

Diagrama Adoption

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Ros Chapman
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Date of last inspection N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is the first inspection of this voluntary adoption agency under its current operation. It was formally registered in February 2015, having previously been registered under different ownership. The provider is a registered charity which operates a number of children's services across Europe.

The agency provides the full range of domestic adoption services, including access to records and intermediary services. Since 1 March 2015 it has approved 16 adoptive families, placed 16 children with its approved adopters and linked a further six children. There are currently 20 adoptive families waiting for a placement.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Diagrama became responsible for the operation of a well-established adoption agency in November 2014, and subsequently became registered in February 2015. Since then, it has faced a number of challenges. This is particularly in relation to changes of manager and staff, which had a destabilising effect on the service. However, the last six months has seen a significant improvement and a number of very positive developments which have led to the judgement of good. A number of people involved with the agency have commented that, 'it is moving in the right direction', and, 'it has improved dramatically.'

The agency has a number of strengths. Good matching and placement stability lead

to positive outcomes for the children placed. Adopters are recruited to meet the needs of children deemed 'harder to place' for whom local authorities require an adoptive placement. Their preparation, assessment and approval process is robust and leads to safe and stable families. Adoption support is prompt and successful in effecting change, and the agency offers a variety of services, including therapeutic work with families.

Staff are committed, well qualified and experienced, which enables them to deliver a competent service. They are very well thought of by the adoptive families. Adopters have described them as 'fantastic', 'supportive', and 'professional'. Leaders and managers demonstrate a high level of commitment and passion to develop and improve the agency. There is good joint working with partner agencies to bring about good outcomes; for example, one stakeholder commented: 'Joint working and communication have been so effective.'

Shortfalls have been identified in relation to documentation and delays in some aspects of service delivery. These have not had an impact on outcomes for children or young people.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendation(s):

Ensure the children's guide includes how they can contact their independent reviewing officer and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 18.6)

Ensure prospective adopters are informed orally of the decision-maker's decision within two working days (NMS 17.12)

Ensure a written record is kept by the agency detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)

Ensure there is a written agency policy, which is implemented, which 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 (NMS 27.1)

Ensure all staff's work and activity are consistent with adoption regulations, and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures. This relates to timescales in the provision of services. (NMS 25.3)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children have good outcomes and experiences and make good progress as a result of being placed with the adopters from this agency. Of particular note is placement stability; there have been no disruptions of placement since Diagrama took over the operation of the service. This compares favourably with the national average. Consequently, children grow up in stable families where they develop good attachments and a positive sense of self.

Most of the children placed with this service's adopters are deemed harder to place by virtue of their age, ethnicity or because they are part of a sibling group. This therefore gives them the opportunity to experience a stable and happy family life when they may otherwise not have done so. They become part of their local community and have positive experiences. For example, they make friends, go to parties, learn to swim, go ice skating and engage in a variety of sports. The agency also runs a children's group which meets every six to eight weeks. This affords children and young people the opportunity to meet with others who are adopted, share experiences and make friends. They also develop their relationship with the agency because they are fully consulted about what they would like to do, and what the group is called. Because this group has been successful, the agency is exploring ways of further development, by offering different venues as well as increasing opportunities for consultation, for example, in adopter and staff recruitment.

Children are matched well with adopters who can meet their assessed needs. They start to develop secure attachments and their confidence and self-esteem improve. They make good progress emotionally, socially and educationally because their health and educational needs are met. Adopters act as good advocates for them, with support from the agency as necessary. For example, the family support service will attend meetings and discuss strategies to assist in school, adopters' social workers visit, and they support adopters in personal education plan meetings and reviews. One social worker said of a child: 'There has been incredible progress in school.' Another said: 'It is absolutely incredible, the child has done fantastically well, and responded to the adopters' care. The child has emotionally stabilised and made a secure attachment.' Children and young people who receive post-adoption support also benefit from the opportunity to meet with therapeutic social workers, counsellors and other therapists. Their anger diminishes, they have a better understanding of their past and they are happier.

Adopters are very aware of the importance of culture, heritage and the birth family. They are fully supportive of contact arrangements, both direct and indirect, in the best interests of the children, and write sensitive letters and provide photographs as appropriate.

Adult service users are very positive about the quality of the service they have received. They have their request for information about their past delivered in a sensitive way and begin to find out about their history, to enable them to move on

with their lives.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Enquirers are positive about their initial contact with the agency. They comment that they receive a prompt and professional response and all their queries are answered. One adopter commented: 'It was efficient, friendly, warm and professional.' This is supplemented by regular information meetings, clear and concise written documentation and an initial interview.

