoptive families are aware of the adoption support that they are able to access post placement. All families receive a regular newsletter, as well as invitations to two family days each year. They are aware of the adoption support fund and the services that they can access if they require them. Regular evening support groups also ensure that families can keep in touch with the agency and provide an opportunity for peer support. Some staff are trained in theraplay® and are able to offer additional individual support to families who require this. Families value the effective support provided by the agency.

Birth records counselling and intermediary services are dealt with skilfully and effectively. Adopted adults speak positively about the response that they receive when accessing these services. When the outcome is not as they would have wished,

they receive help to accept this disappointment.

There is a high level of satisfaction expressed by those using the service. All those spoken to during the inspection were highly satisfied with the service that they had received. One adoptive parent commented, 'It is an excellent adoption service, and I would and do recommend them to anyone looking to adopt.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Children are safe in their adoptive families. All the agency staff are experienced social workers, who have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in relation to safeguarding. The agency has policies and procedures in place that underpin good safeguarding practice. Staff make referrals to local authority teams, if required. However, many staff have not received any updates to safeguarding training for many years. Consequently, they may not be aware of recent developments and changes to practice. The agency acknowledges this, and plans are in place to address this weakness in the near future. Staff are aware of the issues relating to historical abuse. However, the current procedures relating to this are under review as the agency's responsibility to refer to other agencies is unclear.

Adoptive parents are clear about their responsibilities and are mindful of the principles of safe care. They understand the implications of the child's early life experiences on their perceptions and behaviour. They are also aware of the risks associated with social media. Consequently, they are alert to any issues that may arise in the future.

Adoptive parents are aware of their right to make a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the actions of the agency. Details are provided to them at the outset and are available on the agency's website and in its statement of purpose. Adoptive parents spoken to during the inspection feel able to voice their opinions and are confident that staff would take action if needed. There have been no complaints made to the agency for a number of years. On the contrary, the agency is in receipt of a large number of compliments about its service.

Recruitment procedures for staff and panel members are not yet sufficiently robust. Although largely compliant, some failures were identified during this inspection. On one occasion, a reference was not sought from an individual's most recent employer, and referees are not currently asked to confirm an employee's dates of employment. Hence, the agency is unable to identify whether there have been any gaps in

employment. The current processes do not comply with safer recruitment practices or give the agency the necessary assurances about the suitability of those they employ. Similarly, the agency did not have all the necessary documents on staff files and had not realised prior to this inspection that a review of staff car documentation was long overdue. The manager took action to remedy this immediately.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency has a leadership team that is committed to adoption. A board of trustees, equally committed to the service, supports it. The current responsible individual is experienced in the senior management of an adoption agency and has the knowledge to develop and enhance the service. There is an appropriately qualified and experienced manager in day-to-day charge of the agency. An assistant team manager supports him in this role. They are both knowledgeable about adoption issues and respected by the staff team and adoptive parents. Managers are involved in strategic planning and engage in partnership working with other voluntary agencies and local authorities.

Staff receive supervision on a regular basis, and records illustrate that case discussion is frequent and helps to focus the direction of the agency's involvement. Decision-making is evident on case records maintained by the agency. However, staff have not routinely been able to benefit from an annual performance appraisal. This also applies to members of the adoption panel. There has been insufficient focus on the development of staff. Training has been limited, and little focused specifically on adoption. As a result, staff are beginning to feel de-skilled.

The agency has a statement of purpose, which outlines what the service provides. However, despite this document having been subject to a number of reviews since the last inspection, none has been sent to Ofsted, as required. The agency has a children's guide to adoption, which is helpful for older children involved in the adoption process. However, there is no children's guide to adoption support to help to explain the agency's role if they are involved in support at a later stage. This may help to alleviate children's fears and anxieties.

The agency has taken action to address the recommendations made at the last inspection. For example, it has implemented its version of the adoption charter, so that all parties are clear about what to expect. Social workers maintain case records electronically, and these are up to date, but the manager's audit of these is not

evident. Hence, they are unable to ensure the quality of these or to identify any missing or incomplete information, which they could rectify.

The adoption manager prepares regular reports for the trustees. These give a clear picture of what the agency has achieved and budget implications for the year. However, it does not focus on service developments or contain feedback from service users or stakeholders. Similarly, the agency's development plan does not contain these views, and targets are not date specific. Hence, there is a tendency for these to drift. The voice of adopted children is not evident in the service planning. The agency has no formal avenue for consultation.

The agency has made some improvements since the last inspection. These include the appointment of a part-time marketing officer and investment in a specific adoption website. The agency hopes that these improvements will result in an increase in initial enquiries and, subsequently, applications to adopt. The agency has also undertaken specific pieces of work on behalf of local authorities, for example the completion of life-story books.

The manager of the adoption service has taken on additional responsibilities for the wider organisation since the last inspection. This has resulted in less time being available to him to devote to the development and monitoring of this service. However, managers at both a strategic and operational level are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and demonstrate a commitment to improvement.

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.