

ARC Adoption North East Limited

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Unit 29, Business and Innovation Centre, Wearfield, Sunderland Enterprise Park,
Sunderland SR5 2TA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this voluntary adoption agency

This agency registered with Ofsted in March 2014.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 22 prospective adoptive families under assessment, 24 approved adopters awaiting a match with a child and 39 children placed with their prospective adoptive families.

Inspectors spoke to several children with their families present.

The agency is registered to provide domestic and intercountry adoption services and provides adoption support to children and adults. The agency also assesses prospective adopters who can meet the needs of a range of children, including younger and older children, those with more-complex needs and sibling groups.

In addition to the directors, the agency consists of a responsible individual, five senior practitioners, one adoption support coordinator, one senior adoption support worker, two adoption social workers, one birth parent support worker, one birth parent support assistant, one senior family support worker, two family support workers, one clinical psychologist, one finance and administration manager/panel administrator, two administrative assistants and one marketing and business manager.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 December 2022

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: 12 September 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of service users: outstanding

The service that the agency provides to families is exceptional and supports stability for families. Pre- and post-adoption support is extensive, with support extended to birth families. This is pivotal in supporting the adoption journey for birth families, as well as making a positive contribution to the ongoing life-story work for children. There is a vast range of bespoke support available, such as therapeutic services, including the input of a clinical psychologist, and a range of support groups. A child said:

'I really like the group I attend. It's fun. I like meeting people who have had similar experiences to me. They have helped me so much to understand what adoption means for me. I would recommend that other young people join the group.'

The agency is forward thinking, innovative and dedicated to achieve the best outcomes for families. Impressive bespoke support packages are kept under review to ensure that families receive support when required. A large number of adopters return to the agency, as they are highly satisfied with the agency and the support provided. An adopter said:

'Without the support of the agency, I don't know what we would have done. We have had support from other professionals, but the support by the agency is by far head and shoulders above the rest. They have saved us as a family. I cannot thank them enough.'

The agency strongly promotes equality and values diversity. There is a clear recruitment strategy which is based on the awareness of children's needs who require adoption. Furthermore, the agency ensures that the panel members who consider the assessments of prospective adopters are sufficiently diverse and knowledgeable to understand the experiences and backgrounds of the families they assess and support. This strengthens decisions made by the panel and supports sufficiency to have a mix of adoptive families to be matched with children.

The engagement and participation of children is inclusive. The agency greatly values the input of children to help develop the service. The agency is seeking the views of children about what questions panel members should ask social workers and prospective adopters. This will give added value to the panel process and will give consideration to the suitability of prospective adopters from the children's perspective.

Suitably experienced and qualified social workers in the staff team carry out thorough assessments of prospective adopters. Assessments are of an exceptional high standard and go through a rigorous quality assurance process, which is signed off by a manager. Adopters say that they are well prepared throughout the

assessment process and confirm that this has been extremely helpful to them on their adoption journey. Quality assessments of prospective adopters support the adoption panel and the agency decision-maker to make suitable recommendations to ensure that only appropriate adopters are approved.

A significant strength of the agency is in the quality of the training provided to all adopters. Adopters can access additional training to help them promote the individual needs of children. Feedback from adopters about the quality of training has been consistently positive, referring to the social workers as highly skilled and knowledgeable. The delivery of quality training helps adopters to develop their knowledge and skills, which helps them to meet the changing needs of the children over time. Children benefit from building relationships with their adoptive families, which supports stability for children. This is evidenced through the agency's extremely rare disruptions.

Early and well-considered matching of children to their prospective families is efficient and effective. The agency has exceptional working relationships with children's placing local authorities. Social workers ask appropriate questions of placing authorities to ensure that adopters can make informed decisions about a child or children moving in. Effective systems to match children with their prospective families help to avoid delays and help to progress the children's permanence plans.

The agency works effectively with a range of health, social care and education professionals. This is key to the success that the agency achieves for children and their families. The agency delivers bespoke training to education professionals to help them understand the experiences of children who live with adoptive families. Feedback from education professionals about the quality of training and knowledge of the staff team is highly positive. One education professional commented on the need for this training to be delivered more widely, as it was so beneficial. These positive links with education professionals help to support children's learning and development.

Innovative work that the agency developed around life-story work, in a digital platform, has been recognised as unique and worthy of wider sharing. The platform used enables children to contribute to their own life story. The agency owns the copyright of the system, but it is being developed and expanded with the aim for all children who are looked after to have access to it nationally. Neighbouring local authorities are using the agency's digital platform to capture children's special memories and achievements as part of ongoing life-story work, which is important to children.

