Intercountry Adoption Centre

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number: SC386048
Inspection date: 14/02/2014
Inspector: Peter Harrell
Type of inspection: Full
Provision subtype: Children

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Date of last inspection: 15/04/2010
Service information

Brief description of the service

The Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) is a registered Voluntary Adoption Agency. This agency undertakes all the required work in respect of the preparation, assessment and approval of intercountry adopters. In addition, it has been registered to provide a domestic adoption service since 2012. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services for adults affected by adoption. This includes support for adoptive families and adopted persons, birth records counselling and intermediary work.

The IAC is accredited as a foreign adoption agency under the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, May 1993, which is an international multi-lateral agreement to safeguard intercountry adoptions. Accreditation has been given specifically by the central authorities of three States of origin; India, the Philippines and China. It operates the China special needs adoption programme in the UK for prospective adopters resident in England, Scotland, Wales and the Isle of Man.

The IAC has several service level agreements with British local authorities to provide differing levels of input regarding assessment and support for adopters who adopted children from overseas and/or supervision visits in accordance with the Adoptions with a Foreign Element Regulations 2005.

The IAC originated as an adoption support agency and was formerly known as the Overseas Adoption Helpline, established in 1997. The IAC continues to provide adoption support through an advice line and provides other specific 'bespoke' training courses for kinship adopters, and those adopting again. It runs information days for prospective adopters, information days for families and friends, support workshops, intermediary services, training courses in a wide range of issues regarding intercountry and transracial adoption; practitioner workshops and has published material in professional journals. Subscription services are provided to members of the public, including adopted adults, and adoption professionals.

The Agency operates from well-equipped premises in Barnet, Hertfordshire. Managers of the service present the work of IAC at international conferences. IAC is the only agency in the UK eligible for membership of Euradot, an umbrella international adoption organisation based in the Netherlands and has an application in process.

In 2013, 30 intercountry adopters were approved, three prospective domestic adopters were approved and the agency 'converted' one application from intercountry to domestic adoption.

25 children placed in intercountry adoption arrived in the UK during 2013 and two
children were placed in domestic adoption in that year. There were 14 children who have been matched in intercountry adoption and not yet been placed at the end of 2013.

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: outstanding.

The Intercountry Adoption Centre is unique in its operation in this country. It is also a leader in the field of overseas adoption practice internationally.

It is operating at an outstanding level and maintains itself at the vanguard of adoption practice, particularly with regard to placing children from overseas with disabilities and/or complex emotional needs, with highly trained, and very well prepared and strongly supported adoptive families. This agency achieves excellent outcomes for both children and a limited number of adopted adults, with an overriding emphasis on the proactive promotion of children’s well-being. Robust safe caring practice takes place which is underpinned with reference to current safeguarding research. The agency has a well defined ethical stance in respect of its liaisons with carefully scrutinised adoption programmes in children’s countries of origin. The service additionally makes sure that prospective adopters clearly and comprehensively understand what the impact of being an adopted child from an overseas country will have on the development of their identity, throughout their childhood and beyond.

This agency presents a broad and highly relevant range of training courses for child care professionals, which are well attended and facilitated by specialists in many
aspects concerning the practice of overseas adoption. The service has managed a transition to providing an additional domestic adoption service seamlessly. Leaders of the organisation are very dynamic, whilst remaining accessible to a very efficient staff team. The Registered Manager of the service is highly regarded as a leader in the field by external child care professionals, who comment that they 'have a great deal of respect for the services that the Intercountry Adoption Centre provides'. The board of trustees scrutinise closely the agency’s work, together with ensuring the agency remains financially stable and active.

The agency is in regular and meaningful two way dialogue with the Department for Education regarding overseas adoption issues and the department frequently seeks policy advice on these matters from the IAC.

Adopters and their children receive an excellent service from a range of highly competent staff. Prospective carers are well supported and prepared, which also assists them to make sense of the complexities and varying care needs of children being placed with them from overseas. In domestic placements, adopters and child care professionals report that staff at the agency are very skilled at carefully matching the right children with families; this results in a very high level of placement stability.

Prospective adopters assessment reports are of a very high quality, in both their analysis and content. Processes for approval are rigorous. All assessment and support work is carried out by members of staff who are highly qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and supported. Regular and detailed supervision of staff is carried out by highly skilled and experienced practitioners.

Adopters report a very high level of satisfaction regarding the support they receive from the agency. This support is easily accessible and described by adopters as 'perfect, they will go the extra distance to do things that they do not have to do, to help'.

