

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 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 85 years' experience of operating an adoption agency. The agency's main office is in Preston, with smaller office bases in Cumbria and Manchester.

The agency provides a range of adoption services. This includes the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval and support of adoptive parents. The agency also works collaboratively with another voluntary adoption agency in order to provide a concurrent planning service. 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.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 30 children placed in 22 families for adoption, and a further 16 families approved and waiting for children to be placed.

The current manager has managed the service since February 2020, when the former manager was promoted to the role of chief executive officer.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 29 November to 3 December 2021

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 November 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

Prospective adoptive applicants feel valued and welcomed from their very first contact with this agency. Some approach the agency due to positive word-of-mouth recommendations, while others choose to continue their adoption journey with Caritas Care due to the very encouraging and supportive response they receive to their initial enquiry.

The agency's website is attractive and easy to navigate. It contains very helpful information about the adoption process, as well as links to other resources and details of forthcoming information events. The agency is inclusive and potential adopters will be welcomed whatever their ethnicity, faith, marital status or sexual orientation. The agency's website makes this clear for those exploring adoption.

The agency was quick to review its practice during the pandemic and moved swiftly to holding virtual information events, so that potential applicants were not left waiting. Similarly, preparation training was reformatted to ensure that it could continue during the restrictions on face-to-face contact. One adoptive parent commented, 'The staff made me feel really at ease. The training was brilliant, so much better than I had expected.' This training ensures that prospective adopters are well prepared for the inevitable complexities of caring for an adopted child.

Prospective adopters feel exceptionally well supported throughout their assessment. Thorough, high-quality, analytical assessments demonstrate the skills of the applicants to meet children's needs. Approved adopters spoken to during the inspection, as well as those who responded to Ofsted surveys earlier in the year, were extremely positive about their experiences. One commented, 'Staff are friendly, open and straightforward. We cannot fault them at all. Having done the whole application through lockdown, they have been amazing at ensuring that everything can still happen. Doing this in the face of COVID-19 is amazing.'

Following their approval, adopters attend an additional day's training with a focus on therapeutic parenting. This ensures that the best foundations are laid for any child joining the family. Social workers also work closely with adoptive families and with the regional adoption agencies to identify the most appropriate child. Matching is well considered, with social workers making sure that their families have all the necessary information on the child to make a clearly informed decision.

A particular strength of the agency is their successful matching of children with complex needs. This skilled matching means that the vast majority of placements result in the making of an adoption order. The agency's disruption rate is extremely low.

Children placed with the agency's families are enabled to build trusted and secure attachments to their adoptive parents. Children's health, education and emotional

needs are met by their families and the agency, who work in close partnership with other professionals. As a result, children flourish. The agency closely monitors children's progress, so that they can swiftly identify any concerns and address these.

Adoptive parents are committed to maintaining their child's identity. It is routine practice for them to meet with children's birth parents and for adopters to write a settling-in letter to birth parents, to reassure them that their child is settling and making progress. Some beautiful and sensitive examples were viewed during the inspection. Birth parents appreciate these actions. It also helps to reduce the adopters' anxiety about meeting with birth family members again in the future, should their child choose to contact them.

Concurrent carers actively promote contact for the children in their care, with the potential that the child will return to their birth family. These carers are approved as foster carers but also as adoptive parents, so that the child can remain with them if parenting assessments and rehabilitation are unsuccessful. The agency skilfully assesses if carers have the skills and resilience needed for this specific approval as a concurrent carer, which is designed to prevent further placement moves for the child. This project for concurrent carers is nationally recognised for achieving positive outcomes for children.

Adopters say they feel exceptionally well supported by the agency. They value the individual relationships they have with specific staff, but also with the agency. They express confidence in being able to contact them at any time and always feel they receive excellent support, which exceeds their expectations. The adoption support team is responsive and provides high-quality support. This includes individual work with schools to ensure that adopted children's needs are understood.

The agency hosts a range of adoption support groups and workshops, including topics such as 'life-story work' and 'shame and self-esteem'. During the pandemic, the agency also produced regular newsletters for adopters. These were produced weekly initially and included some very helpful tips, such as how to reduce a child's anxiety, a reminder about therapeutic parenting, and how to structure the child's day, as well as activities such as baking and crafting. This reassured adopters that staff were there for support if they were needed.

The agency provides access to birth records for adults who were adopted through the agency, as well as acting as an intermediary for those choosing to trace their birth family members. Social workers approach this work with sensitivity and respect. They are highly skilled in this complex area of adoption practice. Individuals are responded to swiftly, with staff appreciating that for some the decision to access their records has been difficult. There has been a significant increase in this work because of the pandemic, which the agency has been quick to respond to. The agency produces a summary of their involvement, including original handwritten records in a bound document for the adopted adult, which they are given after the information has been shared verbally with them. Adopted adults really appreciate the thoughtful way in which their information is shared with them.

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

Prospective adopters are well prepared to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect on their child. This begins at their preparation training and continues on a specific basis, during matching and placement. The therapeutic parenting training ensures that placements begin on the best footing and gives children the best chance of success. Adoptive parents understand the need to provide safe and nurturing care for children, consistent boundaries and positive experiences for them to thrive.

