

# Intercountry Adoption Centre

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The Intercountry Adoption Centre (IAC) is a registered Voluntary Adoption Agency. The 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 children and adults affected by adoption. This includes support for adoptive families and adopted persons, birth records and signposting to appropriate agencies for intermediary work and birth records counselling.

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 multilateral agreement to safeguard intercountry adoptions. Accreditation has been given specifically by the central authorities of five States of Origin; India, the Philippines, South Africa, Bulgaria and China. The agency is also in the process of applying for accreditation in Kazakhstan. 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 currently has service level agreements with 60 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, training courses covering a wide range of issues regarding intercountry and transracial adoption and practitioner workshops, it signposts adults for intermediary services 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 to hold membership with Euradopt, an umbrella international adoption organisation based in the Netherlands. It has been a member since January 2016. The manager sits on the Euradopt Council, and has been a UK delegate to meetings of The Hague Special Commission which periodically review the operation of the Hague Convention.

In addition to its own work, IAC has recently agreed to take on a number of families approved by another agency who will no longer be providing intercountry adoptions. This has increased the number of post-approved families for intercountry placements to 72, although nine of those families have been matched. This leaves 63 families without identified children or in the process of matching but not officially matched yet.

During the period 1 March 2016 to 28 February 2017, the agency placed 40 children with prospective adopters and a further four were planned to be placed during March 2017. Of these children, 33 were intercountry placements and seven were domestic placements. The additional four children are also domestic adoptions. In the same period, 35 intercountry adopters were approved, two prospective domestic adopters were approved and the agency 'converted' five applications from intercountry to domestic adoption. There were five incoming families approved by a different agency, but all except one have had children placed while with IAC.

## 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 (IAC) continues to offer a unique service, which is held in the highest regard both nationally and internationally in the field of adoption practice.

Inspirational leaders and managers are leading this agency to be ambitious and influential leaders in the field of intercountry and domestic adoption. Over the duration of its work, positive links and networks have been fostered with agencies abroad, with the Department for Education (DfE) and with local and placing authorities using its services. It is also developing through its innovative work with other agencies and through a regionalisation plan to lead and develop intercountry work across the whole of England.

Every piece of work undertaken through the centre is carefully planned and coordinated throughout its involvement. There are clear information packs, information days and a range of highly relevant training courses for prospective adopters and their families. Clearly defined contracts and expectations of fees involved for intercountry work are provided for prospective adopters. One adopter said, 'They respond very quickly and send all the information you need.'

Children with disabilities and/or a range of other complex needs are being carefully and appropriately placed in well-prepared and supported adoptive families. Often there is limited information about children and young people's medical needs overseas and the prognosis for their futures can be uncertain. The agency, alongside health professionals, has jointly undertaken some meaningful research into this area of need. This recently published research is prompting further research and development into the collection and analysis of medical data for overseas adoptions.

The agency regularly uses feedback to improve practice and make changes to courses. For example, the agency changed support to help adopters complete portfolios. In addition, the views of adopters following panel have resulted in changes to the process, in particular that all adopters, whose adoption placement will

be transracial or trans ethnic are now expected to attend transracial training prior to attending the panel.

All of the workers, the managers and the panel understand the lifelong implications of adoption. Some have experienced adoption as either an adoptee or an adopter, or indeed both. Staff have excellent knowledge and experience of adoption work and processes, and are routinely providing high quality reports and support. Processes for approval through the panel are well scrutinised and rigorous.

Despite the high level of expertise of the agency workers and managers, they remain committed to learning and developing the service further. Leaders and managers are aware of areas that could be improved upon and have strategic plans and processes in place. This approach is driving the agency's constant thrust towards improvement. Staff receive high quality supervision, which provides robust oversight of the quality of the work undertaken.

The agency has excellent networks and connections built up over a long period. These relationships are well developed and nurtured to support continuous learning and ensure the best service for families and children using the agency. This supports the managers' constant objective of improving and learning how they can better support vulnerable children and subsequently find and prepare suitable adopters.

Staff, including sessional workers, are provided with high quality training opportunities. There is an agency day once a year where relevant topics are presented and discussed, and regular update safeguarding training is offered. Robust safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and embedded throughout the agency's practice.