Robust safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and embedded throughout the agency's practice. The manner by which the service is monitored is varied and highly effective and evaluative; the agency has a clear development plan. Management and staff at IAC are highly committed to improving the quality of the service, as well as the outcomes for adopted children and adults affected by adoption. The adoption panel is properly constituted, with a highly experienced chair; this enables the service to approve adopters promptly within prescribed timescales and avoid delay for children who wait to be adopted domestically.

No requirements or recommendations were made at the last inspection of this service and there are no actions, requirements or recommendations made as a result of this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding.**
Adoptive parents receive a rapid response from a proactive agency that provides highly skilled help and support. An overriding aim of the IAC is to actively strive to improve children's self-esteem, identity and confidence. They achieve this through the use of a wide range of therapeutically based practices; these are readily available to adopters at all stages, in what they refer to as, their 'adoption journey'. Adoptive families, as a whole family are helped to meet a child's emotional needs which results in dramatic and positive improvements in their behaviour. Children experience stability in their new families, the disruption rate is low with 1 disruptive placement, involving a child over the past five years, which compares favourably with national figures. A great amount of reflective work was carried out from the agency and the connected local authority following this occurrence.

Children make amazing personal and social progress, benefiting from very stable placements. The support adopters receive is comprehensive and tailored to children’s individual needs, where they feel very secure and are made to feel part of the adoptive family. Young children were observed, as part of this inspection, to be very happy, contented and extremely well nurtured.

There are several examples of long-term stable placements. Local authority commissioners comment very favourably regarding the positive outcomes for children who are placed, from overseas and domestically with adopters of the service. For example one manager stated, ‘The outcomes for children and young people who the IAC work with are excellent. Their organisation is one of very few that not only works with children but also has a vast knowledge of the specific needs of adopted young people and adults who have been adopted from overseas.’

Children and young people achieve exceptionally in their education in relation to their starting points. The IAC has realistic aims of children and young people and is proactively involved in education matters. Several children have progressed very well and excelled in mainstream education, where previously they had to be educated away from their peers.

Children’s health needs are met well. Adopters are fully supported and encouraged to access all medical services and there is regular consultation with a proactive medical advisor. Adopters also register with dentists, GPs and opticians, making sure that any heath related issues are identified swiftly.

The IAC makes itself readily available to carry out all aspects of life story work. Workers pass on a high level of skills in this specialist and delicate area to adopters, from the beginning of any adoptive placement, and attempt to get as much family information about a child as they can. The agency understands the clear need for children to maintain a strong sense of belonging and proactive 'life journey' work takes place which enables children to have a strong identity even though this does not necessarily involve promoting contact arrangements with birth families. Social workers educate adopters regarding identity issues and the result is that many adopters return with their children to their countries of origin on several occasions, together with making close and meaningful connections with relevant international
communities in this country.

Young adults who have been adopted and brought to the UK as a child are supported very sensitively, mainly through the advice line, to assist them to trace their families of origin or are signposted to agencies who can try and help them with this task.

**Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding.**

At the heart of the service is the quality of care provided to children from overseas and now domestically. This is a formidable and a major and positive strength of this service. Prospective adopters are prepared, assessed, trained and supervised to an extremely high level. The service attracts a broad range of adoptive parents who are specifically able to meet the special needs of some children and young people, for whom permanence in this country and abroad, may be more difficult. This can be best demonstrated with reference to the China special needs intercountry adoption programme which the service is a proactive and accredited member of. Prospective adopters come to the ICA from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences and include single applicants and adopters who are dedicated to looking after older children and children with disabilities.

The adoption panel is constituted in accordance with regulations and guidance. The panel is guided by a highly experienced, competent and knowledgeable panel chair. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker, who is appropriately qualified, are responded to and ratified in a prompt manner. The central list of panel members is diverse in its life experiences, ethnicity and gender; its members bring a broad range of relevant experience and this ensures that the panel is representative of the urban population where the agency is located and of up to date intercountry adoption issues. The strong and positive panel benefits children placed. There is an awareness of issues relating to adoption from a variety of personal and professional viewpoints. Panel members are well trained, regularly supervised and all receive relevant training and an annual performance appraisal. The panel also monitors the progress of the service’s development and consults regularly with the service’s trustees.

