

Faith in Families

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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Date of last inspection	18/09/2008

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Faith in Families, formerly the Catholic Children's Society, Nottingham, known as Families are Best, is a voluntary adoption agency founded in 1948 which operates from premises in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire. It has recently established an office base in Sheffield, from which one senior practitioner operates.

It is registered to provide services in relation to domestic adoption and adoption support, 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

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This agency provides an outstanding service to children, families and adoption support service users in all outcome areas. Despite undergoing significant changes since the last inspection, the extremely high standards have been maintained and further developed. Children's safety and well-being are at the heart of all the agency does. Adopters are extremely well prepared for the task of adoptive parenting through a very thorough and integrated programme of preparation and assessment. The agency is rigorous in this process to ensure children are kept safe. Significant attention is given to matching to ensure children are placed with adopters who can meet all their needs and help them develop, enjoy and achieve.

Social workers work well in partnership with local authorities and are very effective in ensuring children and adopters have all the information they require, such as life story books and later life letters. A wide range of effective support ensures that children remain with their adoptive parents in stable and loving families.

The agency is extremely well managed at all levels, both strategically and operationally. All staff are committed, very skilled, knowledgeable and child focused in all they do. There are excellent systems to ensure effective governance, monitoring and evaluation, and these contribute to the outstanding level of service which children, adult service users and adopters receive. The agency is forward thinking and continually looking at ways to develop and improve their services. To quote a stakeholder: 'It has been a pleasure working with this agency. I feel that their workers are very professional, and strive to work together in meeting or addressing any issues that have been identified. I hope this agency continues to offer the excellent service they offered us.' An adopter commented: 'The agency provides a fantastic service, and having dealt with them for the last couple of years,

it is obvious why it is so highly rated and respected.'

No requirements or recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two recommendations to improve practice were made at the previous inspection. These were to develop a written protocol outlining the steps the agency decision maker will take when minded not to agree with the panel recommendation, and to improve recording of dates of birth and sex of employees and panel members. Both of these have been met and add further clarity and transparency to the decision-making process and accuracy of information stored.

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 places a high premium on ensuring children are placed with adoptive families who will keep them safe. A significant part of this is achieved through the adopter preparation group, with sessions on managing behaviour, caring for abused children and child development. All of these ensure applicants consider the issues very thoroughly, including what are appropriate risks for children to take, dependent on their age and developmental level. The agency has run a very useful workshop for adopters on social networking and contact, supported by very effective written guidance including a booklet for adopters and a similar, child-friendly version for young people, which they helped develop.

The agency also ensures that children's health is promoted and they are able to access all the appropriate services. The agency obtains full health information for any child placed with adoptive families, and ensures adopters, together with their social worker, see the relevant medical adviser before placement to understand any medical implications. It then ensures these needs are addressed in the support plan. As part of their assessment adopters complete a competency folder which contains evidence that they understand issues about healthy living. The agency has access to a clinical psychologist for consultation, in addition to their own medical adviser, who is also available to talk to adopters about the implications of any medical issues. This also ensures adopters are given appropriate advice about how to access relevant services.

Children are very well matched with adopters who can meet their needs, and benefit from very stable placements. To quote from an independent reviewing officer's report: 'The placement is meeting the child's needs in full and to a high standard.'

The agency has an extremely robust and thorough approach to ensuring the adopters have full information about any child they are considering. Social workers are proactive in seeking out missing information, and spend a lot of time talking with families about what needs and challenges they can realistically cope with. They play a full and active part in matching meetings and planning introductions, and set a high standard for co-working with local authorities through their expectations letter, which is based on good practice and learning from research. They have used their learning from a recent disruption to emphasise the importance of life appreciation days as an effective way of ensuring adopters appreciate the implications of parenting a child, and will chair these on behalf of local authorities on request. Adopters are fully supported by their social worker, who is in turn supported by their manager, in ensuring the match is appropriate. To quote an adopter: 'All the way through the adoption process it has been about finding the right families for the children, so the staff at the agency make every effort to keep you informed and listen to what you say; this way they get to know you and so can help in making the correct choices.'

