

Clifton Children's Society

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

Unique reference number	SC048462
Inspection date	22 June 2010
Inspector	Heather Chaplin
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	Clifton Children's Society 162 Pennywell Road BRISTOL BS5 0TX
Telephone number	0845 122 0077
Email	
Registered person	Clifton Children's Society
Registered manager	Jadwiga Sabina Ball
Responsible individual	Jadwiga Sabina Ball
Date of last inspection	21 August 2007

© Crown copyright 2010

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Cripins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

CCS Adoption is a voluntary, independent adoption agency operated by Clifton Children's Society. The agency is guided by the values of the Roman Catholic church, and seeks to promote the relief of poverty and welfare of children in need from all backgrounds and cultures. The agency works with people of all faiths or none, and covers a defined geographical area in the south west of England. The agency's offices are located just outside the city centre of Bristol, in accessible premises.

The agency undertakes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of people wishing to adopt children from this country. It does not undertake recruitment in respect of inter-country adoption. The agency focuses on recruiting adopters who can offer a permanent home to children for whom finding a placement will be difficult. This would include, for instance, large sibling groups, older children and children with a disability. Bath and North East Somerset has a service level agreement with this agency to provide non-agency adoption and step-parent adoption assessments.

The agency also undertakes adoption support, which includes supporting children and families throughout the adoptive process and beyond, working with birth families and undertaking tracing and intermediary work for adults affected by adoption.

The Director is the Registered Manager and also the Responsible Individual. She reports to a board of trustees. There is a staff team of six social workers and a voluntary intermediary worker, supported by an office manager and team of administration staff.

Summary

This was a very positive announced key inspection, which involved interviews with four adoptive families and one adult service user who is affected by adoption. Three out of the four outcome areas were inspected. The fourth was not inspected, because the agency does not have any statutory duties to work with birth family members. All are rated outstanding.

The service excels in the quality of practical and emotional support to prospective and approved adoptive families. The staff team is exceptionally skilled and experienced. A strong team approach, joint working and a tradition of peer supervision ensure high standards of professional practice. The administrative support is excellent, and the agency is effectively managed at all levels.

One adopter said: 'CCS staff are highly trained, competent, friendly and encouraging while maintaining professionalism with everyone they engage with. CCS is a fantastic agency'. This view was echoed by many other questionnaire responses.

Some minor areas for possible development were discussed in the feedback meeting with the Registered Manager, two trustees and the independent panel chair. One recommendation has been made, which is repeated from the last inspection.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Three recommendations were made at the last inspection. The first related to the conduct of panel meetings. The panel chair structures meetings effectively and groups questions to ensure that one issue is dealt with at a time.

The Statement of Purpose required amendment and this has now been completed. The third recommendation, in relation to staff and panel members' files, has been repeated.

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 operates according to an inclusive, anti-discriminatory recruitment policy and actively recruits prospective adopters who can meet the needs of difficult-to-place children. For example, the agency is in the process of recruiting same sex couples and single people. The service enjoys a strong reputation for success in placing sibling groups, children with disabilities and older children.

One couple said: 'CCS provided us with the contact details of a couple who were similar ethnic origin to ourselves, who had adopted two children. Making contact with them and subsequently meeting their family has been inspiring and reassuring'.

The preparation and assessment process is rigorous and comprehensive. There is whole team, as well as formal supervisory input, into decisions about applicants' suitability. Adopters said that the process was challenging at times, but informative and enjoyable. They have the opportunity to meet approved adopters. Although birth family members do not participate in the preparation programme, applicants can borrow videos and DVDs of birth family members talking about their experiences. Adopters said:

'There were no delays in the approval process and although we took a year, this was exactly the right pace for us and gave us plenty of time to digest the enormous amount of information...I can't fault the approval process'.

'We found CCS to be fantastic....they have not sought to gloss things over, and have helped us in our understanding of what the children would really need. CCS are enthused, clearly very upbeat and professional.'

The agency counsels out applicants that it does not consider are ready to progress to panel. Assessment reports are of high quality and provide detailed analysis of prospective adopters' strengths and vulnerabilities.

Adopters interviewed confirm that they receive very good quality information from the agency children with whom they may be matched. Information from placing authorities is variable, but the agency is dedicated in pursuing this. They would advise prospective adopters not to proceed if there is insufficient information. An adopter said: 'We were given some comprehensive reports on our children and we met the foster mother, who answered all our questions'.

Prospective adopters are informed about the Adoption Register for England and Wales. They are encouraged to provide good quality information about themselves and their family. Pet questionnaires and risk assessments are detailed and informative, to help ensure children's safety.

The agency has excellent procedures for managing the panel process. The panel chair confirmed that there is a strategy for responding to unforeseen developments during the meetings. The panel is presented with progress reports on previous cases under consideration, and there is a system for feeding back information about the quality of reports.

Prospective adopters are able to attend panel and express their views. The panel tries hard to make the occasion as relaxed as possible. There are suitable meeting facilities, including a waiting area.

The adoption panel is properly constituted and includes people from a wide range of backgrounds and skills. There is a good gender balance and some minority ethnic representation. The panel has an excellent medical advisor, who is a community paediatrician. Her skills are a great asset to the service.

New members receive an effective induction, and regular annual training takes place. The latest joint training day included equal opportunities, family assessment and a legal update.

The panel meeting is effectively run. Questions are grouped together to avoid switching between different subject areas. The panel is well supported by excellent administration, and the papers are sent out one week before each meeting. Minutes are clear and informative.

The agency decision maker sits in on the panel meeting as an observer. She is able to make her decision immediately after the meeting. This is conveyed verbally to the prospective adopters, followed by confirmation in writing.

