

# St Francis Children's Society

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Dancer
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	Domestic adoption

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<b>Setting address</b>	St. Francis Children's Society, Collis House, 48 Newport Road, Woolstone, MILTON KEYNES, MK15 0AA
<b>Telephone number</b>	01908 572700
<b>Email</b>	enquiries@sfcs.org.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	St. Francis Children's Society
<b>Registered manager</b>	Veronica Beatrice Lloyd
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Alison Miller
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	26/11/2009

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

St Francis' Children's Society (SFCS) is a voluntary adoption agency. It operates under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and Part 2 of the Care Standards Act 2000.

SFCS is a registered charity, which has been operating as an adoption agency for over 60 years. Originally the agency was faith based, 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 undertakes all the required work in respect of the recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of domestic adopters. The agency also undertakes a range of life long adoption support services for both children and adults affected by adoption.

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.

The agency has seen an increase in applications from people wanting to adopt. During the period 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011, 11 families made an application to adopt; during the same period 2011 to 2012, 32 families made applications. The number of adoption support packages provided to families during the 2011 to 2012 period were 49.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

This is an agency that achieves outstanding outcomes for children and adults through the delivery of very effective services that ensure that their safety and well-being is fully promoted.

The agency is proactive at recruiting prospective adopters likely to be able to meet the needs of children waiting for a placement nationally and it now takes a more inclusive and targeted approach to accepting applications.

Prospective adopters are extremely well prepared and their preparation supports the development of their understanding about the, often complex, needs children coming through the system have. The assessments of prospective adopters are overall of an excellent quality and the approval processes are robust. This ensures that only those likely to be able to parent a child with complex and diverse needs are approved to adopt.

While this agency does not have responsibility for the children placed with their adopters it is firmly child focused and carries out exceptionally high quality support work with children and families. This work begins at the point a family has been identified for a child; the support for the matching and placement processes is of an exceptionally high standard. The agency is fully committed to supporting people affected by adoption throughout their lives and provides an excellent service to adults affected, in any way, by adoption.

The agency routinely seeks the views of people using its service and these feed into the development of services. However, children's views are not sought in a systematic way. Children were, however, clear about how their verbal suggestions had influenced some areas of service delivery.

The leadership and management of the agency are impressive. This is despite a number of significant changes within the agency and nationally. The leadership and management have a very good understanding about the needs of the agency in light of these changes. They have developed ambitious plans to ensure the agency continues to provide a valuable contribution to adoption. Inter-agency working is of a high quality and this includes various collaborations with other voluntary adoption agencies to develop practice in light of the direction of travel for adoption the Government is promoting.

While the board of trustees closely monitor the work of the agency the panel does not formally provide its views about the quality of the work it scrutinises to the trustees. Additionally, while safeguarding practice is of an excellent quality, Ofsted had not been notified of a safeguarding referral the agency made to the local authority. Neither of these shortfalls have had a direct or indirect impact on children or adults using its services.

## **Areas for improvement**

## Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
19 (2003No367)	ensure that any of the events listed in column 1 of Schedule 4 are notified to Ofsted. (Regulation 19 (1))	14/09/2012

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that a formal system is developed that clearly shows that children's wishes, feelings and views have been taken into account by the agency in monitoring and developing its service (NMS 1.6)
- ensure the board of trustees receive written reports, on a 6 monthly basis, that include the quality assurance feedback from the adoption panel. (NMS 25.6 (b))

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

Children make exceptional progress, over time, while living with their adoptive families. They have a very good start to their adoptive placement and they settle very well; skilful and individualised support from the agency is instrumental in achieving this. Children develop positive relationships with those around them and children, who have the ability to, form secure attachments to their adopters. These feelings of security form the basis for children to achieve well in all areas of their lives. Children with needs arising from difference, such as ethnicity or disability, have these needs met to a high standard by the adopters, with support from the agency if this is required.

Children feel safe and are safe and enjoy living within their families. They develop, in most areas of their lives, extremely well despite their past experiences. They interact positively with others and this shows that they are developing appropriate social skills; these are vital for them to grow and develop into useful members of society. Children also develop very positive relationships with children already living in the family. The agency supports this through the skilled preparation of these children. This provides adoptive children with the opportunity to fully integrate into an already established family. An adopter said, 'our birth daughter has been involved from the start...the agency did lots of work with her.' Sibling groups placed have been able to develop stronger and more appropriate relationships with each other due to, for

example, structured Theraplay based work carried out by the agency with adoptive parents.