Children are provided with a family book to help them know more about the proposed family once a match is proposed. To make this more effective, the agency has trialled a DVD of a walk around the proposed adoptive home, with appropriate background music, showing all the rooms, the adopters engaged in normal household activities, and pets running around, to really bring it alive and be more meaningful to a child.

Any allegations are dealt with appropriately, so children are protected and others are supported. The policy and procedure are thorough and clear to give excellent guidance to staff on how to handle any allegations. Staff have appropriate training on an annual basis to ensure they are up to date with current procedures, and the electronic link to the procedures is on everyone's desktop for easy access. Adopters are made aware of the agency's duty to deal with any child protection allegations and following their approval as adoptive parents, are sent a very clear letter outlining how such instances will be dealt with. They are also given very clear information about the agency's expectations of managing behaviour, as well as appropriate advice and guidance. This promotes transparency and clarity about expectations and everyone's responsibilities.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and their adoptive parents receive an excellent level of support from this agency to enable children to enjoy and achieve. The very thorough preparation of applicants provides a solid foundation for this. A comprehensive module addresses behaviour management, understanding the reasons for particular behaviour and positive approaches to deal with this. This is supported by excellent written information and guidance about positive behaviour, rewards and self-esteem, and formalised in a post-approval letter which outlines very clearly the agency's expectations of acceptable discipline. This enables children to enjoy good

relationships with their parents and others, based on positive behaviour management techniques. The agency also runs a supporters' group to inform those people in the adopters' support network about the needs of adopted children so they can understand the issues and provide more effective support. In addition, adopters are linked with other approved adopters in similar situations, so they can learn and support each other as peers.

As part of the preparation, adopters prepare a competency portfolio, which encourages them to look at the practicalities of parenting, for example, sourcing local leisure facilities and thinking about the sorts of activities children may be interested in. It is very clear from talking to adoptive families, that their children are engaged in all the sorts of usual activities which children enjoy, such as swimming, music and sports. The children's group, which runs every school holiday, provides excellent opportunities for adopted children to meet together with children in similar situations and engage in a wide variety of leisure activities and trips. To quote a young person: 'Faith in Families has always given me lots of fun things to do, to support children after they have been adopted.'

Children are supported to achieve their educational potential. The agency has a very experienced and knowledgeable educational adviser, a former headteacher who has also worked with looked after children. His input is invaluable; he provides information during the preparation course, adopters are given a booklet which contains useful information about choosing a school, and he is available for consultation and advice at very short notice. He will also provide direct support, for example at appeals or school meetings, although the preferred approach is to arm adopters with the knowledge and tools to deal with situations themselves. One adopter, who had experienced some difficulties in relation to school commented: 'I don't know how we would have got through without the support of the agency.' The agency has also been involved in offering workshops on supporting adopted and vulnerable children in school and is looking to develop this further.

Children live in homes which are safe and appropriately spacious. This forms part of the adopter assessment and includes a very comprehensive health and safety assessment and lots of written guidance on how to maintain safety in all aspects including hanging cords, safe gardens, caravans, and car safety.

Support to adopters is life long; adopters know this and have complete faith in the agency to deliver this. Post adoption support is formalised through the post adoption order visits. This affords adopters with an excellent opportunity to look at the adoption support plan to ensure it remains relevant, for the social worker to check on any outstanding work and to emphasise the support which is there for families. Adopters are given a very comprehensive pack of information which includes issues such as welfare rights. It is also an opportunity for adopters to give feedback to the agency on how they have viewed the service they have received. Comments from adopters include: 'The agency has provided a professional service at all times, and has been extremely supportive, particularly with post adoption services. I cannot speak highly enough of the caring attitude of their staff, and would have no hesitation in using their services again', and, 'social gatherings and the training

sessions are excellent!' As well as direct work with families, social events, workshops and a children's group, the agency is involved in a pilot group for male adopters. This is particularly innovative and gives male adoptive parents the opportunity to share their experiences and look at issues particularly relevant to them.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is very child focused in all it does; it seeks and acts upon children's views wherever this is possible and appropriate. For example, during an assessment of a potential adoptive family, social workers are very clear that any birth or adopted child of the family must be fully involved; they ensure they speak privately to them and assess the impact of a further child in the family, so it is not detrimental to their well-being. Once children are in placement, social workers elicit their views during visits to the household and ensure they are able to contribute to the statutory review, using the agency's own form if the local authority does not have one.

