

ARC Adoption North East Limited

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Unit 29, Business & Innovation Centre, Wearfield, Sunderland Enterprise Park,
Sunderland SR5 2TA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This voluntary adoption agency was first registered in March 2014. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 14 prospective adoptive families under assessment, 11 approved adopters awaiting a match with a child, and 19 children placed with their prospective adoptive families. In the 12 months preceding the inspection, 28 children were subject to adoption orders with the agency's adopters.

The agency is registered to provide domestic and inter-country adoption services and to provide adoption support to both children and adults. It provides adopters who are able to meet the needs of a range of children, including younger and older children, those with more complex need and larger siblings groups. The agency also has adopters who can provide fostering for adoption placements.

Inspection dates: 12 to 20 September 2017

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and parents are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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The voluntary adoption agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the voluntary adoption agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of previous inspection: 9 March 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- It operates an extremely efficient and thorough assessment and preparation process, which means that adopters are very well prepared to adopt children. This means that children live in families that keep them safe and promote their growth and development.
- The high-quality training provided to adopters, before approval and on an ongoing basis after children are placed with them, ensures that adopters continue to be able to parent children in a safe and nurturing manner.
- It provides extremely high levels of individualised, proactive and flexible adoption support, underpinned by excellent use of theoretical and therapeutic approaches. This supports and equips adopters with the skills and resilience to cope with children's emotional and psychological difficulties and help transform their lives.
- There are excellent relationships between the agency staff, adopters and children. As a consequence, adopters are well able to promote children's excellent progress across their physical, emotional, health and educational needs.
- The agency's management and staff are held in high regard and inspire confidence from people and professionals who use the service.
- The voices of children, whether those being adopted and adopters' own children, are influential in the agency's operation and inform all its work. Consequently, the agency operates in a fully child-focused manner which ensures that the children's needs are met.
- The agency places an impressive focus on helping children understand their life story through the provision of excellent and innovative life story books and ongoing therapeutic work with children.
- The agency's work to support birth parents is highly respectful and supportive of their situation and needs.
- The agency's practice is supported by extremely efficient internal processes which enable the agency to provide a secure base to its innovative and high-quality services.
- The agency has an impressive continuous drive to improve services, both internally and by working with others, to improve adoption services nationally.
- Very flexible, innovative responsive marketing and recruitment ensures adopters are suitable for the needs of children needing families.
- The agency's decision-making is efficient, timely and focused on outcomes for children.
- The agency's practice is innovative, based on evidence and research, and is subject to careful and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.
- The agency is highly influential in the adoption field nationally.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

This agency undertakes all its work with efficiency, thoroughness, and with a child focus. Its practice is innovative and helps to ensure that all service users experience a high-quality service that enhances their lives.

Assessments of service users are carried out rigorously, but in a manner that puts applicants at their ease and supports them through the process. Highly efficient administrative arrangements and close monitoring ensure that assessments take place in a very timely manner, which ensures that all necessary checks and references are sought at the correct time. The agency checks on an applicant's suitability very thoroughly, taking and visiting more referees than is required by the regulations. There is a clearly defined separation between stages one and two of the assessment process, which applicants understand. Home study and assessment visits are undertaken in a way that suits the applicants' lifestyles. For example, for one couple, assessment visits took place within the summer school holidays; for others, visits took place over three weekends. In addition to the thoroughness of assessments and the quality of preparation the agency gives to prospective adopters, these assessments are carried out in a supportive and understanding manner. One adopter said, 'We were made to feel at ease throughout and felt assured that our social worker cared deeply about the process and our emotions.' Assessment reports are of a consistently excellent standard, which ensures that decisions about suitability to adopt are evidence based and well considered.

Training for prospective adopters during the assessment process is of a very high standard. It includes training in a style of therapeutic parenting that adopters find very valuable. The agency's excellent relationships with the birth parents of adopted children mean that preparation training includes birth family input, which adopters said changed their views completely and helped them to empathise with birth parents. Consequently, prospective adopters are very well prepared to become parents to children who need families. As one adopter said, 'The training that ARC provide gives a very thorough understanding of the potential needs of adopted children.'

The agency works very effectively with the local authorities for whom it provides adoptive families. The agency has proactively developed and entered into contacts with some local authorities. This means that the agency is able, with the authorities concerned, to begin to make very early links between adopters and children needing families. In many cases, possible links are explored anonymously and with appropriate safeguards, even before applicants are approved as adopters. Excellent information sharing means that linking and matching between prospective adopters and children is undertaken responsively. This reduces the time that both children and adopters have to wait before placements are made. This improves outcomes for children significantly. It also improves the experience of adopters and helps in the recruitment of new adopters, as the reputation for not having to wait long for children has spread locally.