Leaders and managers are ambitious and inspire high quality work with children and families. They are continuously developing ideas and addressing any areas of weakness to support children to receive better services, for example with regard to medical research and development of medical forms and the consistent efforts to advocate in respect of visas and better arrangements with countries to facilitate smooth and safe adoptions.

Prospective adopters' assessment reports are excellent. Intercountry adoption is a specialist area and reports reflect the additional criteria required to ensure compliance in this area. The agency has its own monitoring of systems via its agency adviser, who is very experienced and knowledgeable in adoption matters. The panel has a vital role in monitoring and auditing the quality of reports presented and provides helpful feedback to social workers and managers. The panel is appropriately

constituted, has a highly experienced chair and is an effective safeguard in the process of approval of prospective adopters. The panel is extremely busy and in recent months has sat fortnightly to ensure that there is no delay for children waiting to be adopted.

There is exceptional and passionate leadership in the service. Leaders and managers are constantly seeking to develop and improve services for children. Motivation stems from what is in the best interests of children. The knowledge held and shared by individual leaders is vast and consequently leaders and managers know a good many of the cases directly. Managers think strategically about how to improve the service and manage changing situations well. With the recent closure of another intercountry adoption service and the development of the regional adoption agency work, coupled with the proposed Kazakhstan office, the agency has grown quickly. Despite this, the agency is managing to support workers and families and offer an exceptional service. Leaders and managers have grown the service from its inception to the strong partnerships it has today and it continues to develop via regionalisation with secured additional funding. The agency holds service level agreements with 60 authorities or boroughs across the country, including London, and subscriber services for a substantial amount of authorities and voluntary adoption agencies.

No requirements or recommendations were made at the last inspection and none are made as a result of this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Suitable, sensitive and skilled adopters are approved by the agency and meet individual children's needs to a high standard. In domestic adoptions, children are suitably matched. Placing authorities come to IAC because they know they will find good diversity in families for children. One agency says, 'If I'm looking for diversity, my first port of call is the IAC.'

In intercountry adoption, children have often already been identified via kinship or connected person arrangements. When they are not, matching is considered as carefully as the systems of the relevant country allow, with as much information as is available. Medical advice is always sought, often following the receipt of poor information. This is an issue which the agency is alive to and has responded to by presenting research and proposals for improvement.

Adopters and their children receive an excellent service from highly competent and well-trained staff. Staff ensure that services such as advocating for education and meeting the health and welfare needs of children are given the highest importance. Staff at the agency understand the complex needs of both overseas and domestic adoptions and support the careful matching of children with adopters who can meet their needs. This is reflected in the high level of placement stability. The agency has not experienced any overseas placement disruptions and very few domestic disruptions. There have been none since the last inspection in February 2014.

Adopters report high levels of satisfaction regarding the support that they receive from the agency. For example, adopters say:

- I would recommend them to anyone. They are a good service.
- I've always found them really helpful; they get me to think about things more.
- I have 'X' on speed dial; I just called her and she has been brilliant, really supportive.
- They have been amazingly supportive and very thorough.
- I have recommended them to a number of people. They haven't put a foot wrong; they have gone above and beyond.

Children make exceptional personal and social progress, benefiting from very stable placements. Highly skilled workers with a vast knowledge of a range of therapeutic-based practices offer accessible help to adopters throughout the adoption process

and post-adoption order. For example, one adopter said, 'Every time I want information they respond so quickly, they also work out of hours, it feels like you are being supported.'

Direct work provided by the agency is at the highest level and is supporting many children to make exceptional progress from their starting points. Children from overseas and domestic adoptions have considerable opportunities to grow up in a family where they are loved and supported by well-prepared adopters. One social worker said, 'The adopters were able to see each child differently and parent separately. They have been excellent and were very well supported by the agency.'

The agency helps adopters to understand their right to an assessment of their adoption support needs. There are various examples of the agency supporting or advocating for ongoing support, for example through play-based therapy, social work support and excellent working in partnership with placing authorities. In intercountry adoptions, in accordance with the requirements of the countries of origin and with the Restriction on Preparation of Adoption Reports Regulations 2005, the agency ensures that post-placement/post adoption reports are completed.

