

# After Adoption

After Adoption

Unit 5, Citygate, 5 Blantyre Street, Manchester M15 4JJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this voluntary adoption agency

First established in November 1990, the agency became registered as a voluntary adoption agency in November 2000. The head office is based in Manchester, and there are four other branches and a satellite office which operates across England and Wales. The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters are managed from the Manchester office. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services, including birth parent support, birth records counselling, and intermediary work. In the year 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the agency recruited 22 new adoptive families and placed 56 children with 33 families.

**Inspection dates:** 26 February to 2 March 2018

**Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account** **good**

How well children and parents 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:** 27 March 2015

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency is good because:

- Leadership and management of the agency are strong. Effective monitoring of the service ensures that practice is continually evolving and improving.
- The agency contributes to the national adoption agenda and is involved in developing improvements in national practice.
- The committed and suitably experienced workforce is mostly well trained, supervised and supported.
- The recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of adopters are good. This helps to provide families for hard-to-place children, including children aged over five and sibling groups.
- Children benefit from being placed with adopters who have a good understanding of their needs, are well informed about their previous life experiences and are well prepared to promote attachment.
- The agency supports children's education through providing training to schools so that they have a better understanding of children's needs, and this helps children overcome difficulties in school.
- Good safeguarding measures ensure that children are safe, and, in most cases, information is shared appropriately with other safeguarding agencies.
- Birth parents benefit from sensitive counselling.
- Adult adoptees receive help to trace their birth families safely and sympathetically. The agency takes a lead role in reuniting birth families with sensitivity.
- The senior leadership team is responsive and dynamic, which drives continuous improvement. The agency's capacity to improve is good.

The voluntary adoption agency's areas for development:

- Not all social workers ensure that they regularly see children in adoptive placements, even when there are concerns about the adopters' parenting skills. This does not ensure that advice given by the agency is based on a sound assessment of the relationship between the adopters and the child. It does not ensure that the welfare of the child is central to practice.
- Not all children receive adoption support, including therapeutic support, when they need it. Efforts by the agency to challenge local authorities to meet their obligations to children are not always successful, or timely.
- The number of disrupted placements is high compared to other voluntary adoption agencies. The agency is reviewing its practice with a view to addressing this.
- The agency does not routinely use good-quality, individual risk assessments and risk management plans to guide adopters in safe caring of their children. Nor does it notify Ofsted of all relevant child protection referrals.
- There are shortfalls in the monitoring of records such as staff supervision records, complaints records, panel files and recruitment records. This undermines the otherwise good practice.
- Fast tracking of adopter assessments is not always carried out in accordance with regulation.
- In a small number of cases, the agency decision maker has delayed making a decision

about approval for several months. This delay in decision-making has meant that adopters have no right of appeal to the independent review mechanism; and children in need of a placement have had to wait unnecessarily to be matched with these families.

- Panel members do not all receive appraisal in line with the agency's policy, and this means that their continuing suitability is not assessed.

## 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
Ensure that the registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any person working at any branch of the agency, the branch manager, shall maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedules 2 and 3. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003, Regulations 7 (1) and 17 (1))	27/04/2018
Ensure that the adoption agency makes a decision about whether the prospective adopter is suitable to adopt a child. In particular, the agency should make its decision and notify the prospective adopter within 7 working days, based on the information available and taking account of the recommendations and final set of minutes of the adoption panel. It should follow the qualifying determination process when making a decision not to approve an adopter as suitable. (The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, Regulation 27 (1), (3), (4))	27/04/2018
Ensure that the fast-track assessment process is used only where the prospective adopter is an approved foster parent; or has, at any time, adopted a child or been approved to adopt a child. (The Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013, Regulation 30F (1))	27/04/2018

