

St Francis Children's Society

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC049107
Inspection date	26 November 2009
Inspector	Romana Jones / Mike Stapley
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	27 November 2006

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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

St Francis' Children's Society (SFCS) is a voluntary adoption agency. The agency undertakes all the required work in respect of the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The agency operates two specialist services to recruit and support adopters who can meet diverse needs. These are the Anancy Black Families Initiative and the Widening Horizons project. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services for both adults and children affected by adoption. Adoption support services provided include life-long support for adoptive families and adopted persons, independent support for birth relatives, birth records counselling and intermediary work.

SCFS is a registered charity, which has been operating as an adoption agency for over 60 years. The agency's roots are faith based. It was originally established in close connection with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton. It is now a separately established, not for profit, charitable organisation welcoming enquiries 'from people from all walks of life, of any and no religious faith and from all racial and cultural backgrounds'.

The agency is based in its own purpose-built office in Milton Keynes. It generally covers the geographical area within a 50-miles radius of Milton Keynes. Areas covered include Northampton, Wellingborough, Bedford, Biggleswade, Letchworth, Hitchin, Luton, Beaconsfield, Slough, High Wycombe, Aylesbury, Leighton Buzzard and Buckingham.

Summary

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key national minimum standards were inspected. The inspectors found the service is operating to an outstanding standard overall.

The agency recognises the lifelong implications of adoption. It is committed to building strong, empathetic and supportive relationships with its adoptive families and child and adult service users. Services are user-focused and tailored to meet individual needs. The agency is strongly focused on ensuring that the welfare of its service users is safeguarded and promoted.

Leadership of the agency is strong and effective. The management and administrative systems provide a strong framework for the efficient and effective operation of the agency. Managers and staff are well-qualified and skilled, with good knowledge and expertise in adoption matters. There is a strong focus on delivering and disseminating good practice.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency has taken effective measures to address the five good practice recommendations made at the previous inspection visit undertaken by the Commission for Social Care Inspection in November 2006. The agency now ensures that prospective applicants have adequate accommodation before an application is accepted. There is very good management oversight of the quality and effectiveness of preparation courses provided for prospective adopters. The health and safety checklist used in the assessment process has been amended. Panel minutes

now clearly detail the reasons for the panel's recommendations. Regular audits of case files are being undertaken to ensure that case records contain all required information.

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 clear written and well-implemented recruitment plan, which is based on the needs of children waiting for adoption. This plan is regularly evaluated to ensure that recruitment strategies are operating effectively. Since the last inspection visit in November 2006, the agency has changed its recruitment policy to an open, inclusive policy in line with current legislation. The agency now welcomes enquiries 'from people from all walks of life, of any and no religious faith and from all racial and cultural backgrounds'. Adopters confirmed that their enquiries were welcomed without prejudice and that they were treated with sensitivity, particularly at the initial point of contact, by friendly, informative and knowledgeable staff. The agency takes a sensitive approach in counselling and supporting people in making the decision about whether applying to adopt is the right course for them.

The agency is strongly child focused in its approach. It fully recognises that the child's needs are of paramount consideration in matching a child to adopters. There is a well-coordinated and proactive approach to recruiting adopters most likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for adoption. The agency operates two specialist projects to raise awareness of the needs of black and minority ethnic children and children who have additional special needs who are waiting to be adopted and to recruit and support adopters who can best meet these children's need: These are the Anancy Black Families and the Widening Horizons projects. The agency prioritises applications from prospective adopters who are interested and able to consider adopting sibling groups, older children, children who have additional special needs, or those able to offer an appropriate family to a child of black or minority ethnic heritage. The agency now ensures that prospective adopters' accommodation is adequate before a formal application is accepted. Local authority social workers report that the agency gives a good service to children who need an adoptive placement. They said, 'I was very happy working with St Francis Children's Society in matching and placing a child with one of their approved adopters', 'We have found the appropriate adoptive family for the child we were family finding for' and 'Very good communication from the social worker about the children to us (the placing local authority)'. Approved adopters who are waiting for a child to be placed with them reported that the agency is good at keeping them informed about children waiting for adoption. Adopters confirmed that they had been given information about the Adoption Register for England and Wales. They said, 'We were given information while we were waiting for a child. Our placement was a result of the local authority searching the Adoption Register' and '(this was) provided in the letter from the agency decision-maker. Applied to go on the Register straight away'.