The agency provides excellent adoption support services to adult adoptees by providing support and signposting to relevant services, which can help in intermediary services. Various groups, including the international searchers' group run in collaboration with the transracial transnational adoption group (TTAG) and offer further links and contacts to others.

The agency also offers a range of services for other family members affected by adoption in the wider family network. There is a friends and family course for families of prospective adopters and other support groups putting prospective adopters and adopters in touch with one another and supporting their adoptions.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The quality of care provided by this agency is exceptional. The level of experience and expertise held by the leaders, managers and workers at every level offers an efficient and seamless service to those who use and commission its service. Its primary objective and function is to provide children from overseas and domestically with high quality, loving and suitable families that can meet their needs. The agency attracts a range of adopters who can specifically meet the special needs of some children for whom permanence in this country and abroad may be more difficult, for

example older children, groups of brothers and sisters or children with disabilities. Although some countries exclude various different applicants, the agency is as inclusive as it can be: it has carers from a diverse range of backgrounds, experience, ethnicity, religions and includes single applicants.

Prospective adopters say that they find the agency helpline extremely helpful and informative. Adopters receive a prompt response to initial enquiries and receive clear and comprehensive written information. Initial interviews are offered quickly and regular information days are held. The administrative back-up and support provided to the advice line and the assessment process are exceptional and efficient. Adopters mentioned this during feedback, stating that they found administrative workers to be a first line of contact and they appreciated this support greatly.

The preparation, assessment and support of prospective adopters is of a high quality. Adopters receive necessary information and are aware of how to complain if needed. Preparation and training greatly benefit prospective adopters and courses are run regularly. Several other training courses take place both during and after approval. Feedback from adopters on the preparation courses is very positive and indicated that they are well run and informative. For example, one adopter said, 'We attended the preparation course; it was very good and we thought it was run very well.' The main criticism from prospective adopters came from the length of the process itself and other areas beyond IAC's control such as visas, immigration and processes changing in countries of origin. These issues are well known to the agency and steps are being taken to improve and advocate when these issues arise.

The adoption panel is efficient and run in accordance with regulations and guidance. The panel chair is very well qualified and experienced and has been leading the panel since its inception in 2009. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to and ratified in a prompt manner. On occasions, the agency decision maker has challenged the panel recommendation or requested further information prior to confirming a decision. This shows a strong gatekeeping process, in which only the strongest applicants are approved. The central list of panel members is diverse in its ethnicity, experience and gender. The organisation of the panel and the panel minutes are of high quality and reflect the detail and discussion of the work of the panel. Disagreements and discussions are accurately recorded and the panel works well together, reflecting on how individual recording of decisions allows time and thought for others' views. This strengthens panel recommendations and benefits children by raising concerns and issues prior to approval. All panel members receive appropriate training, are regularly supervised and receive an annual performance appraisal. The panel monitors the progress of the service's development and is kept informed on service developments and provides six monthly quality assurance

feedback report to the Chief Executive and the Trustees.

Domestic adopters are referred to the register following approval, although many have already been potentially matched prior to approval by placing authorities looking for specific diversity. Intercountry adoption follows a different, more complex process, and different routes are taken depending on the country of origin. The agency knows these processes well and works very closely with the DfE to facilitate the certificate of eligibility and subsequent requirements to initiate family finding abroad.

The agency is commissioned to carry out specific pieces of work on behalf of local authorities at differing levels of service. It provides an assessment service for intercountry adoptions for many local authorities and boroughs and is also commissioned to provide information, post-adoption support or support in accordance with Adoptions with a Foreign Element Regulations 2005. Professionals and commissioners spoke very highly of the services provided. For example, one commissioner said, 'We have a long-standing relationship with IAC, a positive partnership which works on lots of levels, they are very experienced in their field.' Another social worker said, 'The quality of adopters is fantastic.'