### Recommendations

- Use, and keep under regular review, high-quality individual risk assessments that guide adopters in how to keep children safe from abuse and significant harm. In addition, notify Ofsted of referrals for the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries, as outlined in Regulation 10, Voluntary Adoption Agencies and Adoption Agencies Regulations 2003. (NMS 4.1)
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors 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. Take immediate action to address any issues raised. This relates to: inconsistencies in the quality of staff supervision records, insufficient information about complaints in the complaints log and in adopters' case files. (NMS 25. 2)
- To ensure that the chair and individuals on the central list remain suitable to remain on

that list, review their performance annually against agreed performance objectives. The agency adviser to the panel and the panel chair should conduct the performance review of those individuals on the central list. (Statutory guidance, page 22, paragraph 1.35)

- Review the arrangements for providing support to prospective adopters so that social workers who have particular responsibility for supporting prospective adopters sometimes see the child in the presence of the prospective adopters. (Statutory guidance, page 101, paragraph 5.27)

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children benefit from placements with adopters who are well prepared, supported and trained. The agency has a clear focus on building attachment and giving families the tools and strategies necessary to do so. Social workers guide adopters in how to build strong bonds with children so that most children learn to trust their adoptive parents and achieve a sense of belonging, over time.

Most children have a positive experience of adoption and thrive in the care of their adoptive families. Social workers recognise the impact of the agency's work in the provision of stable placements with well-prepared families. For example, one said: 'The child has thrived in their care and I attribute this to the therapeutic approach they both apply to their parenting, which comes with the support of the agency.'

Education is well promoted through a specialist education liaison worker who provides advice and training to schools. This has a very positive impact and enables teachers to have a better understanding of adopted children. Consequently, children have a more positive experience of school.

Many adopters attend the training event that focuses on supporting children through transitions. This helps them to understand the difficulties children face when moving to a new school or facing other transitions. It gives adopters the skills to support children effectively and to reduce their anxieties when facing changes in their lives and routines.

Adopters receive good adoption support including face-to-face and telephone advice and guidance. This helps them to share their feelings, reflect on incidents and consider alternative strategies for dealing with difficult situations, while maintaining a continuing focus on building attachment. Adopters are invited to attend 'Safebase' training, usually between six and 18 months after a child's placement, in accordance with the family's needs. This parenting course helps adopters to understand and respond effectively to children's behaviour. It reinforces the messages given during the preparation training. Most adopters report that it is extremely valuable. For example, one said: 'This programme has made a massive impact on how I understand my child's behaviour. I feel so positive. The programme has been amazing. Every adoptive parent should do this course as our children deserve this level of understanding.'

Children enjoy and benefit from opportunities to interact with other adopted children in safe, enjoyable settings at TalkAdoption events, including residential courses and activity days. These are usually held in school holidays and are open to children who are supported from all branches of the agency. As school holidays vary, not all children are able to attend the courses offered during half-term holidays. TalkAdoption support groups for teenagers are held in the Merseyside area, whereas those for younger children are held in Manchester. Although children in adoptive placements across the North West are invited to both, for many children, distance from the venue restricts their access. The agency is aware of the impact of these limitations and ensures, wherever possible, that events are open to as many children as possible.

Children's views inform the development of the agency and are used in preparation groups to help improve adopters' understanding of their needs. The agency gathers children's views and ensures that they are represented on the national stage, for example by giving feedback to the adoption leadership board.

Not all children receive the specialist help they need at the time and intensity they need it. For example, in one case, children's placements disrupted when adopters were unable to manage their escalating challenging behaviour. The family had waited for a year before therapeutic support was provided, even though it had been agreed in the adoption support plan, and the agency had reminded the local authority to apply for it. However, the agency had not been sufficiently persistent or proactive to influence the local authority to provide adoption support services at the right time for the family.

Children in second-time adopter families are well supported through specialist interventions that help them to reflect on their own life stories and emotionally prepare for another child joining their family. Second-time adopters receive no specific preparation training. Survey responses have shown they would appreciate buddying with other families in a similar situation. This is not always made available.

Although the number of pre-order placement breakdowns is high at 14%, compared to all voluntary adoption agencies, this is reflective of the challenging needs of children who have experienced a longer period of instability and trauma during their early years. Through contributing to disruption meetings, the agency reflects on practice and implements changes in practice from lessons learned. The senior leadership team is reviewing disruptions, with a view to identifying areas for improved practice and thereby increasing the stability of placements.