Adopted children's views are sought and acted upon following activities and groups. They are asked to complete child-friendly feedback forms and the agency evaluates and acts on the suggestions. For example, it widened the range of activities for the children's group. Workers use a range of tools to communicate effectively with children, for example when undertaking direct therapeutic work. The website is being developed to provide a separate area for children so they can post their comments and find out what is happening.

Adopters are extremely well prepared to understand and parent adoptive children. They understand the importance of maintaining a child's heritage, contact, and the effects of loss. They are given strategies to use to be proactive parents, communicate with children and develop a child's emotional resilience and self-esteem. An appropriately qualified worker in the agency undertakes direct therapeutic work with children and staff can also access consultation with a clinical psychologist as a further tool to guide and inform their practice.

There are examples of outstanding practice which highlight the importance the agency places on work with birth families, heritage and contact. Adopters demonstrate exceptional empathy and sensitivity when meeting with birth parents. They also demonstrate openness and honesty when talking with their children about the reasons for their placement with them. This enables children to understand their past and move forward. Contact arrangements, including direct contact, are supported. A stakeholder commented: 'Faith in Families is supporting a family with court-ordered direct contact with birth family. I believe that this has been possible due to their support, advice and guidance.' The agency has taken a proactive stance in addressing the dangers of social networking and produced excellent guidance for adopters and children, in addition to a workshop.

Another real strength of the agency is the proactive approach it takes in ensuring children have information about themselves and their birth family. Social workers

pursue this with vigour, one adopter describing their social worker as 'a terrier' in relation to this. There is a very clear and robust process for chasing up later life letters and life story work if local authorities have been slow to pass this on. Social workers will also undertake this on behalf of local authorities and have produced excellent examples of such work. A stakeholder commented: 'The adoption social worker was able to offer some life story work for the child in placement. This helped the child to feel more settled and to understand why they were placed for adoption.'

The work the agency undertakes with adopted adults and their birth relatives is carried out to an extremely high standard, ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone concerned. This is underpinned by very clear and well thought out policies and procedures which recognise the vulnerability of all parties. Good written information is available for anyone seeking to use the service, so they know what to expect. If there is any delay, they are kept informed and an explanation given as to the reason. A service user commented: 'I am more than happy with the service. The workers are professional at all times, they communicate wonderfully and emails and letters are always sent and received promptly.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The adoption agency has a very clear aim to provide secure and sustainable adoptive placements for looked after children, and it demonstrates that it achieves this aim very effectively and to a very high standard. It has a very focused recruitment strategy, regularly monitored and reviewed, which recognises the value of diversity; to this end it has been proactive in targeting a variety of groups and networks to raise awareness and ensure the message that anyone is welcome to approach the agency is heard. Very clear policy and procedural guidance ensures assessments of applicants are undertaken consistently and thoroughly. The integrated preparation and assessment of applicants is a very rigorous process, underpinned by robust quality assurance mechanisms. This ensures that only those applicants who can demonstrate competence, sensitivity and skills to parent adoptive children are presented to the adoption panel for consideration of their approval. An adopter commented: 'The preparation has been extensive and thorough; at all times we were reminded that adoption is not an easy option, but it is rewarding. The way the training sessions were presented was well thought out, and all the way through it ensured you were doing what you wanted to do, what was right for you and any child placed with you.'

The adoption panel adds further rigour to the process. It is efficiently administered, and information is sent to panel members well in advance of the meeting to enable

them to give it their full consideration. Panel members have a wide range of personal and professional experience of adoption and a mix of cultural backgrounds so they are able to consider all the issues, including those relating to diversity, very thoroughly and from an informed background. They also provide a very important monitoring role, giving feedback to the agency on a regular basis to enable practice to be improved. Decision making is timely, professional and well considered, with the interests of children at its heart.