The quality of service is outstanding and results in sustained improvements for children and their families. The agency consistently uses research to inform and improve practice.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The leaders and managers have an impressive knowledge of child protection and the roles and responsibilities they have when there are concerns or actual harm to a child or vulnerable adult. The well-being and safety of children who are placed for adoption are given the highest priority. Staff are highly experienced and have good expertise of child protection. They know who to go to for advice and support on safeguarding issues and report that managers are accessible for consultation.

All staff receive safeguarding training, including sessional social workers and administrative workers. This helps to minimise risks for children. The last update training was in October 2015. Further training was undertaken on 'risks in assessment' and 'female genital mutilation' in April 2016. Managers and some staff have attended 'Prevent' training on the risk of radicalisation.

Prospective adopters receive excellent preparation for the task of adoptive parenting. They are helped to understand how to keep children as safe as possible. Adopters learn about vulnerability in attachments and how early life trauma, abuse and neglect can affect children's ongoing behaviours and presentation. Adopters receive excellent help to think about the importance of children's identity and their need for information and contact with birth families. These topics are thoroughly explored to ensure that adopters know how to manage these issues safely for children.

The early recruitment and vetting systems for adopters mean that they are rigorously assessed and checked during the first stages of the assessment process. Safeguarding checks in both this country and abroad help to ensure that children are kept as safe as possible.

Prospective adopters, approved adopters, adopted children and adopted adults can express any concerns through the use of a comprehensive complaints policy, which is available on the agency's website. The agency has learned from feedback, including complaints, and has responded in a positive way, which has helped to improve services. For example, all prospective adopters planning to adopt transracially or trans ethnically must attend a training course in transracial adoption prior to having their assessments considered by panel members. This helps prepare prospective adopters more fully in this area, which is hugely important for intercountry adoption.

In response to complaints received, it is impressive that the agency has been able to think about their responses and review them on occasions to check where they can improve and change practice if necessary. There have been four complaints received from service users since the last inspection. These complaints were responded to promptly and fairly as set out within the agency's own complaints policy. In all but one instance, the complaint was resolved between the agency and the service users. One was referred appropriately to the independent review mechanism for investigation and decision. The agency decision was upheld; however, the agency and the trustees have considered the learning from all of these complaints and the outcomes have shaped and informed ongoing practice.

In addition, the agency panel minutes show that the panel has been able to think about approval decisions carefully. The panel has been able to debate when there are split decisions and has on occasion declined approvals. In addition, there is good use of second opinion visits or discussions during panel meetings to pinpoint issues and request that adopters do extra work prior to considering their approval.

The recruitment and vetting process for staff members is robust and helps safeguard

children from unsuitable people being allowed to work in the agency.

The agency has dealt with a safeguarding issue appropriately since the last inspection. When concerns emerged, the agency took appropriate advice from the DfE to advise the country of origin and ensure that children's safety was paramount.

The agency has a comprehensive safeguarding policy and historical abuse allegation policy, which covers intercountry adoptions. There are excellent appendices with essential contact numbers attached to this working document to advise staff of where and to whom issues should be reported. The Local Safeguarding Children Board for the borough where the agency is located has reviewed and approved this document. These strong partnership arrangements also result in frequent updates about safeguarding information and training events.

The agency has prepared an informative and easily understood children's guide, which is accessible in different formats depending on children's age and understanding. This document provides helpful contact numbers and information, which ensures that children have a wide range of potential supports if needed.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The leaders, managers and trustees all show an exceptional commitment to the delivery of excellent adoption services for children and young people, their families and others affected by adoption. The agency has extremely effective working relationships with many placing authorities, local authorities and agencies. In addition, it is leading the involvement of a regional adoption agency, which will provide inbound intercountry adoption services across the whole of England. This will also develop knowledge and processes for children looked after who are being placed abroad. The service is constantly striving to improve working relationships with agencies in other countries, government departments and any authority that can progress intercountry adoptions and make children's lives easier. Leaders and managers are also working hard on becoming functional in Kazakhstan and setting up an office base there.