The agency has an effective recruitment strategy. Through swift and helpful responses to enquiries, and regular information events, the agency ensures that interested parties are well informed before entering stage 1 of the assessment process. Prospective adopters said that they are made welcome and respected.

In most cases, stage 1 and stage 2 assessments are completed within timescales, which reduces the likelihood of delay for children who are waiting for families. Combined assessments enable the fast tracking of second-time adopters and current foster carers. This is not always carried out in accordance with regulations. The impact of this shortfall is negligible because those families who have been fast tracked have significant, well-established skills in caring for children.

Although the quality of assessments is mostly good, inspectors found two instances where assessments have not been sufficiently robust to enable the agency decision maker to make an informed decision about approval. In these circumstances, no decision has been made until further information has been obtained. This has delayed a decision about approval by several months. During this time, the prospective adopters have had no right of appeal to the independent review mechanism because no decision about their suitability has been made.

Some of the information about complaints that is on the website and in the adoption pack is not fully up to date. For example, the address of Ofsted is wrongly recorded. This means that adoptive families and children may not have the information they need, should they wish to raise concerns about the agency with the regulator.

Counselling and support to birth parents are enormously valued. For example, a birth parent described the service as 'absolutely priceless' and said: 'We were in an awful place when our son was adopted. We could not deal with our anger... she changed our perspective on life. We can deal with our emotions. I am now more confident and ready to return to work.'

Similarly, families who receive tracing and intermediary services appreciate the support and sensitivity shown by the agency's workers. Although funding for this work is limited, the agency has recruited volunteer researchers who, through relentless determination, uncover all available information relating to the adopted adult's history. Information is shared by trained adoption support workers, with expertise in counselling. This helps adoptees to understand their origins, achieve a sense of belonging and, in some cases, helps them to reunite with their birth families.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

Preparation and support for adopters are good. These include a focus on child development and the importance of safeguarding children. They help adopters to understand and alleviate the impact of neglect, abuse and early trauma.

Follow-up training is provided through a rolling programme of events to which all adopters are invited through the regular newsletter. This enables adopters to access the training they need, when it suits their family. Parenting skills courses and focused training events help to raise adopters' awareness of the challenges their children may face, and how to best support them. Along with sound advice from agency staff, this helps adopters to protect their children and to be alert to disclosures of historical abuse.

The agency is further developing its safebase and other training to have a greater focus on raising awareness of child sexual exploitation, grooming, extremism, and staying safe online. The agency recognises the importance of helping adopters and children understand the need for online safety, as increasing numbers of adopted children have begun to search for their birth families through social media networks.

There is good oversight of safeguarding concerns, and relevant information is appropriately shared with local authority safeguarding leads and other safeguarding agencies.

Children who self-harm or display dangerous behaviour to themselves or others are not protected through good-quality risk assessments. The agency recognises it needs to develop its practice further in this area and has begun to do so.

There are minor shortfalls in the personnel files of staff, panel members, and volunteers.

For example, Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are not updated in line with the agency's policy. Employment records do not always demonstrate that the agency has verified the reason why a person has left a previous job working with children. Training records are not held on panel members' or volunteers' files. These shortfalls undermine the otherwise robust recruitment practice and should be strengthened to ensure that children are fully protected.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and manager: good**

The strategic leadership of the agency is good. The senior leadership team has ambitious vision and maintains strong oversight of practice. Through regular reflection and strong leadership, the agency is continually learning, developing and improving.

The agency maintains a close overview of national patterns and trends, and has a respected national profile. It actively contributes to developments in the sector, engaging in projects and influencing national strategies. It provides statistical information and data that supports other agencies to develop future strategies. For example, providing advice, feedback from children and statistical information to the child and adolescent mental health services and a local authority has led to improved practice in those agencies, including better early permanence arrangements.