The manager of the agency is a very knowledgeable professional, who is most suitable to operate an adoption agency. The social work staff meet all requirements in terms of qualifications and skills. Social workers do not yet hold the child care award. However, their extensive experience is such that in practice, this is unlikely to contribute significantly to the excellent service they provide.

The agency follows a good standard of recruitment practice and renews Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks every three years. All references are verified by telephone.

There is an excellent complaints procedure. The agency receives very few complaints. In one example, an independent complaints investigator was brought in at an early stage, which was good practice.

One complainant said: 'All round I have received an excellent service – above and beyond the call of duty'.

All service users are very well protected from exploitation or abuse. Support for adults affected by adoption is provided by suitably qualified staff. Cases are now allocated to two workers, to avoid any potential conflicts of interest. There is an effective safeguarding policy, which

specifically addresses the issue of historical abuse. Any child protection referrals are well recorded and passed on swiftly to the appropriate agency.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency excels at providing sensitive, thoughtful support to families and individuals. There are no separate adoption support social workers in this small team, and the assessing social worker continues to provide support after adoption.

One adopter commented: 'The agency is incredibly supportive and go way above and beyond with the service you would expect. The fact that they continue to support you for how ever long you need them, is brilliant'.

There is a wide range of activities and social events available, including an annual picnic and a children's party. These enable adopted children and families to meet and enjoy themselves in informal surroundings.

The service has access to specialist advisors. For example, a clinical psychologist runs monthly parenting support sessions, jointly with a member of the adoption team. Adopters were full of praise for this service. There are very few disrupted placements, and some adopters who did have this traumatic experience, praised the agency for its support. One adopter said: 'We have had non-stop fantastic support from CCS throughout the difficult time of introduction, the placement and final departure. There is no doubt that for our social worker, this is a vocation and not just a job'.

Adopters also have access to very good quality training. Recently approved adopters are put in touch with existing adopters, so that they can develop networks of support locally. Everyone who responded to questionnaires said how helpful this had been.

One person said: 'Existing adopters have been an invaluable form of information and support during preparation, at placement and ongoing. This has been one of the most useful initiatives.'

Adults affected by adoption are effusive about the high standard of support available. Staff who undertake intermediary and tracing work are very skilled and experienced. There are approximately two referrals per month and most of the work is allocated to a qualified volunteer counsellor. All services provided are effectively tailored to people's needs.

Allocation is managed sensitively, so that anyone with an urgent need, such as a very elderly person or someone with a medical issue, has a priority service. The agency is working towards providing two workers to manage post adoption support and tracing work. This will avoid any conflict of interest between parties.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is not judged.

This outcome area is not judged because the agency does not have a statutory duty to work with birth family members.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The managers, trustees and staff were united in wishing to provide a service to gay and lesbian couples. The trustees and managers negotiated successfully with the Roman Catholic Diocese. The agency was re-named and entered a new phase in its development. This was a brave decision, because there are funding implications for the service. Two same-sex couples are in the process of making applications, which is very positive.

The agency has shown good support to social workers from minority ethnic backgrounds by providing consultancy in relation to training needs. Disabled members of staff have also been very well supported.

The Statement of Purpose is of very good quality. It is available in different languages and covers all the information required. There is a children's guide available in suitable formats to meet children's varying needs.

The recruitment policy for adopters is clear that all will be welcomed without prejudice. The agency is honest with any prospective families which are unlikely to be able to meet the needs of children requiring placement. The quality of information provided to service users is excellent.

One adopter said: 'At every step of the way, CCS has given us substantial information about every aspect of adoption'.

The agency is operated effectively and transparently. A new management structure is being introduced. This will address the possible conflict of interest relating to roles of team manager and agency advisor being shared by the same person. A new manager is soon to join the team.

Quality assurance is achieved through strong and supportive leadership, monitoring of records, effective supervision and peer review. The agency is very supported by a dedicated group of six trustees, two of whom took part in the inspection. Trustees meet quarterly and are kept very well informed of progress.

There are insufficient funds for extensive external training, but social workers have access to a number of good courses in the area. The agency is a member of the South West Adoption Consortium, which provides training for member bodies. There is also an external consultant who visits the team to advise on individual cases.

The clerical staff support the team extremely well. There are two staff and an office manager, who is also the panel administrator. They receive phone calls from the public and liaise with the duty social worker. Their input is highly valued by everyone.

The agency has access to specialist advisors in medicine, psychology and adoption law. All are used very effectively.

There are sufficient staff to meet service users' and prospective adopters' needs. The Director has a very wide remit, but this has been addressed with the new management appointment. Everyone spoken with agreed that the agency is a fair and competent employer.

Case recording is of a high standard. All reports and records seen gave a clear picture of the family and what they could or might not be able to offer. Complaints recording is clear and concise.

There is an excellent archive in the building, with fire-proof cabinets and some protection from flood. The archive is made available to families who wish to place treasured items for safekeeping there. Historical files recently returned to a religious order, were in such good condition that the agency was commended for the quality of their care.

Separate records are kept of complaints, allegations and other matters that require management monitoring. Staff records are generally of a high standard. Files are well maintained and sub-divided so that papers can be easily found. There is evidence of good recruitment processes. However, some of the files did not contain a full employment history, because this was recorded in years rather than months. Copies of identity information have not been retained on file. The agency must have seen identity information in order to apply for CRB certificates. These were all available for inspection.

The agency has excellent premises which are suitable for the purpose. The computer systems are ageing, but serviceable. Funds have not so far been available to replace these, but the manager and trustees are aware of the need to keep this in mind.

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
----------	--------	----------

Recommendations

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

- retain all evidence of statutory recruitment checks on panel members and staff, including identity checks and full employment history. (NMS 28)