The agency is highly effective in its work with local authorities to match children and adopters. The agency's psychologist prepares a report for each match, which considers the potential suitability of the family for the child and any ongoing support needed. The

excellent relationships that agency staff have with local authority social workers mean that introduction arrangements are very well supported, taking into account the needs of the child being adopted, the adopters and any children they already have. One adopter said, 'ARC did all they could to support the preparation of the children, and asked questions of the local authority to try and ensure that the children were appropriately prepared.'

The agency provides its adopters and the children placed with exceptionally high levels of support. This is underpinned by specialist workers, including the agency's psychologist, early years' specialist, and a team of workers who are highly trained in specific therapeutic techniques.

The consequence of this thoroughness in preparation, matching and support is that children make outstanding progress as they settle into their placements. The ongoing nature of the support provided means that this continues long after the adoption order is made and often into later life. For example, two children in separate placements made outstanding physical progress with their mobility and walking within the first few months of placement, despite their development being significantly delayed prior to placement. In both these situations, adopters and social workers put this progress down to the support the agency provided, including the agency's advice on parenting, accessing specialist support or equipment, and working to help children communicate. One social worker said, 'This is a wonderful placement, with a family supported by a wonderful agency.' An adopter described a child's progress as '...remarkable' and said, 'I don't know whether he would have achieved this if he'd been placed through any other agency.' Once placements are made, the agency's support team undertakes a 'baseline' assessment of the child. This provides a basis from which to plan the support needs of the child and family, as well as being a tool to monitor progress made. This is excellent practice as, in addition to helping identify progress and support needs, it ensures that adoptive parents maintain relationships with the agency and it makes it easier for them to ask for help if they need it.

The agency is focused on providing positive outcomes for children. It provides children with excellent information about adoption and works with adopters to help them respond to children's needs. The agency's children's guide includes lots of information and items that will help children settle into their new home. A beautifully written and illustrated story book accompanies this, which helps children and adopters to talk about things that have happened to them. The agency is working to have this animated so as to make it even more accessible. The agency provides all children affected by adoption with high levels of support. Adopters described how the agency creatively supported and sought the views of their own children throughout the process of assessment, introductions and placement, after the placement was made.

This focus on promoting excellent outcomes for children is also evident in the agency's commitment to life story work for all children placed with its adopters. The agency works proactively with local authorities, both before and after placements are made, to ensure that all children have detailed and well-structured life story books. In doing this, the agency regularly revisits work done by local authorities to improve the information contained, or to structure it in such a way as to be appropriate for the child as they grow older. One local authority social worker spoken to was extremely complimentary about the quality of this work, saying, 'Life story books are wonderful and the fact that they [the

agency workers] do so much work on them for us. I looked at some they had done and the next day they sent me lots of work they had done already for the child.' This focus on helping children understand about their birth families and what happened to them is vital to a child's emotional and psychological health, and the work the agency has done with adopters to help them understand and appreciate the importance of this is impressive. Consequently, children benefit greatly from the agency's excellent work in this area.

As well as preparing life story books for each child, the agency places a great emphasis on continuing work with children over the years to help them understand and accept their life story. This work is revisited at different times as children's needs change and as they get older. This ongoing commitment to children, a number of years after their placement, is excellent, as is the fact that the agency offers the same help to the children of adopters who may be birth children or may have been adopted previously.

The agency also provides support services to birth parents on behalf of a nearby local authority. There is a high level of take-up for this service, and it is very successful in developing very positive and supportive relationships with people who have lost children to adoption. The quality of this work helps people to come to terms with events and to move forward. For example, in one case, very sensitive work helped a birth mother get back in touch and develop a relationship with an older child who was adopted at a very young age. The support given to both parties during this process was commendable and ensured that the reunion happened in a safe and supported manner. As stated earlier, the quality of relationships developed during this work also helps the agency to enable birth family members to speak to prospective adopters to help in their preparation and training.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

The agency's assessment of prospective adopters is rigorous and gives close scrutiny to assessing their suitability to parent children safely. Its highly efficient processes ensure that suitability checks and references are sought early. The agency is particularly thorough when taking up references for prospective adopters and visiting referees to discuss their comments further. Assessments also include checks and risk assessments regarding adopters' home and living situations to identify any potential future risks to children. The agency's staff recruitment processes are similarly thorough and help ensure that staff are suitable to work with children and vulnerable adults.

The preparation and training of prospective adopters includes training in therapeutic parenting. This helps parents manage behaviour that may challenge them or that they might not understand. This training is supported by additional training offered to adopters on an ongoing basis, both before and after placements are made, as well as individualised support and mentoring in the home. Training for adopters includes input on child abuse, neglect, parenting styles, understanding children's heritage and background, and foetal alcohol syndrome, among others. Individual work with adopters means that specific information and training is sought as required by individual circumstances.