A key strength is finding families for hard-to-place children. Thirty-eight percent of children placed are aged over five, and of the 53 children placed for adoption in 2016–17, 37 were placed alongside at least one brother or sister. This demonstrates that the agency is meeting its stated aim to provide families that keep sibling groups together. Indeed, the agency is developing best practice in assessing the relationships between siblings and providing appropriate support to adopters, so that robust decision-making underpins practice around keeping children together. It has recently delivered a successful training event on this matter to professionals in other agencies.

Good oversight of adopter recruitment ensures that strategies for recruitment are under continuous review and are aimed at meeting the needs of children awaiting adoptive families. This helps the agency to reach a wide range of prospective adopters. Consequently, approved adopters have diverse backgrounds and skills, and the capacity to meet children's varying and complex needs.

Inclusion is a key strength. For example, the agency supports adopters who have disabilities, by recognising their skills and experiences and matching them with children whose needs they can meet. The agency provides additional resources to assist families, as required, including, in one case, an interpreter who aids communication between adopters and professionals. This ensures that the adopters can seek advice and receive good support and guidance.

The agency is well staffed by experienced and committed professionals who are well led, supervised, supported and trained. This ensures that the right level of support is provided to families, as and when they need it. On-call arrangements mean that adoptive families can receive guidance and support day and night.

Staff benefit from regular supervision and annual appraisal; however, records of supervision sessions are variable in quality and not all demonstrate careful reflection on case work. Many and varied training opportunities help staff to keep up to date with changes in adoption matters and in practice development. The agency recognises the importance of having well-trained adopters and adoption workers. It welcomes staff, panel members, adopters and other professionals to training events, which promotes a good understanding of the needs of adopted children and their families among all those involved. Volunteers make an effective and welcome contribution to the work of the agency and are valued members of the team.

The agency has taken action to restructure in response to changes in the adoption climate. Monitoring systems are good. Consequently, leaders and managers know the strengths of the service well. There is a clear, comprehensive and relevant development plan, which is under continuous review. This enables continuous improvement of the service, which remains financially viable.

The adoption panel is appropriately constituted and well led by an experienced and knowledgeable chair. Panel minutes demonstrate rigorous discussion and exploration of information which helps the panel to make well-founded recommendations. Through rigorous quality assurance, the panel addresses shortfalls in the quality of assessments and ensures that adopters are fully vetted, well prepared and ready to provide safe, secure and stable placements for children.

There are some shortfalls in the annual appraisal process in that the panel chair is not involved in appraising the performance of panel members who are social workers for the agency. This means that the continuing suitability of some members for their role is not properly assessed.

For the most part, case files are well maintained. Adopter support visits are well recorded and demonstrate that adopters receive a high level of support, advice and guidance. File audits are carried out on adopters' case files. However, it is not clear who should take responsibility for rectifying shortfalls noted, and no timeframes are set.

The agency maintains good working relationships with partner agencies. It provides professional challenge to local authorities and other professionals who are not meeting their obligations to children, including where children's placements are not being reviewed in good time, or there is delay in providing children with life-story books. Despite its interventions, the agency is not always able to influence improvements in local authority practice. Consideration should be given to how the agency can provide greater and more successful challenge so that children get the support to which they are entitled and within a timeframe that suits their needs.

Details recorded in the agency's complaints log do not always give a clear indication of the nature of a complaint or of whether the complainant is satisfied with the way that the agency has addressed it. This impedes managers in their monitoring of complaints and in making practice changes as a result of a complaint. The details of complaints are not

always recorded on adopters' files. This means that their files are not truly reflective of matters arising in relation to their practice.

Adoption social workers do not always see children when they visit the adoptive family. In some cases, the child has not been seen by an adoption social worker for several months, despite significant concerns about the stability of the placement and the adopters' parenting strategies. Consequently, they are not checking on the welfare of the child and are not able to form a reliable, professional view about the quality of the relationship between the parent and child, aided by observations. Although this practice is contrary to the agency's procedures, it has not been identified as an area of concern by managers responsible for supervising social workers and auditing records.

## **Information about this inspection**

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

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## **Inspectors**

Sharon Lloyd, social care inspector

Mandy Williams, social care inspector



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