Adopters speak positively about their preparation and assessment. One said: 'The preparation and assessment gave us a fundamental understanding of children and birth parents.' It gives them a realistic picture of the task of being an adoptive parent, and in some cases changes their views on issues such as birth parent contact. Consequently they are fully aware of what to expect and can make an informed judgement about their own capacity and expectations. This is enhanced by post-approval introductory sessions of theraplay to enable them to parent children in a therapeutic way.

Assessments are rigorous yet sensitive. One adopter commented of the assessing social worker: 'She balanced sensitivity with professionalism and rigour very well.' Prospective adopter reports are, in the main, analytical and clear; those that need further work are addressed through the quality assurance process. Some reports are excellent, and a child's social worker commented: 'The prospective adopter report and the pen profile reflected the adopters absolutely perfectly.' This enhances the matching and leads to good and stable placements.

Not all assessments are completed within timescales. This is particularly the case in stage one, although most delays are out of the control of the agency or justified because of emerging complexities. The manager has a good oversight of the progress of assessments and has implemented tracking systems. He has also recently implemented a mid-way review of assessments so that any delays can be addressed earlier.

The adoption panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function which contributes to safe placements by recommending the approval of suitable adopters. This has been enhanced by the recent appointment of a panel adviser, which has improved quality assurance and added rigour. Quality and timeliness of assessments are monitored and reported on, and there is good liaison between the panel adviser and the manager in order to improve the service. The membership of the panel is diverse and includes people with a personal and professional experience of adoption, as well as a member who represents the child's view. The panel chair is very experienced and knowledgeable and one adopter described her as 'fantastic'. Although daunting, attendees are made welcome and put at ease. Agency decision making is also robust and timely. An appropriately suitable and qualified agency decision maker takes the role very seriously and makes a well-informed decision based on full information.

Adopters receive written confirmation of the decision in good time; however, there is no evidence that they are informed verbally within two days of the decision.

Matching is an area of strength, demonstrated by the stability of placements, satisfaction of children's social workers and adoptive families. One social worker commented: 'It's been brilliant. It's a wonderful match.' The agency's social workers are very good at obtaining all the information about a prospective match and ensuring prospective adopters understand the issues fully. They help them frame questions for meetings with children's social workers and support them fully. This ensures they can make an informed decision about accepting a placement, based on the child's assessed needs and their own parenting ability. One adopter said: 'I felt totally supported and my social worker advocated for me.'

Placement support, both before and after the adoption order, is another area of strength. Adopters have access to a range of support, including social events, a recently re-established support group, a children's group, a wide range of relevant training, and the readily available, multidisciplinary family support service. This service responds promptly when families need support. This has a positive impact on children, young people and families, for example, by helping them understand their emotions, develop strategies to cope, understand their histories, and become happier, more confident and self-assured. The early input of the team helps to normalise this. For example, the family support service attends the preparation training, they meet with adopters post approval, and in some cases, have some input into the assessment. Adopters feel the agency will be there for them when they need it. One adopter said: 'I can't speak highly enough of the agency. There has been no change in the level of support since the changeover.' Another said: 'Post-adoption support was as good as I expected.' This has a positive impact on placement stability.

Work with adult service users is delivered very sensitively and professionally. Staff who provide this service are well qualified, experienced and committed. Service users are very positive about the service they have received. One commented: 'The whole process was excellent, she couldn't have been better or more helpful. I was given time, and she really cared.' However, there is a long wait for this service. The manager has tried to address this through the appointment of a member of staff, who has made a start on reducing the waiting list and signposting some enquirers elsewhere.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides a safe service for children, young people and adult service users. This is underpinned by relevant policies and procedures which reflect current guidance and practice. There have been no allegations or safeguarding concerns.

However, the manager and staff clearly understand the role of the local authority, including the designated officer. Staff also understand their role, and this understanding has been enhanced by recent training which included the risk from radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. There is also a robust understanding of the risks that social media pose for both adopters, children and young people. This is addressed in adopter preparation and training, and as a result, adopters demonstrate a good understanding of how to protect children and young people from harm. The agency's commitment to safe placements is also indicated by its very clear stance on physical chastisement, and it has a no-smacking policy which is communicated to adopters at an early stage.

Safe placements are promoted through robust adopter recruitment, preparation and assessment. All appropriate checks and references are taken up, and the preparation helps adopters understand how a child's early life experiences may have an impact on their behaviour. This is enhanced by introduction to theraplay, which is offered prior to placement. This provides adopters with strategies to engage with, and parent in a therapeutic way, children who struggle with attachment. As placements progress, further training and support with attachment and other issues are provided, to further support and sustain safe placements. For example, the agency provides a 12-week parenting course once a year.