IAC is the largest single provider of intercountry adoptions in the UK and has doubled its turnover in the past five years. The second largest provider, which was also expected to be IAC's partner agency in the regional adoption agency for inbound placements, stopped providing intercountry adoptions in September 2016. The incoming transfer of work from this agency which commenced in April 2016, has

been a significant and unexpected piece of work for IAC, which it has managed admirably. IAC has taken on approximately 30 extra service level agreements with local authorities, and about 30 legacy cases as a result of this.

IAC successfully applied for a Department for Education Booster grant in 2014 for domestic adoptions and has received a succession of grants to develop under the regional adoption agency. This will continue to support what is already a financially viable agency.

The agency has excellent monitoring systems in place for performance and delivery of services. This ensures compliance with the national minimum standards and regulations. The agency has a clear development plan in place and an ongoing strategy for the expected growth, which has happened more rapidly than the agency expected. A new operational director started with the agency in November last year, thus allowing the strategic and operational organisation to be separated. Managers are continuing to work on a scheme of delegation surrounding these two roles as part of the ongoing development plan. The manager formally reports to the board of trustees, as do other managers within the service. This ensures that the services provided are continuously scrutinised.

The agency is continually striving to improve and this is very evident in a number of ways. It is an outstanding service and for the past two inspections, there have been no breaches of regulation. It is self-regulating in terms of constantly learning from feedback, complaints, and changes in legislation and adoption processes. It consistently uses research to inform practice. It has actively become involved in regionalisation and secured DfE funding to develop incoming intercountry adoptions and to develop a national advice and information service to support local authorities in placing looked after children in adoption. It is close to securing Kazakhstan as another accredited agency status. It has expanded, somewhat more quickly than it expected, and has responded to a partner agency ceasing its intercountry adoption service.

The agency continuously recruits adopters in line with its statement of purpose and service level agreements in providing intercountry adoption to local authorities. The leaders and managers have developed very close and positive working relationships with a wide range of placing authorities and voluntary adoption agencies. It is evident from speaking with placing authorities and commissioners how well respected the agency is, and the vast amount of knowledge held by leaders and managers and staff working in intercountry adoption.

The manager is a leading expert in intercountry adoption and regularly travels

overseas to develop new projects and increase the agency's knowledge about intercountry issues. Since the last inspection, the agency has established a partnership with an agency in Bulgaria, is now functional in South Africa and is working on becoming functional in Kazakhstan. The manager is involved at the highest level with the DfE and contributes regularly with her knowledge and expertise to matters involving intercountry adoptions. IAC is actively involved with Euradopt, and the manager has represented the agency at conferences and various committees and working parties regarding intercountry adoption. In terms of domestic adoption, despite the national trend of diminishing numbers of children available for adoption, the agency has regularly placed hard to place children. It has become an established agency for domestic adoption, being renowned particularly for expertise in transracial issues. Having a diverse range of available adopters who can meet the needs of a range of children waiting for placements has led to several prospective intercountry adopters being approached for potential matches for domestic adoptions.

The agency has an excellent website and provides clear and accessible information. The statement of purpose and children's guides are available on the website. The children's guides are child focused and contain all essential information, including advocate numbers and children's commissioner contact details for England, Scotland and Wales. This approach ensures that anyone using the service has clear and accessible information.

All the staff at IAC are well qualified and have considerable relevant experience. There is regular accessible training and practitioner groups for professional and personal development. Staff say that they find these opportunities excellent and informative and that they help them to undertake their roles. Staff have regular supervisions and appraisals. These are also in place for sessional workers. Staff say that they trust managers and that they are very well supported by them. In between supervisions or if needed, staff felt that they had very knowledgeable information at hand.

The agency has been in the process of transitioning to an electronic database system for records. This system is now in operation and although not yet fully functional, it enables clear, helpful records of children's and adopters' progress with the agency. The recording is sensitive and thoughtful. There are excellent administrative systems in place and data is stored in a confidential and safe manner.

There were no requirements or recommendations made at the last inspection. Despite this, the leaders and managers work hard to continually improve their service and are highly committed to improving the quality of care and outcomes for children

who are placed from overseas and domestically.

Leaders and managers are highly inspirational and lead the way both nationally and internationally in intercountry adoption. This is exceptional leadership, and provides a voice for the vulnerable children the agency works with.

## 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.