Panel meeting minutes are concise in their detail and clear to read; they demonstrate very well the discussion of issues and show exactly how recommendations are reached following extensive consideration of the suitability of applicants in each case. This ensures that a gatekeeping process is in place to make sure children are placed with people who are suitable to parent them and adopters are aware of the issues that they may face when adopting from overseas. Adopters say 'the panel is organised efficiently and thorough.' Prospective adopters' reports contain relevant analysis and are an accurate picture of the adopters. They provide a very effective tool when considering matching children, as they are accurate and appropriately detailed.
Assessment of all prospective adopters is very rigorous. Adopters reported that there was a timely and personal response to their initial enquiries, followed by a prompt invitation to an information session. Preparation and training consists of a comprehensive regularly held or specifically tailored programme of learning and always includes participation from adoptive parents, which several adopters state was the highlight of their preparation. Several training programmes take place during and after approval, these are well attended and delivered by social workers with a range of experiences of intercountry adoption; the content of training has been developed by the IAC with reference to other intercountry adoption agencies in other parts of the world. The agency incorporates their training with current and relevant theories and it is always informed by up to date research, including reference to recent theories regarding attachment and brain development. This enables adopters to be given the correct knowledge and preparation for looking after children who have a range of complex needs and for the life changing experience and challenges of adoption. The new arrangements with shorter assessment timescales are being implemented well by this service since they came into effect in July 2013, despite the IAC having to adjust sharply yet efficiently to this implementation, as they discovered late with under two month’s notice, that intercountry adoption assessments were not exempt from the new timescales.

Prospective adopters say they received as much information about children as the agency can find out and are expertly guided to make a considered decision about whether they have the ability to meet a child’s needs. An adopter said, 'IAC were really helpful, they tried to get as much information as possible and kept constant communication going, even when we were overseas'.

Post adoption support is of exceptionally high quality. This strong level of on-going support has been essential in preventing children having attachment problems and minimising disruptions and ensures that children remain settled and are developing well. Several members of staff have specific skills in post adoption support work and there is an additional benefit that some have personal experience of intercountry adoption.

The agency sees support as lifelong and families say they are responded to promptly and remembered even if they have not had contact with the IAC for several years. Adopters confirmed this by saying 'I have to say staff at IAC are in a league of their own; super professional, realistic, honest and they've never forgotten us. The support experience we have had has been excellent, just fabulous and really helpful'. This support is also further enhanced with longstanding and specific post adoption training, support groups and annual family days. These occasions add to the sense of common belonging that the agency actively promotes.

The agency is commissioned to carry out specific pieces of work on behalf of local authorities at differing levels of service. They provide an assessment service for intercountry adoptions for a nearby and distant local authorities and are also commissioned to provide post adoption support or support for adoptive placements in accordance with foreign element Regulations. Childcare professionals connected with the service and local authority commissioning managers spoke extremely highly
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of the efficient services provided, with stating that, 'The service the IAC provide is invaluable' and 'This authority sends all of our prospective intercountry adopters to the IAC for their information day and preparation groups. The IAC is always able to offer them places within timescales and the feedback I get from the prospective adopters is always positive'.

Despite being a limited service compared to the other aspects of the adoption agency, access to records and intermediary work is carried out with sensitivity and in a safe manner. There is a secure archive in the building; cabinets are fire-proof and stored in a dry and secure area.

**Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The well-being and safety of children who are placed for adoption have an overriding high priority in this agency. This view is apparent regardless of whether children come from overseas or domestically.

Children are placed with adoptive families who come to the IAC and have been prepared extremely well for the task of adoptive parenting and keeping them safe. Safeguarding, safe touch, attachment which is related to current research in brain development and managing behaviour forms a significant part of the preparation course. High quality on-going training also ensures that adopters have a thorough knowledge of how to promote all aspects of safety. Training is also made relevant to the process of going through the practical and emotional processes of adopting children from overseas and bringing them to the UK.

The recruitment and vetting system of both staff and adopters is well organised, with all the necessary and relevant references and checks in place. Staff files are also subject to a regular audit process to ensure that all statutory checks are robustly and thoroughly kept up to date. Health and safety checks make sure that all the family homes are suitably safe for young children. In order to make sure that only people assessed as safe are able to work with children and adult service users, the agency has recruitment procedures in place which follow relevant up to date safer recruitment guidance.