Children's behaviour improves as it is managed well by adoptive parents, with support and guidance from the agency. Parents are adept at adapting their parenting styles to meet the needs of their child. One adopter said she has received, 'great advice about behaviour management...we are still using it and it works.'

For some children their health has improved significantly since being placed with their adoptive families because they are supported to access relevant services to support and sustain improvement. For example, access to speech therapy has meant that children's communication skills have improved and this has impacted positively on many areas of their lives. Likewise individualised therapeutic support has had an extremely positive effect on children and their family life and has stabilised placements that were at risk of disruption. Routine registration and appointments with health providers, such as GPs and dentists, ensures that any health problems are identified and addressed promptly. Young people learn about promoting their sexual health through their adopters who have had support from the agency via training in these issues.

Children and young people achieve very well in their education, in line with their potential. Adopters and the agency have realistic expectations of children and young people and this means that children have progressed, at their pace. This also means as their confidence in their abilities has increased they become more inquisitive and try new and interesting activities and pastimes; this helps them develop in all areas of their lives.

Children maintain a sense of identity and heritage through contact arrangements with their birth families. Adopters fully understand the benefits and risks of their children having contact with their birth family. This means that children maintain a link, in a safe way, to those who have been significant in their lives and it paves the way for a reunion in the future should a child or young adult wish for this.

Feedback to the agency from children about their experience of the agency included a very positive comment from a child who wrote, 'you made it easier for the whole family....it's much better having an adoptive mum than a step-mum.'

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

As a voluntary adoption agency this agency does not have direct responsibility for the children placed. However, the agency has a significant input into ensuring that children's assessed needs are met. Work supporting children with the development of their social, physical and psychological development is of a very high standard. The agency has a very good history of low disruption rates and this is a good indication that quality of the support services provided is excellent. It also is an indication that prospective adopters' preparation and assessment is consistently of a

high standard and that this means they are well placed to parent children who often come to them with very complex needs.

The vast majority of applicants and adopters feel valued and welcomed by the agency and have gone on to develop a long and lasting connection to the agency. Their interest in adoption is valued and a comprehensive range of information, support and advice is provided to them to help them make a decision about if adoption is right for them. Prospective adopters comments about the information provided include, 'it's really useful', 'informative' and 'we still use it as reference material.'

The preparation process is very sensitive to people's needs and learning styles to ensure that they get the most from this important stage of the process. Preparation is exceptionally well thought out and delivered. Its content is based on current thinking; the agency adapts the sessions, over time, in line with developments in adoption and the views of adopters. The training after preparation is especially useful for prospective adopters and is timed so that they have the best chance of absorbing and fully understanding the information. Prospective adopters understand the needs of children from the care system. They are very well prepared for parenting a child who has complex needs and for the life changing experience adoption brings. Adopters' comments about their experience of the preparation include, 'it was enlightening' and 'everyone's needs are taken into account, they listened to what we said and that gave us confidence.' and 'we were supported well with thinking about backgrounds and the vulnerability of birth parents and it gave a fair picture of the needs of children.'

The assessments of prospective adopters are based firmly on identifying each applicant's ability to meet the likely needs of children waiting for adoption; they are generally of a very high quality and analytical and they clearly identify the strengths and the areas for development; this information feeds into the matching process and planning for support. Adopters' comments about the assessment process included, 'there were clear expectations regarding home studies' and 'it was intrusive but we understood why it had to be.' Timescales for assessments have improved significantly over the past 12 months so that recommendations about applicants' suitability are now being made in a timely way; for some far quicker than the expected eight months.

This agency's panel makes a recommendation about applicants' suitability to adopt a child. The panel does this in a robust way; this ensures that only those people suitable to adopt are recommended for approval.

The agency is very proactive in the family finding. Skilful work is carried out to help prospective adopters consider if they are likely to be able to meet the needs of a child being considered. This also includes support to them to consider children who have needs they may not have previously thought they could cater for. In some cases the agency has worked tirelessly to ensure that prospective adopters get all information about a child they are considering. Adopters comments include, 'We were very well supported in looking at children and thinking about if we could meet

their needs.' and 'The social worker was really really on the ball...she found everything out about him by chasing the local authority.' Another said, 'Our social worker really knows us well; she helped us think about children we may not have considered and provided us with sound advice about what the pitfalls might be in each case.' The excellent support provided in the matching and introduction processes ensure that each family has the best start possible.

