

The Catholic Children's Society

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC048470
Inspection date	18 September 2008
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman / Vivien Slyfield
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	14 November 2005

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Families are Best is the title of the adoption service provided by the Catholic Children's Society (Nottingham). The agency currently operates from premises in West Bridgford and is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption only, which include the preparation, assessment and approval of adoptive parents. It works with local authorities to place looked after children with its approved families and also provides adoption support services to children, adoptive parents, adopted adults and birth relatives. This includes birth records counselling, birth relative initiated contact, tracing and intermediary work.

Summary

This was a key, announced inspection. The agency has a thorough and rigorous approach to the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of adopters. It is committed to supporting adoptive families both before and after the adoption order is made, through individual work, access to specialist advice, the provision of social events, support groups for adopters and children and training. It is also committed to supporting birth relatives and adopted adults through its counselling, access to records and intermediary services, which are responsive, sensitive and professional. The management of the agency is outstanding at all levels. There are very good monitoring systems in place, the agency is responsive to any shortfalls which are identified and is constantly looking at how it can improve. Staff and managers are skilled, knowledgeable, experienced and enabled to undertake their duties through good support, supervision and training.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Four recommendations were made at the previous inspection and these have all been completed satisfactorily. Assessments of adopters are now more competency based. There have been significant developments in relation to adoption support, which include the provision of children's groups and a regular adopters' support group. Policies and procedures have been revised and updated in line with new legislative requirements and provide a very strong basis for the provision of services and excellent standards of practice. The agency continually assesses and evaluates its own services and is keen to improve and develop wherever it can, which has resulted in this inspection finding a service of exceptionally high quality.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is not judged.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has a written strategy for the recruitment of adopters which is based on a sound awareness of the needs of looked after children who require adoptive families. The recruitment officer, assisted by volunteers and other staff, has responsibility for implementing this strategy and evaluating the effectiveness of various methods used to ensure they remain an effective way of attracting enquirers to the agency. Enquirers are invited for a very thorough initial interview, which is detailed and well structured. This process is effective in ensuring that only

those people able to offer an appropriate resource are invited to apply. The agency is very sensitive in dealing with enquirers who cannot offer an appropriate resource and very mindful of their previous experiences of loss and perceived failure. Adopters have commented that their first contact with the agency was very caring, professional and unhurried and they felt every question was answered. The agency has a very thorough preparation and assessment process to ensure that the adoptive families they approve are equipped to care safely for the children placed with them. The preparation and assessment is integrated so that issues can be discussed and clarified as they arise. There are seven days of preparation which are extremely thorough, to ensure that families are as fully prepared as possible. Different adopters attend six of the groups to enable the applicants to meet a range of families and talk to them informally. They also meet all the social workers in the agency during that time. The agency run a day for supporters of the adoptive families, to provide them with information about adoption and equip them to provide support more readily. This is relatively new and a direct result of acting on suggestions from adopters and learning from previous practice. Adopters are very positive about all aspects of the preparation, and feedback from their supporters is that this group is also valuable. The assessments are thorough, analytical and competencies are addressed which provide a good focus for highlighting any vulnerabilities and future support needs. Adopters speak highly of their social workers; they are said to be professional, sensitive, make them feel valued and cared for and keep them informed. All appropriate checks and references are carried out, including a thorough health and safety check, to promote the safety of children placed. There is a well-established practice of a review and second opinion visit which is thorough, well-documented and provides an added safeguard to the assessment. Once approved, adopters are sent detailed information from the chief executive regarding the expectations of the agency in relation to appropriate methods of discipline and control and child protection, which adopters must read, sign and return a copy, as a record of their agreement. This formality gives added emphasis to the importance of these two areas and absolute clarity of what is acceptable. There is a useful post approval pack which gives clear information about the next stage, including the National Adoption Register. The agency works with Local Authorities to obtain full, accurate and up to date information on any children who are being considered and encourages life appreciation days and meetings with relevant people in the child's life. The manager takes a very proactive approach in this process, as he has an overview of all the reports, makes sure any queries are addressed and this objectivity provides an added check and balance to the matching process. The adoption panel is governed by appropriate policies and procedures. Applicants are invited to attend, and sent a pack of information to prepare them for their attendance, but it is clear that it is their choice. Adopters report that they are made welcome and the evaluations which they complete also indicate a good level of satisfaction in the way their application was handled. The panel is properly constituted, with members who have a range of personal and professional experiences of adoption. New members receive a very good pack of information and have an induction. Their learning is reinforced by training and updates on various issues. The panel is well organised and administered; papers are sent out in good time to enable panel members to read them thoroughly. The minutes are clear, thorough and give the reasons for the recommendation. The agency decision is made in a timely way and with proper consideration. There is a protocol which the agency decision maker has developed when minded not to agree with the recommendation but this is not in writing. Staff recruitment systems are thorough and demonstrate that workers and managers are suitable to undertake their responsibilities. Appropriate checks are undertaken, staff are appropriately qualified with a good range of experience, understanding and knowledge about adoption. The agency has policies and procedures in place which address complaints and safeguarding. Staff have had