Prospective and approved adopters, adopted children and adopted adults can all express any concerns through the use of an accessible complaints procedure. The agency demonstrates a desire to learn from any feedback, including complaints, and responds in a positive way to improve the service. There has been one complaint received from a service user since the last inspection. This was responded to within very clear timescales; it was handled appropriately, promptly, sensitively and in immense detail with a positive and reflective outcome which informs present practice. The IAC is very proactive in receiving feedback from its adopters so that it can identify any emerging themes and provide appropriate resources to improve practice.
During specific sessions which form part of the preparation and assessment process, the service provides information to prospective adopters about signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect. There is a detailed programme of training in place, which happens both before and after approval. Adopters say training is helpful and well organised. There is also lots of further training related to safeguarding available to adopters, which ensures that they acquire an understanding of child protection, feel prepared to protect and support children and have an understanding of the potential long-term impact of any previous abuse, neglect and institutional care overseas. Staff demonstrate an awareness of the safety issues in relation to social media, which they pass on to adopters to increase their knowledge and understanding so they can safeguard their children. Training also includes reference to recent research in brain development.

The service uses regional child protection procedures and receives regular information from the Local Safeguarding Childrens Board for the area in which the IAC is situated. Social workers who work for the service all have regularly updated mandatory safeguarding training and supervision is structured to ensure that there are always regular opportunities to discuss safeguarding matters. The agency has appropriate safeguarding procedures in place which make reference to historical abuse. Several countries insist on regular reports regarding children's progress to be sent back to their country of origin's social service department equivalents and the visits which inform these reports add an additional level of safeguarding to specific permanent placements.

Adopted children or children waiting to be adopted in permanent placements are aware that they can contact social workers if they have any anxieties or worries. There is information readily available for them in the children's guide about this, which if required can be translated into their home language or in other formats. This ensures that children can access a variety of people to share any concerns.

**Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: outstanding.

Leadership and management of the agency is exceptional in its strength. There is a clear development plan in place and a well thought out strategy for growth, from an agency which is already financially very viable. Performance and delivery of the service is clearly monitored and is formally reported in written form to the board of trustees regularly, in different formats. This ensures that the level of care that adopted children receive within this agency is constantly and closely being scrutinised by senior management.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides have recently been updated to reflect the recent changes and have been submitted to Ofsted as required. Anyone using the service has clear information about what the service provides.

The wide range of support groups for adoptive families and on-going training and social events are well attended. This further ensures that children are cared for by
informed adoptive parents who contribute to the development of the service and say that their feedback is always highly regarding and promptly responded to.

The Registered Manager of the service has developed very close positive working relationships with a wide range of placing authorities and other voluntary adoption agencies, as well as education and health services. This makes certain that the IAC a strongly respected and recognised organisation. The manager is a leading expert in intercountry adoption and travels overseas to increase her knowledge about intercountry adoption issues; liaises regularly with the Department for Education at a senior level and has attended and contributed to various committees and working parties regarding intercountry adoption. The IAC is an actively involved member of the council for Voluntary Adoption Agencies, the British Association of Adoption and Fostering as well as European and international consortia concerned with intercountry adoption matters. In terms of the development of a domestic adoption service, there is already in place a management structure to support this and in addition a joint and highly collaborative multi-agency approach to being aware of trends in transracial adoption, finding families and meeting the needs of a wide range of adopted children.

The social work and administrative staff appointed are highly competent, trained, supervised and well supported. Members of staff have extended their learning further than social work qualifications. Regardless of the fact that the service is staffed by independent social workers, they all state that they feel positive about being an integral part of the agency, the direction it is moving and are committed to the organisation and its purpose. Staff described the management of the service as 'phenomenal' and 'a real path of partnership' and 'there is an open process of change'. Appraisals of social workers and the manager’s competency takes place at least once a year. The actively involved manager of the service is a professionally qualified and registered social work practitioner with several years’ relevant experience in adoption work and holds the appropriate management qualifications. The high levels of support from management ensure that children receive an excellent quality of care from well prepared and supported adoptive parents.

The agency's premises are very accessible and welcoming situated in a calm and quiet environment. One large room is available for training, with more appropriate spaces set aside for staff supervision and smaller meetings. There are displays promoting the agencies international ethos throughout the service, together with positive images of children and adults from a range of backgrounds and experiences. This strongly emphasises the agency's commitment to its overseas work, together with promoting equality and tackling discrimination.

Relevant insurance cover and appropriate security of the building is in place at the service. A clear business continuity plan is in place including a central backup ensuring that records are preserved in case of an emergency.

No recommendations were made at the last inspection or on this occasion. Despite this, the leaders and management of the IAC continually strive to improve their service further and are highly committed to improving the quality of care and
especially the outcomes for children who are placed from overseas and now domestically, in adoptive 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.