

Nugent Adoption

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6 Chain Lane, St Helens, Merseyside WA11 9RA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Nugent Adoption is run by a social care charity, which provides a variety of children's and adult services. The registered voluntary adoption agency is based in St Helens and operates across North West England.

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 an intermediary and tracing service for adult adoptees who wish to access their birth records, or contact their birth families.

During the year 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018, the agency placed 21 children in 15 adoptive families. Sixty-five adults adopted had received tracing and intermediary services.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was assessing six prospective adopter families and was supporting 12 families awaiting placements. Of these, four had been matched with children. Eleven families were receiving pre-order support and 16 families were receiving post-adoption support.

Inspection dates: 30 April to 4 May 2018

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account **good**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The voluntary adoption agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 17 October 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- The experienced and stable staff team is well led by an inspirational manager who has high aspirations for the service and for children.
- Most children thrive in stable, secure and loving adoptive placements.
- The quality of parenting assessments and family finding is good and leads to effective matching of children and families.
- The organisation is learning, and improving and developing its workforce.
- Adopters feel well supported and valued.
- The placement disruption rate is low, even though the service provides adopters for children with complex and challenging needs.
- The organisation is adaptable and responsive to need.
- The quality of adoption support is steadily improving.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- The voice of children and adopters is not strong.
- The quality of partnership working is inconsistent, therefore it does not always benefit adoptees.
- Shortfalls in the way the service helps and protects children are evident in staff and panel recruitment processes, and in some panel processes, including the knowledge and skills of the agency decision-maker and some panel members.
- Shortfalls in leadership and management are evident in record-keeping, reports to trustees and the arrangements for the supervision of the manager.

The shortfalls identified are not widespread and have had minimal impact upon the welfare of children and young people.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, 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>	30/06/2018
<p>41: Confidentiality of case records</p> <p>Ensure that, subject to regulation 42, the contents of the child's case record and the prospective adopter's case record are treated by the adoption agency as confidential. In particular, ensure that children's records are filed separately to adopter's records.</p>	30/06/2018

Recommendations

- 1: The child's wishes and feelings

Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account by the adoption agency in monitoring and developing its service. (NMS 1.6)
- 23: Development and qualifications of staff

ensure the decision-maker is a senior person who has knowledge and experience of adoption. In particular, provide training that increases her knowledge and skills pertinent to the role of agency decision-maker. (NMS 23.17)
- 27: Records

Ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. In particular, ensure that shortfalls identified through auditing files are addressed in good time. (NMS 27.2)
- 24: Staff support and supervision

Ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of managers and the registered person of the agency. (NMS 24.3)
- 17: Adoption panels and decision-maker

Ensure that adoption panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the agency every six months on the quality of reports being presented to the panel. This includes

whether the requirements of the Restrictions on the Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005 have been met, and whether there is a thorough, rigorous, consistent and fair approach across the service in the assessment of whether a child should be placed for adoption, the suitability of prospective adopters and the proposed placement. This sub-standard is linked to standard 25. It should comment on the quality of the minutes as well. (NMS 17.2)

- **25: Managing effectively and monitoring**
Ensure that the executive side of the voluntary adoption agency/trustees receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every six months. (NMS 25.6)
- **23: Development and qualifications of staff**
Ensure that each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation, regulation and guidance. In particular, ensure that the medical adviser receives training specific to his role. (NMS 23.6)
- **4: Safeguarding children**
Ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted and children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm. In particular, further develop adoption support services and preparation training to ensure that adopters have a good understanding of children's safety needs. This should include how well adopters are prepared and supported to respond to children who may go missing or be at risk of harm, including exploitation, neglect, self-harm, bullying and radicalisation. (NMS 4.1)
- **4: Safeguarding children**
Ensure that the agency works effectively with agencies concerned with child protection, e.g. the responsible authority, schools, hospitals, general practitioners, etc. and do not work in isolation from them. (NMS 4.3)
- **15: Adoption support**
Ensure that visits to adoptive families when a child has been placed for adoption maintain a focus on the child's welfare and the provision of advice and support. To do so effectively, ensure that visits take place both with and without the child present. Reports of such visits must be placed on the child's case record. (Adoption guidance, chapter 5, paragraphs 24–28)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Children receive good-quality, individualised care and support from their adoptive families. The majority of children make excellent progress across all areas of their development. They thrive in stable, secure and loving adoptive placements.

The agency ensures that prospective adopters are well prepared and have a good understanding of the needs of children who are likely to need adoption, including those who have suffered significant trauma, abuse and neglect. Adopters receive good guidance about how to promote their children's education, health and welfare.

