

Nugent Care 2019

Nugent Care 2019 Limited

6 Chain Lane, St. Helens, Merseyside WA11 9RA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

Nugent Care is a social care agency providing a variety of children's and adult services. The registered voluntary adoption agency has its base in St Helens and operates across the North West of 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, including an inter-country adoption 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.

During the year 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, the agency placed 13 children in nine adoptive families. At the time of the inspection, the agency had placed an additional seven children in three families since 1 April 2022. The agency had 12 families approved and waiting for children to be placed and a further eight currently in assessment.

The current manager has managed the service since April 2021.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 August 2022

Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account	good
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How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The voluntary adoption agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of previous inspection: 30 April 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: good

Potential adoption applicants feel very welcomed from their first contact with the agency. The agency responds quickly to enquiries and in a friendly but professional way. Applicants feel valued and have confidence in the information that they receive, resulting in them choosing to proceed with Nugent Care.

The agency's website provides helpful information for those making tentative enquiries and includes a series of video clips of adopters talking about their experiences of adopting through the agency. These helpfully explore a range of circumstances and support the agency's inclusive approach to the approval of adopters.

The quality of adoption preparation and assessment is good. Assessments reports are evaluative and highlight families' strengths and matching considerations. This helps to ensure that children are matched successfully. Social workers work closely with local authorities to identify the most appropriate child. Matching is well considered, with social workers ensuring that families have all the necessary information on the child to make a clearly informed decision.

A particular strength of the agency is their successful approval of families that can adopt a sibling group of children. The recent placements of two large sibling groups mean that these children can now grow up alongside their brothers and sisters. The agency ensures additional post placement support for these families, including enabling prospective adopters to complete training on therapeutic parenting. This gives these families the best chance of a positive outcome. Effective post placement support means that the vast majority of children placed are successfully adopted. The agency's disruption rate is extremely low, signifying success in the preparation and support of adoptive families. However, following any disruption the agency is quick to review the circumstances of this and uses any learning to amend future practice.

Most adopters report feeling well supported by the agency. However, there has been significant staff turnover since the last inspection in terms of managers and assessing social workers. This has had a negative effect on those families who had formed a trusting relationship with their original social worker.

Adoptive parents demonstrate a commitment to maintaining their child's identity. They routinely meet with children's birth parents and write settling-in letters post placement to help reassure birth parents that their child is settling and making progress. Birth parents appreciate this. Adopters report that it has also helped them have more meaningful conversations with their children and helped to reduce their anxiety about the possibility of meeting with birth family members again in the future.

Adoption support is a real strength of the agency. The agency's two adoption support workers are knowledgeable and experienced. Children are helped to build trusted relationships with their adoptive parents using a range of therapeutic support strategies. One adoptive parent commented, 'Nugent have had a massive positive impact on our family. I don't know how we would have managed without them.'

Adopted adults choosing to access their birth records receive a professional response and they feel emotionally prepared for the information that they will receive. Social workers approach this work with sensitivity and respect. The agency has seen an increase in demand since the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in the need to introduce a short waiting list and some delay for those accessing this part of the service.

Regular support groups provide a venue for adoptive families to meet with social workers and other families. These include informal activity days, as well as more focused events centred around a topic, such as life-story work. Groups for children to meet have also been introduced since the last inspection and children were recently involved in the recruitment of new staff. Children spoke to the inspectors about the positive relationships they have with the adoption support workers and the friendships they have made by attending the agency's events. This helps children appreciate that they are not alone and gives them easy access to support should they need it.

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

Prospective adopters feel they are well prepared to understand the potential impact of abuse and neglect on their child. There is an emphasis on attachment, with therapeutic parenting training ensuring that families have the best chance of success. Adoptive parents understand the importance of consistent boundaries, as well as a positive nurturing environment, to help their children thrive.

The agency has a strong approach to safeguarding. The agency engages in partnership working with other professionals if any safeguarding issues do emerge. Appropriate notifications are made to Ofsted, allowing the regulator to monitor the agency's actions when a serious incident has occurred. They are also quick to review incidents, with a view to amending policy and practice if required.

The agency has recently introduced unannounced visits to adoptive families, after children are placed. This provides social workers with the additional assurance that children are safe and well cared for, even when a social worker is not expected to visit.

The adoption support workers are mindful of their safeguarding responsibilities. Adopters receive high-quality support to help them understand and manage their children's behaviour. Children also value the positive relationships they have with

post-adoption support workers, talking about the easy nature of their relationship and the difference their input has made for them at home and at school. The agency are strong advocates for adoptive families and children.

Complaints and allegations are taken seriously and responded to effectively. Outcomes of investigations and any 'lessons learned' do inform future practice.