The agency's preparation, training and assessment of prospective adopters is thorough, rigorous and generally of a very good standard. Assessments reports are well-written, cover all necessary areas and include good analysis by assessing social workers. All appropriate checks and references are carried out, which ensures that the safety of children is promoted. There is a well established practice of undertaking a review midway through the assessment process. This, along with a second opinion visit, provides additional scrutiny and quality assurance to the assessment

process. There is good management oversight of the preparation course. Adopters reported that they found the preparation course to be thorough, well planned and organised and that it helped them to gain a better understanding of all aspects of adoption. Comments from adopters about their preparation included, 'Training was very good and informative. At the end I felt I understood the background of the children and the lifetime implications of adopting a child' and 'We were given lots of information on the positives and negatives of becoming adopters'. Regarding the approval process, adopters said, 'I am only at the beginning of the process (just completed preparation groups). To date everything has been clearly explained and the agency is very supportive in approach, generating long term relationships rather than feeling "processed"', 'All has gone swiftly, started prep group in April 09, panel Nov 09. All explained thoroughly and support constantly available', 'We found the approval process nerve racking and lengthy but realise we really have to be looked at to see if we are suitable adopters, we found our social worker & other staff at St Francis very supportive' and 'We were well guided through the process. Yes, the process was long and not without delay but that was on both sides, ours and the agency's. The approval panel process was well explained by both the agency and the panel chair so no big surprises on the day. As for approval process delays, the reasons for agency delays were clearly explained to us by our social worker'.

The adoption panel is suitably constituted. A written policy and procedure about the handling of the functions of panel are in place. Applicants are invited to and made welcome at panel meetings. They feel well prepared for this. Meetings are effectively chaired and generally keep well to time. The panel is conscientious about its quality assurance function. Panel members give appropriate and rigorous scrutiny to applications and provide feedback on the quality of cases being presented to ensure that service delivery is consistent and of good quality. Panel minutes now clearly record the reasons for the recommendations made by the panel. The agency decision-maker ensures that the agency decision is taken without delay and that all information surrounding the case and the panel's recommendation are taken into account before making a considered and professional decision. Applicants are informed of the agency's decision both verbally and in writing.

After approval as suitable to adopt, prospective adopters are provided with very good support in finding children needing an adoptive placement and considering if they would be able to meet the needs of the child. Adopters who have been matched with a child, or who have a child placed with them, said that they had been given enough information about their adoptive child. One said, 'We had a full history including medicals, reviews, doctor reports and foster carer reports'. These adopters all said that they were satisfied with how the placement was made. Comments from these adopters included, 'We saw the child in the magazine 'Children Who Wait' after saying no to 4-5 children whose details had been selected for us by our social worker and from the Adoption Register' and 'The placement was well planned by us, the social worker and foster carer'. The agency holds its own internal matching meetings to consider the potential for a match and what support the prospective adopters may require to fully meet the child's needs.

The managers and staff of the agency are all appropriately qualified and experienced and demonstrate a high level of knowledge and understanding of adoption issues, legislation and current practice. Recruitment practice is robust and ensures that people working for the agency are suitable to work with children and vulnerable people.

There is a comprehensive representation and complaints policy and procedure in place. However, the system for recording the handling of informal complaints is not sufficient to ensure that any patterns or causes for concern emerging from complaints that are resolved before reaching the formal complaint stage are included in management monitoring systems. However, the agency is responsive to complaints and uses them to improve the services provided.

There is an excellent focus on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all service users across the whole service. All staff are provided with safeguarding training and training on how to respond to a complaint.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is committed to providing life-long support to its adoptive families and adults who, as children, received one of its former services. The excellent preparation of, and support provided to, adopters so that children are provided with stable and secure adoptive placements are strengths of the agency. Preparation and training for adopters, both before and after approval, is strongly focused on helping adopters understand the impact early life experiences have on future development and well-being. The agency ensures that the matching process is robust and includes consideration about any support services required so that children's needs can be suitably met. The stability of adoptive placements indicates that matching processes and support provided to adoptive families are very effective. Adopters who have a child placed with them said that they were satisfied with the support they are receiving since the child was placed. Comments from these adopters included, 'St Francis has provided full support through visits and phone calls. We have also met other adopters to share our experiences', 'Yes, from St Francis. No, from the child's social worker from another area. We have had visits, phone calls, a family therapist and contact with other adopters all arranged through St Francis' and 'The individual service is excellent and the speed of the service first class. Overall the play therapy for (the children) has been first class and it has given us strengths for building relationships in the future. The agency has also supported us and (the children) as they attend activities for adopted children, which are mainly in the school holidays and include horse riding and bowling'.

