

Caritas Care (Head Office)

Caritas Care Limited

218 Tulketh Road, Ashton-on-Ribble, Preston PR2 1ES

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Caritas Care is a specialist voluntary adoption agency. It operates throughout the North West of England. It has been registered since 2009, although operated as part of the Diocese of Lancaster prior to this, being known as Catholic Caring Services. It has over 80 years' experience as an adoption agency. The agency's main office is in Preston, with smaller office bases in Carlisle, Manchester and Warrington.

The agency provides a range of adoption services. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval and support of adoptive parents. The agency works collaboratively with another voluntary adoption agency in order to provide adoption support services, a bespoke family finding service and concurrent care planning. The agency also provides birth records counselling for adopted adults and undertakes intermediary work for those wishing to make contact with birth family members who were adopted through the agency.

As of 31 March 2017, the agency had 64 children in adoption placements. In addition, 37 children were made the subject of an adoption order in the year ending 31 March 2017. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 21 approved adoptive families available for placements and 30 families with children placed for adoption.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 November 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, 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: 7 October 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: Outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is outstanding because:

- The leadership and management of the agency is dynamic and effective.
- Managers are involved a number of innovative projects in the region, resulting in improved outcomes for children.
- Inspirational partnership working makes good use of the agency's resources and improves continuity for children and families.
- Social workers are skilled in adoption work. Their approach is sensitive but thorough.
- Social workers know their families well. Good-quality matching and support result in stable and secure adoption placements. Disruptions are extremely rare.
- Feedback from adoptive families and local authority social workers is overwhelmingly positive.
- The agency provides a life-long service to its adoptive families. A wide range of support services are on offer, ranging from informal fun activities for families to individual therapeutic support.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- Introduce a system to ensure that Ofsted is notified of significant events.

What does the voluntary adoption agency need to do to improve?

Recommendation

- Ensure that the registered provider and the manager of the VAA have a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 19. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (National minimum standards 29.1)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The quality of service that anyone involved with this agency receives is of a very high standard. Prospective adoptive applicants feel welcomed from their first point of contact with the agency. Many positive comments were received about this during the inspection and in feedback given directly to the agency. Examples of these include:

- 'Everyone is very friendly and welcoming.'
- 'They got back to us really promptly; they were friendly and explained the process really clearly at each stage.'
- 'Their advertising and website are really clear about their inclusive response; this was particularly important to me.'
- 'Thanks so much for your help. You answered so many of our questions and more.'
- 'Thank you so much for your prompt and efficient response.'

The agency successfully engages those who express an interest in adoption. Its website contains a wealth of information on adoption and is easy to navigate. A recent introduction of a live web-chat facility enables individuals to receive a prompt response to any questions that they may have, and they are able to download a fuller information pack themselves. Recruitment staff will then follow up these enquiries with an email or telephone call. The agency employs marketing and recruitment personnel, who are able to respond quickly and ensure that the agency has a visible presence in the community. The agency monitors the success of recruitment campaigns in order to target its resources most effectively. Recruitment is targeted at meeting the needs of the children waiting for adoption placements. The agency values diversity, and there is no discrimination in relation to sexuality, ethnicity, marital status or religious persuasion. Prospective adopters value this.

Thorough adopter preparation training, and the assessment process itself, ensure that prospective adopters are well prepared for parenting an adopted child. They have an opportunity to meet with approved adoptive parents early in the process and value this. Training provides applicants with information about the complex needs of the children waiting for adoption and the skills and support that they will need to parent them effectively. The agency is clear about the two-stage process for assessment, and it endeavours to complete the process within the recommended timescales. The agency and the adoption panel monitor these timescales, which are usually met, unless outside of the agency's control or where further exploration is warranted. This process concludes with the production of good-quality analytical reports that reflect the applicants and demonstrate their parenting capacity. Prospective adopters comment on their learning during this process and the confidence that they have in their assessing social worker. One approved adoptive parent commented, 'We have found our adoption journey with Caritas to be wonderful. It was thorough, and we were supported, encouraged and prepared to be adoptive parents. They are a fantastic agency to deal with; I cannot recommend them highly enough.'

Following approval, social workers work closely with adoptive families in order to identify the most appropriate child or children. Sometimes this process is adopter led, as they use

web-based tools such as 'Adoption Match' and 'Link Maker'. However, some families prefer their social worker to take the lead and express trust in them knowing who will be the right child for them. Social workers complete family profiles, which they distribute to local authorities using a variety of methods. They are fully involved in regional matching events, such as exchange and activity days. When a link is being proposed, social workers work in partnership with the local authority involved and will go the extra mile to ensure that the match proceeds swiftly but thoroughly. Full information is gathered, shared and discussed with the adoptive family and long-term implications thought through. If the agency social worker is unhappy with the agency's plan, they will communicate the reasons why and if important items are missing, such as a child's life-story book, they agree timescales for completion. The agency has a wealth of experience in managing the important transition from foster care to adoption, and this helps inform the process of introductions.