Support after placement is also of an exceptional quality. The agency sees adoption as a lifelong event and families know and are confident that whenever they need support it will be forthcoming. Adopters comments about the support include, 'There are an impressive range of support services provided by the agency and these help to avoid disruptions.' Another said, 'We adopted in 2005 and I still feel I can pick up the phone and there will be help...we have two children and they (the agency) have never failed us yet.'

There are mainstream support services such as, training programmes, groups, family fun days and activities for children and young people. There are also two projects that focus on supporting placements of Black and Ethnic minority children and children who have a disability; the Anancy and Widening Horizon projects. There is also highly individualised therapeutic support provided at any stage of the adoption. In a number of cases this support has been instrumental in stabilising placements that have been at risk of disruption; the dedication to this work is impressive. One adopter said of the therapeutic support, 'We needed extra help, St Francis sorted it out the children had eighteen months of therapy then as a family we had a further 6 months...very useful.' Another adopter said of the therapeutic input, 'It was immensely helpful; it has made the placement.' The Children's Guardian in this case added, 'I am impressed by the structured play therapy technique delivered by St Francis Children's Society it met the child's needs very well.' This work has ensured that the children have developed a positive self-view, have higher self-esteem and have developed an understanding of their background. It is from this base that children have then been able to work towards reaching their full potential.

The agency supports schools, through training and direct support, in understanding the complex needs of many of the children placed; this training has a strong focus on attachment difficulties and the impact these have on children's behaviour, emotional well-being and ability to learn and achieve. This work has meant that school staff are better equipped to work with children effectively and that they can learn and reach their full educational potential.

The arrangements for supporting contact are exceptionally well supported. These contacts are generally for past adoptions made through the agency. This work has enabled children to maintain a sense of their heritage and birth family members to be reassured about how their child is getting on in life. Adopters fully understand the benefits of their child maintaining a safe level of contact with birth family members and provide their child with the support to get the most possible out of contact.

For young adults who have been having contact over a number of years the agency works closely with them to establish their wishes and feelings about future contact;



the agency supports them with their decision very well. For example, should a young adult wish to make more direct contact with birth family members, the agency provides advice and support to enable positive contact or reunions to be made.

The agency also supports birth parents, it is working with contracts with local authorities, with maintaining contact arrangements with their child. This may be support to think about what to write or help with actually writing to their child.

The work with birth parents is of an exceptionally high quality; the outcomes of some of the work are extremely positive. For example, the opportunities provided to birth parents and families to work through some very difficult issues have meant that some have been able to move on in their lives and have parented subsequent children. For others they have moved in their thinking and are better equipped to parent any future children they may have. One birth parent said of the support that it was, 'the biggest support ever, I would have never got as far as I have without the support from St Francis; I am able to look towards and plan for the future...something I have never been able to do before.' Another birth parent who met with the adopters for her child said 'I could not have done it without the social worker's help.'

Likewise the work in relation to birth records counselling and birth relative initiated contact is of a high quality and means that people are supported to understand their situation and in some cases have re-established relationships in a safe and fulfilling way. A person who used the birth relative initiated contact service said of the social worker, 'excellent, very caring, sensible and practical can't speak highly enough, the social worker pitched everything just right.'

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The arrangements for ensuring that only safe people care for and work with children are robust and the agency places a strong focus on ensuring that staff and adopters fully understand the complexity and many facets of safeguarding practice. The agency provides clear information to prospective adopters about abuse and its impact on children verbally during the preparation sessions and in writing via detailed letters. Prospective adopters are supported to develop a safe caring plan for a child being placed with them and this excellent practice ensures that each individual child's needs in relation to safety issues are fully considered.

The preparation of prospective adopters is informed by research and based on developments in safeguarding practice. This and the support they receive means that they fully understand and appreciate the impact abuse and adverse past experience have on children. Adopters are fully attuned to their child's needs and the high quality care and support they provide to their children means that, often for the first time in their lives, children feel safe and are safe.

After placement the agency works with local authorities to draw up a visiting plan to monitor the placement; this ensures that children, if they are at an age and level of understanding, have someone they can talk to about any worries they have. For children who are unable to communicate, the visits provide the opportunity for the social worker to observe the child and pick up on any negative changes in their presentation. A placing social worker commented, 'the agency, supported introduction visits well and there was excellent working in terms of sharing the statutory visits.... this was key due to the distances involved.' She concluded, 'Brilliant placement the social worker has been brilliant.'