The professional and friendly approach of the staff team helps prospective adopters to feel welcomed by the agency. Adopters express a high level of satisfaction with the preparation process and with the level and quality of the social work service provided. Most people apply to this agency following personal recommendation.

The quality of parenting assessments is a key strength of this agency. Reports are informative and evaluative. Experienced and knowledgeable social workers who have carried out adopter assessments lead on family finding for that particular adoptive family. This means that social workers have a really good understanding of the strengths, lifestyle and interests of particular families, which enables high-quality matching. The very low disruption rate is testament to the success of this model of working.

The agency ensures that adopters have full and detailed information prior to a child's placement. Good partnership working enables well-planned introductions which facilitate the development of trusting relationships between children and the adoptive family.

In most cases, adopters understand and respond effectively to their children's needs, with good guidance from the agency's social workers. When relationship difficulties and challenging behaviour persist, the agency collaborates effectively with other professionals to assist adopters to access specialist support. This may be through universal services or enabled by adoption support funding. For example, those with attachment difficulties receive therapy, and those with complex health needs receive individual packages of care.

The agency is further developing its adoption support services. It is training all staff to provide better support and guidance that more effectively and quickly meets adoptive families' needs.

Children's relationships with previous foster carers are respected and valued and short-term contact continues where this is in the best interests of the child. Adopters understand the need for and actively facilitate contact with birth families, where appropriate. The agency is proactive in ensuring that children receive life story books which help them to have a sense of identity and to understand why they are adopted.

A few children have benefited from being placed in fostering for adoption arrangements.

This has enabled early permanence for some, and a good start in life for one who has returned to their birth family. The agency is becoming more attuned to the benefits of such placements for children and is planning to roll out further training for staff so that they can better promote and support fostering for adoption placements.

Although good partnership working with other professionals is usual, in one post-adoption support case, it was not evident. Intermediary services, including a reunification meeting, were enabled in the case of a young person who was attempting to contact their birth family via social media. The agency did not liaise with the well-established team around the child to ensure that this was enabled at a time that was in the best interests of the young person, before proceeding. The manager and staff have clearly learned from this error in practice. The manager recognises the need for closer scrutiny of case work so that staff who provide tracing and intermediary services work more collaboratively when other services are involved with children, young people and adult adoptees.

The agency has facilitated the development of a single-parent adopter group that is now self-sufficient and beneficial to those families who have established close bonds and mutual support. Other support groups have not been well attended and the agency is once again reviewing its offer with a view to providing support groups that adoptive families want and will find beneficial. The manager has canvassed adopters' views and this is in its early stages. A planned workshop on life story books has been well received.

The voice of the child is not yet strong enough in this agency. Social workers do not routinely observe adopters and children together to ensure that they have a good understanding of how well the child is settling into the family. While they know the children, they do not form influential or trusting relationships with them. The agency does not yet run any support groups involving children, other than two annual parties. This makes it difficult for the agency to gather the views of children to inform the development of the service. The agency is not helping children at different stages of their lives to have a good understanding of adoption or to form friendships with other adopted children. The new manager has taken steps to address this. She has introduced improved adoption support and the agency is developing this aspect of its work further.

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected: good

Preparation for adopters includes information and focused discussions about the impact of abuse. This helps to ensure that adopters have a good understanding of the potential impact of abuse, early trauma and neglect on children's emotional and physical well-being and on their behaviour. There is a strong emphasis on building attachment, establishing trust and making a lifelong commitment to a child. Adopters receive good guidance on how to provide clear boundaries and a positive, loving environment.

The agency recognises that it needs to do more to prepare and support adopters to understand how their children's safety may be vulnerable in the future. For example, it does not currently provide training and support groups with a strong focus on helping adopters to be aware of potential risks that may arise as children grow older, such as grooming, exploitation, bullying and self-harm, although it does signpost adopters to universal services. The agency is reviewing how best to develop and deliver this aspect of

its work in the near future. Similarly, it is planning to raise adopters' awareness of the importance of e-safety so as to strengthen adopters' understanding of how to protect their children and prevent them from going missing. The development of this important aspect of adoption support is in its early stages.

When safeguarding matters arise, the agency supports adopters well. In the main, it works well with other agencies, ensuring that children's safety needs are paramount.

However, children's safeguarding needs have not been central to all aspects of the agency's work. For example, the agency did not work effectively with an established team of professionals when it enabled a meeting between an adopted young person and a birth parent. The agency did not take full and proper account of the young person's emotional and psychological needs or her safety. Professional challenge from the local authority social worker has helped the agency to review its practice and learn lessons.