Very clear written information, including the Statement of Purpose, children's guide and information packs, ensures that anyone working for or using the service knows what to expect. The children's guide is particularly good; it is personalised, child focused, appropriately written and very clear. All documents, which are of a very good quality, include a diverse range of images to ensure service users are aware of the inclusive nature of the agency. They also include input from service users themselves, for example, a poem written by an adopted child and personal experiences of adopted families. This promotes the voice of the service user and gives a clear message about how importantly the agency views them.

The agency is managed and staffed by people who are extremely knowledgeable, skilled, experienced and appropriately qualified for the roles they perform. The manager, for example, has extensive experience in local authority childcare and adoption work. Recruitment practices, for staff and members of the central list, are rigorous to ensure that unsuitable people are prevented from having the opportunity to harm children and service users. Any new recruit has a full induction and access to an extremely good quality training programme. All staff are appropriately qualified and the majority have a post qualification award. Their competence is demonstrated throughout the work they do and recognised by the people with whom they work. For example, a stakeholder commented: 'I have been extremely impressed by the skills and knowledge of the support worker I have been working with. I am fully confident that the input and advice to the prospective adopters ensure that the child's care is first rate.' Another stakeholder said: 'As a local authority adoption social worker I work with many agencies. I would place this agency among the most professional I have worked with. The social worker's knowledge and skills have helped to ensure that the family have received the best service possible from the placing agency.' A service user said: 'Every person I have been in contact with at Faith in Families has always had the knowledge to answer any questions I may have; they also have good communication skills and are professional when dealing with sensitive issues.'

All staff are fully supported to ensure they continue to provide a high quality service to children and service users. They receive regular supervision of a good quality, and an annual appraisal which highlights their training needs, to ensure they keep up to date with current practice. Staff feel that the agency enables and empowers them. Their views are listened to and if they want to develop services, undertake research and be innovative they are allowed to do so, if they can support their arguments with a well thought out business case.

The agency is managed extremely effectively at all levels. The trustees are

exceptionally well skilled, qualified and committed, and offer a range of relevant expertise to provide challenging yet supportive governance to the agency. They meet on a regular basis and have full reports on the work of the agency in addition to verbal reports from senior managers. Staff have direct access to the board through their stakeholder group, which is a very good additional safeguard. The leadership team is very effective; their roles and responsibilities are clear. The reorganisation of the management tier has enabled the leadership team to be more strategic and given senior practitioners wider responsibilities to develop their skills and expertise in some aspects of management. There are excellent mechanisms for quality assurance and monitoring the work of the agency to ensure high standards are maintained. There are also excellent and effective systems, such as team and agency days, for ensuring that staff have a significant input into how the agency develops and moves forward.

The agency is financially viable to ensure it can continue to provide a consistent service to the families and children. It has significant reserves and the financial governance is very robust, ensuring any issues are highlighted promptly and a strategy to deal with them is put in place. There is a clear business plan which demonstrates a forward-thinking approach to the future operation of the agency.

The premises are accessible, secure and appropriate for the work the agency undertakes. Administrative systems are robust and records are stored with appropriate security, including off-site storage which is risk assessed on an annual basis. A business continuity plan addresses the relevant issues so that the agency can continue to offer a service in the event of a disaster. Although there have been no notifications to Ofsted, the agency is fully aware of its responsibilities to notify Ofsted and other agencies of certain significant events.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. These issues are promoted throughout the agency on many levels. The premises are accessible, and images on the walls are diverse and child focused, as is the literature. The agency is proactive in targeting diverse groups to raise awareness of adoption, for example, minority ethnic and gay and lesbian communities. All staff demonstrate a great sensitivity to, and awareness of, the importance of difference, for example in how they manage the preparation and assessment of applicants whose first language is not English. Children's needs are assessed and met on an individual basis.