recent training in safeguarding which was relevant to their role and this will be undertaken on an annual basis. Appropriate action is taken when allegations are made and staff demonstrate a clarity about their role and responsibilities in relation to child protection.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The thorough preparation course which all adoptive parents undertake prepares them well for the task of parenting an adoptive child. This includes input from the adoption support team, who provide assurance and information about the services available post order. The competency framework, which is used in their assessment, is useful in assisting with identifying and addressing possible support needs. Adopters are linked with similar adoptive families to provide peer support, and adopters were very positive about how well this is done, to ensure the linking family is someone with whom they can relate, and a good 'match' for them. The families receive a high level of support once a child is placed. Adopters comment on the frequency of contact, both in person and by telephone and email, and feel confident they will receive appropriate help. There is clear evidence that adoptive families receive an increased level of support if they are having difficulties and extra input is provided. The agency is very committed to supporting placements and preventing disruptions. However, when these do occur, there is evidence that the agency takes them very seriously, supports the adopters and cooperates fully with any meetings. They hold their own disruption meeting in addition to cooperating with any external meeting and have recently undertaken a piece of research to see what can be learnt. This has identified some changes in practice which the agency are implementing. There is a well-established practice of the manager of the post adoption team undertaking a post adoption order visit to gain feedback about the agency, receive suggestions for improving practice and providing other services, and to identify any further needs for adoption support. This is an extremely good and useful practice. Adoptive families receive regular newsletters to keep them in touch with the agency. Adoptive children have groups which they can attend and more work is in progress to promote consultation with young people with a view to looking at further groups, a young person's newsletter and discussions about what children and young people find useful. Adopters can attend a bi-monthly support group which has a training/information focus, in addition to twice yearly social events and an annual training day. The agency also provides direct work and other individual support. The agency has a long lasting commitment to providing a service and one adopter commented: 'I have complete confidence in their ongoing support; they are there for life'. The agency has its own educational advisor who provides very useful information and support to adoptive families, including a booklet on how to choose a school. Feedback from adopters is very positive about the help which has been given in relation to the educational needs of their children and his input is clearly valued. The agency has a medical adviser who provides advice to the adoption panel in relation to the health of adopters, as well as to staff and adoptive families in the agency, in relation to the health needs of children. Legal advice is available to the agency and all advisers are said to be helpful and accessible.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Families are Best has limited involvement with birth families at the point children are placed for adoption due its status as a Voluntary Adoption Agency (VAA). However, it shows a strong recognition of the lifelong implications of adoption through its work with birth parents and families once children reach adulthood and through its work with adopted adults. It also works