The service has access to a range of specialist advisers and services to assist in the continuing support of adoptive placements. This enables the agency to be responsive to a variety of needs, given the complex demands made on adopters. The medical adviser attends panel meetings. He also provides advice and support at the assessment and matching stages. An excellent level of legal advice and expertise is readily available from the legal adviser. The panel also have members with particular specialist backgrounds that add a further dimension to the advice available to the agency.

Service users are provided with services which are well-tailored to their particular needs and are treated fairly, openly and with respect throughout their contact with the agency. They are given clear information about the service they can expect to receive. The support is provided by experienced and knowledgeable staff who understand the effects of adoption on adopted adults and birth families. Recipients of such services are highly appreciative of the standard of support provided and the qualities of the agency staff.

The agency is commissioned by three local authorities to provide independent support services to birth relatives. These projects are very effective at engaging with these service users. The

project workers are well qualified, skilled and empathetic and provide a flexible service to meet individual needs. A social worker from one of the commissioning local authorities said, 'SFCS has provided, and continues to do so, an excellent independent birth relative service. The take-up of the service has been phenomenal, and the worker's skill at engaging with this often unhappy and "disenfranchised" user group is outstanding. She is also involved in our birth mothers' group, and our drop-in for birth relatives. Both of these are well attended, and some of the attendees have been able to develop reflective skills and self-confidence to the point that they have given a talk to (social work) students!' A comment received from another commissioning local authority is, 'St Francis Children's Society provides a service on behalf of (the local authority), a commissioned service. This is a service, which provides advice, support and counselling to birth families whose children are to be, or have been, adopted or subject of Special Guardianship Order... The service engages with service users well. They provide a safe welcoming environment where service users feel secure and 'held'. They provide a volunteer driver service to transport service users, which not only gets the service user to the venue but also provides consistent support and people who can be trusted'. All of the birth relatives service users who responded to the questionnaire survey said that the agency offered them good support and was easy to contact. They reported that the agency explained what it could do and what it could not do, answered any questions and gave reasons for any delays. All of these service users said that they had a good response when they first had contact with the agency, that they were listened to and treated with respect and that their family's racial and cultural needs were recognised and responded to. They also said that they got enough information from the agency about what was happening. One of these respondent said, '(She) explained who she was and what she did'. Other comments from these service users included, 'always very attentive', 'given a lot of support', 'helpful in arranging volunteer drivers. We appreciate the calls and support', 'I find the Birth Mothers' Group really helpful' and 'it would be much tougher if a service like this did not exist'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Service users receive compassionate, professional, high quality services based on their needs. The agency is reflective about its work and consults well with service users about service provision and service delivery.

The agency is commissioned by three local authorities to provide independent support services for birth relatives. These are the 'Open Door', 'Birthlink' and 'Birth Family Support Service' projects. A high quality, responsive and flexible service is provided to these service users, which is of great benefit to children. A social worker from one of the commissioning local authorities said, 'SFCS input has ensured that a greater understanding has been achieved for many birth parents regarding the health and emotional needs of their children. This in turn may benefit any further children born to the birth parents'. Another commissioning local authority commented, 'SFCS have provided this service for the past eight years. The service has become a valued, responsive provision. It is truly valued by service users as being totally independent, which we want it to be. However, partnership arrangements and relationships between the professionals from the two agencies are open and honest, which means that difficult and complex issues can be addressed and resolved in a professional and transparent manner. Currently we are in early discussions about commissioning a research study to evaluate the outcome of the service. This is a good example of their approach and willingness to be innovative and develop practice. (This local authority) has just extended the service for a further two years

and we are looking forward to continued and positive working relationships and the service providing relatives with a supportive, independent service that meets their needs'. Birth relative service users who responded to the questionnaire survey said that the agency told them about local and national support groups. These service users said that what they feel the agency does well is 'support - listening - taking others' feelings into consideration - always focussed on the job in hand', 'talk nicely to us and we feel able to talk to (our project worker). She understands', listens. If I need someone to talk to (the project worker) is always there'.