Allegations or suspicions of harm are dealt with effectively, through detailed and robust safeguarding policies, procedures and practice. Practice is in the best interests of children but remains sensitive to adopters' needs; adopters are supported when they are the subject of an allegation. The Local Authority Designated Officer said that the agency, 'contributed well to the process supporting the adoptive parents and assisting with the investigation. I have no concerns regarding my involvement with the agency.'

In relation to work with adults, services are delivered to ensure that people are dealt with in a sensitive way with their safety and that of others at the forefront of the work.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the voluntary adoption agency are **good**.

The recruitment of prospective adopters is very well-planned, based on national trends and the make-up of the local community; generally recruitment is successful within a range of different local communities. Where it has been less successful the agency investigates the reasons for this and seeks to address them. The agency, as a former faith based agency, has recently been able to open up to accepting applications from same sex couples and this means that it is now fully inclusive.

The leadership and management of the agency are exceptionally strong. This is despite a number of significant changes and developments internally and on a national basis; these have been managed very well. For example there have been: recent changes to the Chief Executive and manager; an increase of 50 percent in applications and assessments of prospective adopters; a breakaway of the agency from the Catholic Church and significant developments in relation to adoption nationally. All of these issues have meant that the agency has had to adapt to new ways of working and diversify and the leadership and management have risen to the challenges.

Over the past 2 years, the agency has demonstrated a strong, unwavering commitment to develop and deliver an ambitious service to children and their families and to adults affected by adoption. While some developments, such as the increase in applications, have begun to positively contribute to adoption nationally some of them are still in the developmental stage. This means it is too soon to

assess the impact of these. There are, however, many exciting, initiative, cost effective projects being worked on that are planned to meet the needs of children and adoptive families to a high standard.

The agency has demonstrated a very good capacity for improvement based on its track record and it uses inspection to improve the already excellent services it provides. It has addressed the recommendation from the last inspection and this means that complaints are now dealt with effectively and in a timely way.

While the views of adopters, children and other interested parties are sought about many aspects of the agency children's views are not generally gathered on a formal basis; there are plans to introduce a survey for children to address this shortfall. It is planned that these views will be used to feed into the development of services on a more formal basis.

The agency has good relationships with a range of agencies, both in terms of the day- to-day work and in terms of the development of its services. A commissioner from a local authority stated she felt the agency is, 'streets ahead of other organisations' and said, 'I guide other organisations towards St Francis as a model of excellent practice.'

The systems for monitoring the work, from practice level up to the board of trustees are overall robust. Shortfalls identified are tackled with due diligence and therefore there is constant development and improvement in the work. However, the panel do not report, in a formal way, to the board on the quality of work it scrutinises; the board therefore does not have the benefit of clear information about, for example, the quality of assessment work, from this important source.

The financial viability of the agency is sound despite the significant recent changes in funding streams. The approach to fund raising has been subject to significant developments since the breakaway from the Church. For example, the family centre work planned has been well thought through both in terms of the finances involved and in terms of its use. If it comes to fruition it is planned that it will: be of great value to children and families using it; increase the already good reputation of the agency and open up the agency more to the local community.

The arrangements for the approval of prospective adopters are sound. Along with the robust scrutiny panel provides to the work carried out the arrangements for decision making are excellent and ensure that only those people suitable to adopt are approved as adopters.

The calibre of managers and staff working for the agency is high. Staff, including administrative staff, have seen some significant recent changes within the agency; they have dealt with these well and continue to show a high level of commitment to their work. Staff are well supported through appropriate supervision, training opportunities and peer support and all of them are passionate about their work. Comments from staff about working for the agency included, 'it's a good place to work' and 'peer support is good.' Comments from adopters about staff included they

are 'reliable' and that, 'it is great, you deal with the same people.'

Records are well maintained and clear and securely stored to ensure their confidentiality. The premises are fit for purpose and provide a pleasant place to work in and come to for a service.

The agency has a system for notifying relevant agencies of significant issues. However, a recent safeguarding matter was not notified to Ofsted; this meant that Ofsted could not assess if it needed to take any action. This had no impact on children because the agency did notify all other relevant agencies which have the duty to investigate safeguarding matters and the issue was dealt with effectively and efficiently.

## 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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 voluntary adoption agencies.