Successful matching ensures that the vast majority of placements culminate in the making of an adoption order. The agency's disruption rates are extremely small, with there being only one since the last inspection over three years ago. Similarly, the vast amount of support provided to the adoptive family following placement ensures the stability of these placements. Adoptive parents really understand the importance of attachment. They receive guidance on activities to engage in with children to promote their attachment, as well as suggested literature to increase their understanding. This ensures that the placement begins on a sound foundation, as children are able to build trusting relationships with their adoptive families.

Social workers continue to provide a high level of support after a child is placed for adoption, to ensure that they are settling and making progress. The agency monitors their progress, while accepting that sometimes they may need a period of regression. They remain in close communication with the local authority social worker to ensure that they share important information.

Adoptive parents understand the significance of the child's early life experiences and are committed to maintaining their identity. They have a one-off meeting with birth parents wherever possible and promote both indirect and direct contact with brothers and sisters, who are living elsewhere. This helps the child have a clear understanding of their identity. Sometimes brothers and sisters have been able to remain together in an adoptive family or join an already adopted elder sibling. One adoptive parent commented, 'The second time we adopted, our social worker came to our house at 8.30pm the day she found out about a sibling being born. She did training at weekends and evenings to get us approved in two months and our child placed in four months, so our daughter didn't languish in care.' This degree of commitment is exemplary and led by the needs of the child.

The adoption support service has expanded considerably since the last inspection. The agency works in partnership with another voluntary adoption service to provide a comprehensive support service to adoptive parents. A range of core support services is available to all families. This includes a range of opportunities for families to meet together, a peer mentoring scheme, as well as individual therapeutic support for children and their adoptive parents. A range of regular workshops also ensures that adoptive parents can access the information and help that they need. Topics include, 'Shame and self-esteem' and 'Strengthening families through play'. In addition, social workers will

undertake work in schools, so that teachers are aware of the complexities of adoption and they devise a plan to reduce the child's anxiety. This is particularly effective at maintaining a child's school placement. One headteacher commented in feedback given to the agency, 'Your input has really inspired our team and pulled everyone together.' In addition, one adoptive parent said, 'Thank you for the truly wonderful work that you do. I was certain a few years ago that we would have struggled to stay together as a family and without doubt, [name of child's] school placement would have collapsed were it not for the work you did, the expertise you shared, along with the care, kindness, and commitment that you personally gave to us. You have developed a team of very special people to provide a very special service.'

The agency provides birth records counselling for adopted adults and undertakes intermediary work for those wishing to make contact with birth family members who were adopted through the agency. Social workers deal skilfully and effectively with these adult service users, being aware of the potential risks and problems. There have been many successful reunions as a result.

There is a high level of satisfaction expressed by those using the service. Many positive comments were received about the agency as a whole. These include:

- 'They are brilliant.'
- 'The support provided by Caritas is truly impressive.'
- 'I can't think of anything that they could improve.'
- 'I have nothing but praise for Caritas.'
- 'You made the process seem so enjoyable and easy. Thank you for making our family complete.'
- 'The support that we have received is truly outstanding.'

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

Safeguarding underpins the agency's practice. All the agency staff are experienced social workers, who have a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities. The agency's policies and procedures reflect this. Agency staff and panel members all complete regular safeguarding training, so that they are aware of the actions that they need to take to ensure that children are safe. Staff take this responsibility seriously and refer to other agencies with a safeguarding responsibility, such as the designated officer, when necessary. Good-quality recording indicates that staff act swiftly, without delay. This ensures that children are safe in their adoptive families.

Prospective adopters are clear about their responsibilities and are mindful of safe caring, understanding the potential impact that abuse and neglect may have on children. This process starts from the point of first contact with the agency, and social workers cover it in more detail in preparation and assessment. This helps adoptive parents appreciate the implications of the child's early life experiences on their presenting behaviours, and they learn how to manage this appropriately and effectively.

Staff complete health and safety assessments as part of the assessment process, as well as an assessment on any pet living in the family. This ensures that any matters requiring

attention are dealt with prior to a child joining the family. Child-specific safe caring policies also inform adoptive families about the best way to approach their care, bearing in mind their previous experiences. These actions help to ensure that children are living in safe and nurturing environments.