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

The agency has a strong safeguarding culture that is evidenced throughout daily practice. Policies and procedures are regularly updated and reviewed by the management team to adapt to relevant legislation to pick up on national learning.

Leaders ensure that the staff understand their roles and responsibilities to make sure that they comply with safeguarding protocols. This helps to better protect the children and their families.

The agency has established working relationships with multiple external agencies. This supports the agency to fulfil its statutory responsibilities to safeguard children, and, when necessary, challenge placing authorities to fulfil their own responsibilities. This has been highly effective and has resulted in adoption support plans being reviewed to ensure that they are suitable and promote the safety and welfare of families.

The agency describes itself as a 'learning agency'. Leaders and managers welcome feedback from a range of sources to improve practice with a continual focus on outcomes for families. On the very rare occasion that the agency experiences a disruption, it takes decisive action to improve practice. Additionally, the agency is extremely responsive to learning from national reviews. This has enhanced the agency's assessment process of prospective adopters, which includes enhanced checks and rigorous scrutiny of information. High-quality assessments help to support the agency to make suitable recommendations about prospective adopters at all stages of the assessment process.

Adopters are well prepared for the challenges that parenting can bring. They are supported to develop a thorough understanding of potential risks to children and recognise signs of children's presentation and behaviour, which could be linked to trauma. This support filters throughout all aspects of support given to families, such as preparation work, assessment, training and post-adoption support. This supports the continued nurture and care that adopters provide to children, which aids the exceptional progress that children make.

The recruitment of all adopters, staff and panel members is efficient. There is a highly competent office manager, who is supported by an administration team which supports the agency's business and functions. This includes recruitment checks. There are clear systems in place to ensure that all appropriate checks are carried out and then signed off by a manager. Efficient recruitment systems ensure that only suitable people are recruited.

There have been no allegations or complaints made since the last inspection. Leaders and managers are proactive in consulting with children and their families to ensure that their experiences are consistently positive with the agency. This approach helps to identify any issues early so they can be resolved quickly. A large number of adopters say that they value how much the agency invests in them. Lifelong links between the agency and families strengthen relationships and add to the success of stability for children and families.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers have a clear focus and insight into the agency's strengths. They continue to exceed the expectations of good practice through their innovative

developments, delivering an exceptional service to families. The responsible individual has been recognised for his contributions and services to children and families, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. He has been awarded an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). He is modest about this award and gives recognition to his dedicated and stable team of staff, who share his values.

Leaders and managers create a safe environment for staff to reflect on their practice. Staff practice is regularly reviewed by managers and leaders, using effective systems to monitor all aspects of the service. Staff receive regular high-quality supervision and appraisals. They attend team meetings and contribute to reflective group sessions. This enables the team to reflect on practice and develop areas of specialism. All staff who spoke with inspectors said that they feel extremely well supported by their managers and that they have a healthy work-life balance. Subsequently, there is an extremely small turnover of staff. This benefits families as the relationships that they form with the staff team are sustained.

Leaders and managers increased their communication with staff during the COVID restrictions. This ensured that the staff had sufficient support, which in return helped them to deliver high-quality support to families. Flexible working arrangements means that there is a real focus to offer excellent-quality support to adopters when they require it.

The agency invests in the development of the staff to ensure that all staff have the experience and skills they require to fulfil their roles and responsibilities. Leaders and managers are astute in how they allocate work to the staff team, as they use the wealth of diverse skills and experience within the team. Some staff have completed bespoke training that they have expressed an interest in. This includes recognised models of practice, which is suitable for adoption work. This improves the exceptional support that is available to children and their families.

Continual developments in the agency are informed by regional and national initiatives, which the agency is quick to respond to. Learning from such initiatives is underpinned by strong theoretical bases, which enhances practice developments. This supports and improves outcomes for children and families.

Regular permanence meetings between the panel chair, panel advisers and the agency decision-maker ensure that there is consistency in how the agency functions in respect of panel business. Additionally, the effective processes that the agency has in place support the quality assurance of assessments. This means that assessments presented to panel are of a consistent high quality.

The quality of the agency decision-making is exceptional. There is a clear audit trail and rationale of decisions made. The agency decision-maker's recommendations demonstrate comprehensive reflection and consideration of all elements of the application and approval process of adopters.

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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