While recruitment practice for staff and panel members is mostly good, there are minor shortfalls which undermine the otherwise good practice. For example, a record of interview is not always held, and on one file, there was no evidence that a social worker's registration with the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC) had been checked, nor that a discrepancy between dates provided by the applicant and the referee had been explored.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders and managers show ambitious vision and have high expectations of what children can achieve. The agency successfully, and without delay, finds adoptive families for children with varied levels of need, including sibling groups and those with complex health needs. Family finding is a key strength. It results in children being well matched with adoptive families who meet their needs and provide lifelong security and love.

In line with the national picture, the recruitment of adopters has slowed down. The agency has recently taken steps to strengthen and improve its recruitment practice, led by a dedicated marketing and recruitment officer. It is in the early stages of a concerted recruitment campaign aimed at increasing the number of adoptive families available to children.

The new manager is appropriately qualified and is an experienced adoption social worker and manager. She is child-focused and has brought positive changes to the team. She is developing the adoption support element of the service, has boosted staff morale and has set up improved arrangements for staff training.

Staff feel listened to and excited about practice development, in which they are fully included. Managers provide the right supportive environment for staff, offering effective supervision and appraisal. Although the manager receives one-to-one supervision, this is not given by a knowledgeable and experienced adoption professional. This does not best support her to deliver a strong and continuously improving service. Adopters are satisfied with the quality of the service they receive.

This is a learning organisation. Managers and staff demonstrate a good understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for development and much is being done to improve practice and develop the service, particularly the adoption support service. For example, staff are receiving training in the use of therapy. This enables them to provide adopters with better advice, guidance and support in how to build strong bonds with their children.

The agency's capacity to improve is good. Four of the five requirements from the last inspection have been fully met. One relating to safe recruitment of new staff has been partially met and is repeated. The four recommendations made at the last inspection have been partially met. More needs to be done to ensure that children's and adopters' views are heard and contribute to the development of the service.

There has been a change of manager and the service was without a manager for several months, during a period of recruitment. While the agency did not grow during that period, the acting manager did a sterling job of maintaining the quality of service.

Staff are knowledgeable about individual children's specific needs and research their particular conditions so that they can support adopters to better understand and respond to their children. Barriers to children's progress are addressed through discussion, training and seeking specialist support.

Signposting to other agencies is good and, for the most part, the agency works very well with partners. This ensures that children usually get the best possible service from other agencies. Where there are barriers to accessing services, the agency guides and supports adopters to advocate strongly for their children, and intervenes on their behalf, where appropriate.

The agency is open to working with other agencies to promote better practice across the sector. For example, it provides children with good-quality life story books on behalf of placing authorities. It is starting to open up strong practice to the wider sector through providing a course on life story work to adopters and to professionals in other agencies.

Despite a recent, stronger emphasis on adoption support aimed at helping adopters to build bonds with children who are presenting challenging behaviour, more needs to be done to ensure that all social workers observe children with their adopters; and that advice and guidance are given promptly and are based on a sound assessment of issues that arise. Monitoring of children's views, experiences and progress is not strong enough and does not ensure that children's experiences and views are always at the heart of the agency's practice.

There are a few shortfalls in record-keeping. For example, children's information is sometimes stored on the adopter's file and remains there even when the placement has broken down and the child is no longer placed with that family. This does not adequately protect the child's personal data. When auditing of files leads to recommendations for improvement, the arrangements to ensure that those improvements are made in good time are not robust.

Reports to trustees require improvement. They do not always report on the financial state of the agency. Nor do they provide good evaluation of the operation of the service and children's experiences and progress. They do not demonstrate that the agency is listening to children, adopters and other stakeholders and that their views inform the development of the service.

The responsible individual is the agency decision-maker. Although an experienced social worker and senior manager, with associated social work and leadership skills, she acknowledges that her understanding of adoption regulations and standards is limited. She maintains a good overview of the service and continues to seek access to decision-maker training.

Panel minutes show good scrutiny of assessments, which ensures that the agency decision-maker and placing social workers have good-quality information. This promotes safe, secure and stable placements. Although panel provides anecdotal feedback on the quality of assessments after each panel, the chair does not provide a six-monthly summative report on the quality of the agency's assessment work. This does not ensure that it has a strong quality assurance function. Panel members do not always receive training appropriate to their role. For example, the medical adviser has not received training that clearly identifies the responsibilities and skills required to enable effective advice and decision-making.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work with children, young people and adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families, and adult service users. 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, young people and adults 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: SC049079

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