

Intercountry Adoption Centre

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22 Union Street, Barnet EN5 4HZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

- The Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) was registered on 7 November 2008.
- The agency prepares, assesses and approves inter-country adopters. In addition, it has been registered to provide a domestic adoption service since 2012.
- The agency offers adoption support services for children and adults affected by adoption. This includes support for adoptive families and adopted persons, birth records and signposting to appropriate agencies for intermediary work and birth records counselling.
- The IAC has service level agreements with many local authorities and some regional adoption agencies. It provides differing levels of input regarding assessment and support for adopters who have adopted children from overseas and/or supervision visits in accordance with the Adoptions with a Foreign Element Regulations, 2005.
- The IAC has established a regional adoption agency with other voluntary adoption agencies to widen the offer of its expertise into other parts of the country on a 'hub and spoke' model.
- The IAC has approved 74 prospective adopters in the period of 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019. In the same period, the agency placed 53 children with 35 adoption orders being made.
- The agency has had an experienced operations manager in post since 19 June 2017, who has a social work and management qualification.

Inspection dates: 27 to 31 January 2020

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account	outstanding
How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected	outstanding
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding

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, young people and adults.

Date of previous inspection: 13 March 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

In the year from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2019, the agency approved 74 prospective adopters. During the same period, 46 inter-country children and seven domestic children were placed for adoption. There was a total of 53 children placed and 35 adoption orders made. This is a significant achievement for a small agency. These are children who would otherwise live in difficult circumstances, such as orphanages abroad, or would have remained within the care system in this country.

This agency provides high-quality, individualised and bespoke packages for children and families, depending on their needs and their adoption journey. Each new application brings a different scenario and set of challenges. The agency's focus is on the vulnerability and needs of the individual children and it offers a service with this in mind.

The agency is staffed by an experienced and inspirational staff team. Many have personal experience of adoption. All of them have professional experience and expertise in different areas of working with children and adoption. Workers form respectful, positive and friendly relationships with prospective adopters, children and with other agency professionals. These positive relationships allow workers to challenge, have difficult conversations with, and guide prospective adopters through the adoption process to ensure that the best outcomes for children are achieved.

Prospective adopters feel extremely welcomed by the agency. The response from the advice line for information is prompt, helpful and friendly. This level of service continues throughout the assessment, training and approval process.

Adoption preparation training is of exceptional quality and is tailored to individual needs. It offers prospective adopters relevant information about adoption and on bespoke issues for individual countries. The agency provides a high level of knowledge and experience in what is a fluid and fast-changing environment.

The agency guides prospective adopters through the adoption process exceptionally well and offers considerable support and advice along the way. Additional training sessions are on offer, such as 'friends and families', 'transracial placements' and 'blended families'.

Adopter feedback regarding the introduction, training and preparation is overwhelmingly positive. The ongoing support offer from the agency has developed considerably. The chief executive officer (CEO) is evolving the agency support to a 'lifelong offer'.

Adoption support has positively developed since the previous inspection. The agency now employs an adoption support coordinator who organises events with the social work teams, for example activity days where adopted children and their families have the opportunity to meet. The agency now offers a consultation service, written

guides to therapeutic support, advocacy for education, advice on life-story work, workshops, an African support group, coffee mornings and a partnership with another agency to offer attachment training. In addition, there are various adopter-led support groups and WhatsApp groups where adopters share their knowledge and experiences.

Prospective adopters identified two possible improvements to the support offer. The main issue is support for prospective adopters in navigating the complexities of other countries' systems and legal processes when abroad for placement. Although the agency has no control to assist or interfere with other countries' complex systems, its staff are working hard to influence the Department for Education and the Home Office in this country to help with these processes.

Prospective adopters have requested a greater transparency in the breakdown of costs charged for inter-country adoption. Although it is the government regulatory requirements and not the agency which determines these costs, the agency understands, accepts and is working on the need for more clarity and scrutiny in the breakdown of these costs. The agency has taken a decision not to increase costs for the new financial year. It has also changed information to assist prospective adopters to understand how their money is spent and that the agency is a not-for-profit charity.

Children are listened to, respected and valued. Regular events take place where children can mix with others who are internationally adopted and where they can share their views and give their feedback. Workers are strong advocates for children and this was evident in the case records kept.

Individual case records demonstrated that children are at the centre of practice, are responded to promptly and difficult situations are dealt with sensitively. However, some record-keeping needs improving, bearing in mind that it is adopted children as adults who will want to understand their story.

Prospective adopter reports are of exceptional quality. They are well written and address all key areas, such as motivation to adopt, ability to parent, understanding of children's complex needs and networks of support. There are thorough and robust checking systems and quality assurance processes in place. This helps to ensure that the right people are approved for adoption.

The agency adoption panel is a major strength. It has a new and highly experienced chair and two experienced vice-chairs. Members are diverse in their ethnicity, background and experiences of adoption. Recent recruitment has refreshed the panel with new members. The panel offers an excellent gatekeeping service to the agency and a clear feedback loop to improve practice.

Matching processes for inter-country adoptions are extremely thorough. Careful consideration to what adopters can achieve is included in their prospective adopter reports, which are recommended by the panel and approved by the agency decision-maker process. The agency ensures its legal responsibility for matching inter-country and supports adopters to gather the maximum amount of information

available. Matching meetings sometimes take place via Skype calls because adopters may be abroad at this stage. These meetings are informed by the agency medical adviser, despite the logistics and tight timescales.