with local authorities to encourage them to obtain information about a child's birth family and provide life story books for the children placed with its families, and gives clear guidance to adopters about the importance of this information for adopted children. All staff demonstrate a real awareness and sensitivity about the importance and significance of original documents and items provided by birth parents for their children, and these are stored safely with information about their whereabouts. The agency will also assist with contact arrangements, both indirect and direct, either to support the arrangements made by local authorities, or to take over responsibility for these when they have broken down. It has its own letterbox in place but this is very small and diminishing as local authorities administer their own. The agency provides a good service for birth relatives who wish to trace their adopted adult and for adopted adults who wish to see their birth records. Clear information leaflets are available which outline the services provided and these are underpinned by comprehensive policies and procedures which support the good practice. A written risk assessment which considers the welfare of all parties is undertaken before any service is offered, to ensure the welfare and safety of everyone is promoted. Counselling is undertaken very sensitively and the birth record information report is professional and provides information in a consistent manner. Intermediary and reunion services are also available where necessary.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose is comprehensive and well written and provides a good reflection of the services provided by the agency. Enquirers are encouraged to read it when they first make contact with the agency and it is available on the website. The Children's Guide provides very good information for any child using the agency; each one is personalised with the name of the child, with a photograph of the social worker and written in a child-friendly way. This gives added protection for children by providing them with other avenues of support and contact if they are unhappy. The policies and procedures which underpin the work of the agency are very detailed and comprehensive and reflect the Statement of Purpose. Any documents can be translated into appropriate formats on request. The information for enquirers is clear and well written and the website is easy to access. The agency is clear about its criteria yet gives a positive message to those enquirers to whom it cannot offer a service at present. This initial information pack is supplemented with further, well-produced information at other stages, such as panel and post approval. The agency is extremely well managed at all levels by people who demonstrate a commitment to, as well as knowledge and experience of, adoption. Everyone involved in managing the agency is appropriately qualified, experienced, knowledgeable and skilled, including financial and managerial expertise in addition to adoption and childcare experience. There are every clear expectations of professional standards of behaviour and practice, balanced with care and support for staff. Roles and responsibilities are well defined, communication is good and all managers are approachable. The arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency are extremely thorough, extensive and effective. These include service user consultation and evaluation at all stages of the process, with clear evidence that views and comments are taken into account and acted upon. The Trustees are competent, committed, involved and interested in the work of the agency. They keep themselves informed through regular meetings and reporting systems. The Chair of the Trustees is responsible for the supervision and appraisal of the Chief Executive. The agency is fully staffed with a group of

workers who demonstrate significant levels of skill, knowledge and experience of adoption work. They are well supported and encouraged to undertake this work through regular and effective supervision, appraisals, training opportunities and team meetings. New staff have a thorough induction which is tailored to their needs and makes them feel supported and welcomed. The administrative arrangements are good, efficient and well managed to provide support to the work of the agency. Social workers report that the administrative staff are 'brilliant'. Case records are well ordered, well organised and accessible. They are audited by the manager and there is clear evidence of case decisions made in supervision, on the files. The arrangements for storage and access promote confidentiality. The Catholic Children's Society is reported to be a 'fantastic' employer; caring, supportive yet professional. Staff are protected by the structures in place, such as the underpinning policies and procedures, yet there is space to be creative and do the job well. Staff feel valued, respected and listened to. The agency is 'family-friendly' and responsive to the needs of staff with caring responsibilities. By the agency caring for the staff, staff feel enabled to care for their families. Personnel files demonstrate a rigorous approach to recruitment and selection; all files include the required information, are well ordered, securely stored, with effective systems for the renewal of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks. Panel members' files are similarly well constructed. The recording of the date of birth and sex of employees and panel members is not as clear as it could be however. The premises are accessible, identifiable and appropriate for the purposes of the agency. They are secure, with appropriate insurance cover and plans for disaster recovery in place. The agency is financially viable, with sufficient reserves to operate fully for two years and for a further four and a half years to continue to support families. There are effective systems for monitoring the financial status, through regular management meetings, Trustee meetings and external auditing, to ensure that problems are highlighted and rectified at an early stage.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- have a written protocol which outlines the steps the agency decision maker will take when he/she is minded not to agree with the panel recommendation (NMS 13)
- ensure the dates of birth and sex of employees and panel members are more clearly recorded (NMS 28).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for voluntary adoption agency