Shortfalls in staff recruitment practice were raised at the last inspection and concerns remain at this inspection, necessitating a repeat requirement on this occasion. The principles of safer recruitment have not been adhered to, as it was evident that gaps in employment history had only been followed up when this inspection was announced, a reference had not been sought from a previous employer and third-party information was filed on one employee's file.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The agency has reduced in size significantly since the last inspection. Some very experienced staff have left and been replaced by those still learning about adoption. The manager is experienced in the assessment of adopters, allowing her to provide the required level of support and direction. However, the agency currently has very little capacity for expansion or ability to target the recruitment of adopters, as social workers have no spare capacity.

The above capacity issues have also affected social workers' ability to complete all elements of their responsibility effectively. This includes poor-quality recording, as records do not always include the social workers' observations of children or any discussions with them. Furthermore, health and safety assessments are not being routinely updated when identified actions have been completed, and important documents are missing from children's and adopters' records.

Staff receive regular supervision and management decision-making is clear on individual case records, providing a clear audit trail. The introduction of group supervision also allows staff to reflect on any challenging piece of work and consider alternative ways to approach this. Staff report that this has been helpful. While there is an annual performance appraisal system in place, not all staff have benefited from this throughout this inspection period, due to management changes. Similarly, there are gaps in the annual appraisals of panel members and a variability in quality, which are not reflective of a robust process.

The agency has a small central list of adoption panel members, with the majority having sat on the agency's panel for many years. While they bring a range of experience, the panel currently provides little breadth in terms of diversity. Furthermore, one social work representative does not have the required adoption experience to fulfil this role. The panel does benefit from comprehensive legal advice, highlighting any problematic issues.

The limited number of panel members also means that the panel is unable to meet in August and in December, even if the work of the agency demands this. This has resulted in pressure on social workers to complete assessments quickly, so that they meet the timescales required. The panel's availability is not centred around service need. There has been one new panel member recruited over recent months, but they did not have the opportunity to observe a panel, as they were needed for the purpose of quoracy. This is not adequate in terms of induction for new panel members, who need to be prepared for the significance of the role they are to perform.

Annual joint training days are organised for the benefit of staff and panel members. However, a central record is not maintained in terms of panel members' attendance, making it very difficult to assess if all members have completed the training that is required of them. Training requirements are also not routinely discussed at the time of the annual appraisal. Both the panel chair and the medical adviser have yet to complete training pertinent to their role.

Panel minutes are of good quality and demonstrate a good exploration of issues identified in the assessments presented to it. This assists the agency decision-maker to reach her decision in a timely way.

Management oversight is not vigorous enough. While some file audits have been completed, all the cases sampled during this inspection were missing important documentation and case records were not always completed in line with agency expectations. Furthermore, there is no written development plan for the agency, which would help to target areas for development and ensure that tasks progress in a timely manner and are not left to drift.

The agency has good working relationships with placing local authorities, who report child-centred practice by agency staff. The agency also completes commissioned work on behalf of the local authority, such as the completion of life-story books and partner adoption assessments, as they are trusted to complete this work to a high standard.

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>The registered person must 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> <p>Specifically, this requirement refers to the registered person ensuring that a reference is requested from the most recent employer, that gaps in employment are explored prior to staff starting to work for the agency and that third party information is not recorded on individual personnel files.</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	30 September 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the agency is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible service provision for the agency's service users. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 19.6, page 58)
- The registered person should ensure that the adoption agency has a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the agency, either identifying any planned changes in the operation or resources of the agency, or confirming the continuation of the agency's current operation and resourcing. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 20.2, page 59)
- The registered person should ensure that each person on the central list is provided with an opportunity of observing an adoption panel meeting before they sit on an adoption panel. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 23.13 page 68)

- The registered person should 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. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 23.16 page 69)

In particular, that the registered person should ensure that the panel chair and medical adviser attend training specific to their role.

- The registered person should ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 24.6 page 71)
- The registered manager should ensure that they regularly monitor all records kept by the agency to ensure compliance with the agency's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Adoption: national minimum standards', standard 25.2 page 73)
- The registered person should ensure that there are sufficient members of the central list of panel members whom it considers suitable to be a member of an adoption panel. There is no limit on the number of people who may be included on the central list. Having a pool of people with different skills, experience and qualifications allows for the most appropriate members to be drawn on to consider individual cases and reduces the likelihood of panel meetings having to be postponed, while retaining knowledgeable and experienced members without the need to wait for a vacancy to occur to appoint a new member to the list. ('Statutory Guidance on Adoption', paragraph 1.27, page 20)

In particular, that the registered person ensures that there are sufficient members to allow for the panel to meet each month if the needs of service dictate this and to widen the panel's make-up in terms of diversity.

- The registered person must ensure that the central list includes individuals with the qualifications, experience and qualities needed for the constitution of adoption panels. In particular, one or more social workers with at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience. Relevant experience should be in childcare social work, including direct experience in adoption work. These social workers do not need to be employed by the agency. ('Statutory Guidance on Adoption', paragraph 1.29, page 21)

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

Unique reference number: SC049079

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Inspectors

Mandy Williams, Social Care Inspector

Dawn Parton, Social Care Inspector

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