Prompt medicals are completed on a new medical form developed by the agency through its own research. This enables children's medical needs to be understood and responded to quickly. It also ensures that adopters have the capacity to meet children's health needs. Practice within this agency is of a consistently high standard. Children make exceptional progress from their starting points. This is directly related to the excellent service and training on offer to prepare adopters but also in bespoke packages of care and advocacy available to support children.

The agency has developed practice for inter-country adoption. It offers families heritage placements and for others the ability to adopt and care for related children living abroad. All the children who arrive in this country via the service have significantly better opportunities than they would have had in orphanages in their country of origin. The agency also supports placing authorities who are seeking to place children abroad with relatives for adoption, special guardianship or other permanence order.

The agency is involved in various research initiatives and in highlighting the work it does. The research into medical information has led to highly improved practice which helps adopters to understand their children's often complex medical needs.

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

This agency has a strong emphasis on safeguarding, which is at the heart of all its practice. Staff are guided by a clear and updated policy and procedure which includes a whistle-blowing policy and a policy on non-recent abuse. The agency invests in advanced safeguarding training for staff. This covers all areas of potential abuse, including those relevant to inter-country adoption, such as trafficking, honour-based violence and female genital mutilation.

Prospective adopters are helped to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect on children. They learn how early brain development can affect later functioning and be the cause of complex behaviours throughout childhood. Preparation training also helps prospective adopters to explore issues of attachment, loss and trauma and considers the impact on children who have lived in institutionalised care. This helps to provide more stability in adoptive placements for children and encourages adopters to parent more therapeutically.

The prospective adopter training includes risks associated with social media use and helps prospective adopters to think about the wider risks children face when using the internet. Case studies help prospective adopters to think about wider contextual safeguarding risks, such as gang association, risk of radicalisation and children who go missing and wider exploitation risks, such as the risk of extremism. The agency promotes online and accessible courses, such as webinars and workshops at a later

stage to refresh adopters' awareness of the potential risks as their children develop and grow.

This agency is a learning environment both for staff and for prospective adopters and actual adopters. It has invested in research and learning which it promotes on its own website and on the Consortium of Voluntary Adoption Agencies website. The chief executive currently chairs the black, Asian and ethnic minority adopter recruitment group, part of a steering group set up by the Department for Education.

Although it is not required in inter-country adoption, the agency is considering how it can ensure safety planning at the point of children being placed from abroad. This proposes to ensure that all areas of potential risk are considered with prospective adopters and any risks are formulated into a plan to keep children as safe as possible.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers provide inspirational and effective leadership in this agency. The founder of this charitable organisation has retired since the last inspection. She retains a role by offering consultancy to the current leadership team. This allows the agency to continue to benefit from her extensive knowledge of inter-country adoption.

The new CEO has the confidence of the board of trustees, the management and the staff team. This has enabled him to begin to make changes and take forward his vision for the service. It has been a year of change, during which the CEO has quietly asserted new ways of working and taken the agency forward in a very collaborative way.

The agency has an effective management team which is led by a CEO who has a strong vision and focus for the improvement of services. There are high expectations across all levels of staffing. Staff feel listened to and the directors and managers are providing an environment where good social work can flourish. A real strength of this agency is its understanding of its current position and the areas which need more development and change.

Training, support, inclusion and personal development are strong features of this agency. Staff remain working here for many years and have done so despite many recent changes. Staff say that they love coming to work here, and their knowledge base and experience continue to grow. Workers regularly share knowledge through team meetings or 'lunch and learn' sessions and through the development of 'whole agency days'. This means that staff stay up to date with current practice and can offer a more informed service for children.

Leaders and managers are excellent advocates for children. They work extremely effectively in partnerships with other agencies and provide therapeutic challenge when advocating on behalf of children and families.

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

Recommendations

- The agency has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the agency's files, on the child's and prospective adopters' case records. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 78, paragraph 27.1)
- People who are interested in becoming adoptive parents and prospective adopters are treated fairly, without prejudice, openly and with respect. They are kept informed on a regular basis, of the progress (or lack of it) of their enquiry/application throughout the adoption process, in a manner which meets their individual communication needs. They are given regular opportunities to raise any specific concerns or questions, which are then answered as directly and fully as possible. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 33, paragraph 11.1)

Specifically, in relation to supporting prospective adopters, post-approval, when they are abroad and navigating different countries' systems and processes.

- The adoption agency has a written policy concerning safety for children in the prospective adopters' home, and in vehicles used to transport the child, which is regularly reviewed in line with the most recent guidance from relevant bodies. The policy is understood and successfully implemented by prospective adopters. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 28, paragraph 9.2)

Specifically, in relation to inter-country adoptive parents, ensuring that safety planning takes place for individual children at the point of placement.

- The assessment process is clearly explained to prospective adopters, including: details of fees involved in the application and post approval process. (Adoption: national minimum standards, page 34, paragraph 11.2)

Specifically, in relation to ensuring that prospective adopters understand the breakdown of fees for the services that are being provided to them.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people, 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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Inspector

Christine Kennet, Social Care Inspector

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