The agency has highly effective links with other safeguarding bodies. They work in partnership with other professionals when any safeguarding issues emerge. Staff are very mindful of their safeguarding responsibilities and work in an open and transparent way. If concerns emerge during assessment, the agency is clear with applicants that they are unable to proceed and outlines the reasons to them, both verbally and in writing. Applicants are made aware of their options for appeal, dependent on their stage in the process. However, the agency will pass on their areas of concern to other bodies if appropriate, ensuring that they meet their safeguarding responsibilities.

Complaints and allegations are taken seriously and responded to effectively in consultation with other professionals, although there have been no complaints since the last inspection. A 'lessons learned' exercise is completed following any allegation or safeguarding concern. The outcomes are used effectively to inform future practice. The agency recently commissioned a two-day safeguarding training course for staff, with a specific focus on adoption, following one such incident. Staff were extremely positive about the quality of this training, saying that it was the best training they have attended for many years. This illustrates the agency's willingness to learn from serious incidents and put additional safeguards in place.

Safeguarding notifications are made to Ofsted in a timely way and are regularly updated, allowing Ofsted to monitor their progress and outcomes.

Staff recruitment is robust, as a range of vetting and reference checks ensure that only those suitable are able to gain employment with the agency. However, some shortfalls were identified in relation to the recruitment of one new member of the central panel list, as there was no chronology of employment and the interview record contained the name of another individual. Action was taken to address this during the inspection.

The agency is a strong advocate for adoptive families and children. They provide appropriate challenge to local authorities if required. They have a very proactive can-do attitude and a willingness to try innovative ways of working to support children and families.

The adoption support service has a robust safeguarding ethos. Adopters receive excellent support to manage their children's behaviour at home and at school. Staff

and adopters work in a therapeutic way to ensure that they provide the best standard of care. Children also value the positive relationships they have with post-adoption support workers. Children can make their own decisions about how they access this support, to meet their individual needs. This child-centred approach ensures that children feel in control of what is happening.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Trustees and managers are highly ambitious for children and adult service users. Their monitoring is regular and of an extremely high standard. The agency is self-critical and periodically reviews all its services, to ensure that they are operating in the most effective way. Alternatives are considered, along with resource implications, and changes are made if required. Development plans are dynamic and ambitious.

There is a strong learning culture and an appetite for continuing innovation, to ensure that the agency continues to meet the needs of children requiring adoption. The agency is involved in the development of new initiatives and their concurrent planning partnership with another voluntary adoption agency is held in high regard. The agency is at the forefront of national developments in adoption and hosts national conferences to disseminate its good practice, as well as inviting specialist speakers. They are currently developing an early permanence project for older children, to ensure that these children have the best opportunity for a positive outcome. Such creative practice is commonplace and designed to improve outcomes for children.

The responsible individual and adoption manager have a wealth of adoption experience. They are dynamic and enthusiastic leaders. They work collaboratively with several regional adoption agencies, including being members of their boards of governance. Consequently, they can focus their recruitment of adopters and services on what the local authorities require.

Trustees and managers are willing to invest in staff development. This includes supporting staff to complete specific training relevant to their role, such as therapeutic training for working with adolescents. This ensures that they are best placed to offer effective advice and guidance to adoptive families. Staff say they feel extremely well supported. One commented, 'My manager is outstanding. She goes over and above for her staff and I feel very well supported and listened to. She is honest and will challenge me, which has made me a confident social worker.' Consequently, staff turnover is low as staff are content in their work. This consistency helps adoptive families and children, as they have developed positive working relationships and know they can rely on staff for sound advice and support.

Staff report that managers were resilient but flexible during the COVID-19 pandemic. They showed care and compassion, but were alert to their important safeguarding role, so staff were expected to continue to have some face-to-face contact with adopters. Managers were also mindful that adoptive families had missed out by not being able to attend celebration hearings during the pandemic.

Consequently, they have recently held their own celebration hearing for all families that this applied to, with one manager dressing as the judge for photos to be taken, so that this significant occasion can be marked with photos for children's life-story books. They are acutely aware of the impact of the pandemic on adoptive families.

Panel membership is diverse, and members bring a range of personal and professional experience in adoption. The agency has a relatively new panel chair, who brings many years of expertise in adoption. Panel members provide robust scrutiny to the reports presented to panel. They will seek further clarification if they are not satisfied that an issue has been thoroughly explored. Minutes are of very good quality and assist the agency decision-maker in reaching her decision. Decisions are made in a timely way. On one occasion, panel was asked to reconsider a case presented to it, as the agency decision-maker was made aware of additional medical information on the applicant that the panel had not been made aware of originally. Although this was done with best intentions, it did result in the decision-making not being completed within the required timescales. Regular panel business meetings involving the panel chair, agency adviser, team manager and decision-maker ensure that there is ongoing review of the operation of the panel, to be assured that the panel fulfils its functions in the best way.

Managers and staff work in collaboration with other professionals. Communication between the agency and social care professionals, including social workers and commissioners, is extremely good. The agency is held in high regard, due to their expertise. One commissioner commented, 'Caritas are a very responsive service, and their work is of high quality. I trust the information they provide to us about the needs of families because their staff are so skilled. I wouldn't have that level of trust in other agencies.' This is an illustration of the agency's reputation for excellence.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the adoption panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', page 50, 17.10)
- The registered person should ensure that the agency can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of persons on the central list. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', page 61, 21.2)

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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