Adoptive parents have access to a range of online training. This includes safeguarding and radicalisation. They are also alert to the risks associated with social media. Consequently, they feel equipped to deal with any issues that arise in the future. The centre for adoption support also provides specific workshops for families, to address specific need. For example, 'Child to parent violence', so that adoptive parents know how to respond in the most appropriate way. Staff complete risk assessments at the onset of their involvement in relation to known vulnerabilities, such as violence, self-harm or sexual exploitation. This helps to identify strategies and minimise the risk. Adoption support provided by the agency is dynamic and responsive to need. Social workers will go out of their way to identify appropriate resources to meet the need of those requiring their assistance and to prevent family breakdown.

Adoptive parents are aware of their right to make a complaint if they are dissatisfied with the actions taken by the agency. Details are readily available via a variety of means. They receive written information at the onset of the agency's involvement, details are available on the agency's website and contained in their statement of purpose. Similarly, information is available for those accessing adoption support or access to birth records, and for children and young people, as this is contained in a child-friendly guide to the agency. The agency has only received one complaint since the last inspection. Good-quality records indicate that the matter was taken seriously and a thorough investigation undertaken. The outcome was fed back to the complainant, who was satisfied with the actions taken.

Staff and panel members' recruitment is robust. A range of vetting and reference checks ensure that only those suitable have access to children, and sensitive information about children and adults.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The leadership and management of the agency is particularly strong and ambitious. A board of trustees is kept well informed about plans and developments in the agency; they provide effective challenge but are committed to providing a high-quality adoption service. They are open to new initiatives and actively support the development of the agency. The registered manager and responsible individual are very experienced in adoption. They are driven by a real passion to make a positive difference to children and young people.

Senior managers are at the forefront of regional and national developments in adoption. They work in partnership with local authorities as part of a number of the recently formed regional adoption agencies. The agency also works in collaboration with another voluntary adoption agency to provide; a centre for adoption support; a concurrent planning arrangements and a bespoke family finding service. This innovative and creative practice is exceptional. The agency acts as a leader within the voluntary adoption agency

community. Those in the adoption field have recognised the agency's contribution to adoption, as it has received a number of awards. For example, the agency received an award for its 'Dear adopter' campaign, where approved adoptive parents wrote a letter of advice to those embarking on the adoption journey. The agency uses these letters as part of its recruitment and assessment process. Adoptive applicants said that they find these a really helpful insight into how they may feel during the process. One of the agency's approved adopters also received the award of 'Adoption Champion' for her part in this campaign.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose. This outlines its aims and objectives. It is subject to regular review, available on the agency's website and sent to Ofsted, as required. It is a helpful document for local authority social workers and service users. There are also effective business and continuity plans in place to ensure that the service is able to continue to operate.

The agency has grown considerably since the last inspection. This is as a result of the agency's active involvement in regional initiatives, as well as its successful marketing to attract new adoptive families. Managers value diversity. They have forged links with a number of community projects in order to encourage applications from under-represented groups and to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption, such as the local minority ethnic community. Consequently, the number of staff employed continues to grow. The management structure ensures that lines of accountability are clear. Staff receive regular supportive supervision and an annual performance appraisal. Staff spoke highly of the support that they receive and of the training opportunities available to them. One social worker commented, 'I feel listened to and valued. My professional development is actively encouraged.' An annual staff survey also ensures that staff have the opportunity to express their views and managers have the opportunity to address any problems while these are in their infancy.

The adoption panel comprises a central list of panel members who bring a range of experiences, both personal and professional. The panel chair is an experienced and knowledgeable adoption professional. The panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function, while being sensitive to the applicants attending panel. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on a regular basis on the quality of reports and presentation of social workers, so that agency staff can address any issues swiftly. Panel members receive regular updates on developments in the agency; have the opportunity to attend regular training events; can access online training; and have access to a lending library. This helps ensure that they are kept up to date with changes in practice.

The agency is constantly seeking feedback from service users. This, along with excellent data collection and monitoring, helps staff focus on where they need to make improvements. Development plans include clear targets and these receive regular review and adjustment, in order to meet the ever-changing need in the region. This ensures that those responsible take actions in a timely way and issues do not drift. The registered manager keeps a record of all safeguarding incidents that occur and regularly monitors the actions taken by staff to ensure that safeguarding procedures are followed. However, Ofsted has not received notifications in relation to serious incidents. Consequently, it is difficult to assess the actions of the agency between inspections, although no concerns are

evident in relation to contacting other safeguarding bodies.

Managers are constantly looking at ways to improve the service and improve outcomes for children requiring adoption. Concurrent planning enables very young babies to be placed with families, initially on a fostering basis but with the potential to result in their adoption, if rehabilitation to their birth families is not successful. This allows children to form secure attachments with their adoptive families at an early age and without the necessity of a further move. This vastly improves their life chances.

Managers have taken action to address the three recommendations made at the last inspection of the agency in October 2014. This includes the development of a range of children's guides for children and young people, and improvements in the way that the agency captures and uses feedback from adoptive parents. This is now a strength of the agency.

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

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