Staff recruitment has not been as robust as it should have been. This predates the current managerial situation, and the agency has taken action to address and improve this to prevent further shortfalls in recruitment. All managers have undertaken training in safer recruitment, and they now have oversight of all appointments. The human resources section has been provided with copies of the required information and action for staff recruitment, so they are clear about their responsibilities. The manager was able to demonstrate a robust and responsible response to a recent recruitment issue.

There are safe practices which underpin the provision of services to adults. Clear procedures inform staff about their responsibilities in relation to allegations of historic abuse. All requests for access to records or intermediary services have the welfare of all parties considered prior to the provision of a service, and identity is thoroughly checked.

Anyone involved with the service is provided with the written complaints procedure. There has been one complaint which has been addressed. The agency welcomes feedback as a way of improving its services.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency is in the early stages of its development following the change of ownership. However, leaders and managers demonstrate a significant commitment

and passion to improving the service for the benefit of children and young people. The adoption team manager was appointed in August and has made a number of changes to move the service forwards, following an unsettled period of managerial change. He has re-engaged with the two local consortia, and is a member of the Consortium for Voluntary Adoption Agencies, to enable this agency to play a role in shaping the wider adoption agenda. He has started to address shortfalls in terms of timeliness of service provision, has updated the policies, procedures and documentation and has begun to develop improved consultation with adopters and children. An adopter commented of the manager: 'He is very approachable and open.' Local authority social workers speak highly of their working relationships with the agency and its staff. One said: 'I've only got praise for them', while another commented, 'We worked well together to achieve really good outcomes.'

The manager has developed good systems for monitoring, including outcomes for children as well as service delivery, which feed into senior managerial overview and the development of the service. His monthly performance and development review addresses all aspects of the service, including complaints, allegations, timescales and placements. The management team meets monthly to consider this, and the responsible individual is actively involved. The children's participation officer is engaging children and young people to contribute to the agency's development, although this is in the early stages. Similarly, the manager is developing adopter participation and has recently established an adopters' working group. Feedback at all levels is seen as crucial for service development.

The agency is implementing its recruitment strategy, based on its knowledge of the needs of local authorities. It is targeting adopters who will look after children who are deemed 'harder to place', for example, by advertising in particular communities. The information for enquirers is very clear and the images are those of older children, disabled children, brothers and sisters, children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and adopters who represent different types of families.

The adoption agency is part of a charity which provides a number of services. It has ready access to the family support service, and the manager plans to utilise the wider services more effectively. Diagrama is committed to the adoption service, and the responsible individual confirms that the finances of the wider organisation will be used until the agency becomes financially self-sufficient. There is also an acknowledgement that adoption tends to be cyclical in terms of financial viability, due to the timings of placements.

The statement of purpose and children's guide have been updated to reflect the current service. The statement of purpose is readily available on the website, so anyone can access this to see what the agency will provide. The manager is looking at ways to improve the children's guide so that it is appropriate for children at different stages of their development. Currently it does not give details of how children can contact an independent advocate or their independent reviewing officer, which would enable them to have access to a wider number of adults if they had any concerns.

Staff, managers and panel members contribute a range of experiences which reflect

the diverse nature of adoption. They are all appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable, and the manager is undertaking the relevant management qualification. Staff have access to training, which has been enhanced by an online service. They also have monthly consultation with a psychologist, which they find extremely beneficial as a means to assist adopters who are struggling with aspects of a child's behaviour as well as assessment or matching issues. The manager sees staff development as very important and promotes external courses. Panel members did not have training last year, nor did all of them have their appraisals. This has been rectified this year, with a joint training day planned for later in the month and dates booked in for all appraisals.

Staff feel well supported and appreciate the opportunity for more joined-up working, with, for example, the fostering service and the family support service. They comment that the new leaders and managers have taken time to understand the service and are positive about their drive and vision for the future. They are regularly supervised, although not all records of supervision are signed by both parties or give the time, date and length of the supervision. Appraisals are carried out and the manager has canvassed the views of adopters to contribute to the appraisal, which is a new initiative, and one which demonstrates an open attitude to feedback and improvement.

The paper records are in the process of being transferred to an electronic system. They are not well organised and information is difficult to access. They therefore do not provide a meaningful record for the users of the service should they choose to access them. The archives of the former agency's adoption records are stored at the premises in appropriately secure conditions, and a business continuity plan addresses how the agency would maintain its operation in the event of a disaster, to ensure the service can continue with minimal disruption to children and families.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.