Written information for adopters in the adopters' handbook contains information about a wide range of risks of harm that children may face. These include matters such as car safety, contact, pets, child protection and bullying. The guide also extends to providing information about risks to children as they get older, including absence from home, social media and online risks, child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, gambling and so on. The

very close relationships between the agency's staff and adopters, and the support team's proactive work with adopters, mean that workers are well placed to offer advice and support needed at different times, as well as to monitor the well-being of children.

The agency has efficient safeguarding arrangements in place. Placements are well monitored and supported to ensure that children are safe. The agency provides local authorities with detailed information about how placements are progressing and supports them to undertake statutory visits before the adoption order has been granted. Supervision arrangements, both of adopters with children in placement and of agency staff, are regular and thorough, which helps the agency's managers to monitor children's well-being. The extremely high quality of relationships developed between the agency's workers and adopters promotes open communication and an ability to ask for help and advice, or to express any concerns. The agency's child-focused nature means that workers spend lots of time with children placed for adoption and get to know them well. This means that the workers are alert to any signs which may be of concern.

The agency has highly developed policies and procedural guidance related to safeguarding and responding to any child protection concerns. These cover allegations or concerns of historic abuse and working with adults who may be deemed as vulnerable. Well-developed monitoring and reporting systems are in place within the agency should an allegation, incident or concern arise, though these have not been needed to date.

The effectiveness of leaders and manager: outstanding

This agency is characterised by its highly skilled, trained, experienced and motivated management and staff team. Management and administrative systems are well developed, efficient and highly effective. This means that all the agency's activities take place in an efficient, timely and thorough manner. Very efficient internal processes are supported by an excellent administrative team. This means that social workers and specialists are able to do their work to a very high standard knowing that the core processes are safely in hand. One adopter said, 'The staff at ARC are outstandingly professional. They are quick to return calls or emails and we feel like we are very prepared for the life of adopting. We value their opinion and appreciate all the wonderful work they do, from guest speakers to hands-on activities.' Another said, 'The staff that work at ARC are tremendously welcoming and supportive. Our experience with them could not have been better.'

The agency's marketing and recruitment activity is based on a detailed knowledge of the needs of children waiting for families. This knowledge is gained by the very effective joint working and information-sharing between the agency and local authorities that use its services. The agency's marketing and recruitment activity is innovative, highly flexible and responsive. As needs for families change, the focus of marketing can change within a few hours, from looking for adopters for older children with more complex needs, to recruiting for adopters for much younger children. This means that the agency is able to approve adopters who are suited to the needs of children waiting. This, in turn, means that waiting times for both children and adopters are reduced.

Decision-making in the agency is highly effective. The agency's panel is very experienced and gives very close consideration to matters presented to it. This supports the similarly thorough and prompt decision-making which helps to quality assure the work done, as

well as ensuring that the agency approves adopters who are well prepared to meet children's needs.

The agency's extremely strong focus on adoption support, and its recognition of the ongoing and lifelong nature of adoption support, is highly impressive. This empowers all people who use the service and helps improve their lives. One social worker said, 'I wish we could look at placing more of our children with an agency that gives such wonderful support. I can't say enough how impressed I am with them.'

The agency is outstandingly well led and managed, both strategically and at an operational level. Quality monitoring at all levels is rigorous and, as a result, the quality of the agency's day-to-day practice is solidly assured. At a strategic level, the agency's periodic monitoring and planning are of a very high standard, realistic, and demonstrate an agency that thoroughly understands its own strengths and the environment it works in. One recently approved adopter described the agency as 'staggeringly good'.

Much of the agency's practice is innovative and based on evidence and research. For example, the high levels of adoption support are provided within the framework of well-evidenced models of practice and are similarly well monitored and evaluated. The agency's commitment to life story work is notable. Its work to develop a digital and on-line system for maintaining children's life story information is well advanced and impressive.

The agency's managers and staff have developed very positive working relationships with local authorities in the area and have entered into specific contacts with some. These relationships help to ensure that the agency's work is responsive and relevant to local need. Local authority managers said that these relationships have helped them improve their own services, and commented on the personal and professional support provided to them by the agency manager. All parties described the agency as open, transparent and not defensive in its practice. This means that the agency is able to learn from its practice, and that of others, to continue to improve its future practice and provision.

The agency demonstrates a continuous drive to improve. Commendably, in addition to working constantly to improving its own services, the agency is outward looking and engages with other bodies, both locally and nationally, to improve services and influence developments within the adoption environment nationally. For example, the agency offers its buddy service to other agencies and authorities locally. The manager is involved and influential in a wide range of key national and local forums for adoption. Notably, this means that the agency has been able to play a key role in discussions regarding the formation of the local Regional Adoption Agencies. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to improving adoption practice nationally as well as within its own service.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the voluntary adoption agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is

making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

Voluntary adoption agency details

Unique reference number: SC474819

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Inspector

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