The agency has a strong recognition of the life long implications of adoption for all concerned. It ensures that adopters are aware of the importance of maintaining the child's heritage and are supported in helping their child to understand their situation.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose is up-to-date and reflects the agency's aims, objectives, structure and services provided. Policies and procedures, which underpin the operation and strategic direction of the service, are regularly reviewed and updated. There are children's guides in place, which with other resources, are used to inform and prepare children for adoption.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency strives hard to ensure that due care and attention are given to issues of equality and diversity throughout the whole of its operations. Services are user-focused and tailored to meet individual needs. Service users report that contact they have with the agency is non-discriminatory and that they are treated with sensitivity and respect. Staff are provided with good support and training in this area.

People who are interested in knowing more about becoming adoptive parents are given clear written information about the process and the needs of children who are requiring an adoptive family. Adopters report that information they receive from the agency is helpful and informative. Comments from adopters included, 'St Francis provided lots of information re books, St Francis documents, web sites, magazine subscriptions. At the outset I felt we had enough information to make an informed decision about the process and lifetime implications of adopting a child' and 'We have been given lots of information on becoming adopters and have regularly used St Francis library for more information'.

The agency is very efficiently and effectively managed so that it achieves excellent outcomes for children and other service users. The organisational structure has been reviewed and redeveloped since the last inspection visit. The managers of the agency are highly skilled, well qualified and experienced in adoption and childcare. Managers demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and a strong commitment to the development and dissemination of good practice. A social worker from one of the local authorities that commission services for birth relatives from the agency said 'The Director for adoption at SFCS sits as chair to (the local authority) Adoption Support Forum, and is excellent at bringing the promotion of good outcomes for adopted children and young people to the attention of the various service providers who attend... (She) is up to date with current research findings and gets involved (and involves us) in researching outcomes for adopted children. Enables us to look at gaps in the services we provide'.

Staff spoke highly of their managers and feel that there is excellent leadership of the agency. They are well supported to carry out their duties and responsibilities. They said that managers are supportive, approachable, 'take an interest in what's happening' and are available for advice and support at all times. Social workers said, 'I've phoned (my manager) in the evenings when I had introductions that have been difficult and she always makes herself available', 'I feel very clear about who I can go to for support - I feel I have support all around me' and 'As new member of the team I feel I can go to anyone for support'. Individuals' skills and experience are recognised as key resources in the agency. Staff are encouraged to develop their knowledge base, professional expertise and skills, which are utilised to the best advantage of service users. Staff are very happy in their employment and feel supported to do their jobs well, so are well-motivated and committed to the organisation and its purpose.

There are sufficient staff to undertake the range of duties the service has to manage. The arrangements for team management are effectively organised. Social workers said, 'Admin support is absolutely fantastic - support is generally very accessible and excellent... They get on with it and do it - nothing's too much trouble for them but they are working very hard'. The agency is currently reviewing its level of administrative support to ensure that it is sufficient to meet its needs.

Social workers are suitably qualified and experienced and knowledgeable about adoption and the needs of people affected by adoption. There is a very good commitment to staff training and development, including access to, and support for, higher level professional qualifications.

The monitoring of the agency is undertaken in a robust way. The agency feeds the comments and views of people using the service into service development. The work of the agency is well-supported by the Trustees who show a high level of interest in and commitment to providing a high quality service. The Trustees keep themselves informed via a variety of means, including Trustees meetings, sub-committees and written reports about the work of the agency. There is close, open and effective dialogue between senior managers and between senior managers and the chair of the Council of Trustees. The chair of the Council of Trustees is also a member of the adoption panel, which helps to keep him well-informed about the agency's work.

The case records on prospective adopters, approved adopters and people receiving adoption support are well maintained and include all required information. Case files are well presented, suitably indexed and provide a clear and accurate overview. They are audited on a regular basis by the service manager. Other administrative records are maintained to a very high standard. This includes personnel records on all staff, whether employed or contracted, and panel members.

The agency operates from its own well-designed, purpose-built offices. The premises are safe, suitable, accessible, well maintained and well equipped. The premises are secure. There is a suitable disaster recovery plan in place.

The arrangements for financial viability are subject to close internal and external scrutiny and monitoring. The financial management and administration, as in all other administrative systems in the agency, are very well controlled by experienced personnel.

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):

- ensure that complaints that are resolved before they reach the formal complaint stage are included in the central complaints record so that emerging patterns, or causes for concern, arising from these can be monitored as part of the quality assurance system. (NMS24)