

St Francis Children's Society

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Inspector Rosie Dancer
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Provision subtype Domestic adoption

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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-mile radius of Milton Keynes. In the past 12 months the agency has had 23 applications from people wishing to adopt, three of whom withdrew their application and two of which are on hold. It has placed children with 13 prospective adoptive families, worked with 52 adoptees and birth relatives and has 35 adoptive families that support is being actively provided to.

The agency also operates an office in Peterborough to manage work in that area. At the time of this visit discussions are ongoing between the agency and Ofsted regarding separate registration. Therefore this office's practice was not inspected nor covered by this report.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

All involved in working for the agency are dedicated to providing a good quality service to children.

This is an agency that has a low breakdown rate despite placing a proportionally high number of children who have additional and often complex needs. There has been just one adoption breakdown after an adoption order in the past 12 months and no breakdowns pre-order.

Good attention is paid to ensuring that prospective adopters have details of children's needs and understand the implications of these to enable them to make an informed decision about if the placement of the child is viable. Some recording did not reflect the work that had been carried out in regard to this.

Placements are supported through proactive and effective support provided by the agency. This work helps to stabilise placements and safeguards the overall well-being of the child and children develop more secure attachments to their adoptive parents. Adoptive parents, through the support given, learn to parent their child in a way that meets their specific needs. The agency is proactive in advocating for those families who need support that the agency itself is unable to provide.

The agency has had recent success in recruiting prospective adopters from a diverse range of backgrounds and this widens the pool of adopters for children waiting nationally. Delays are kept to a minimum and generally are for reasons beyond the control of the agency, for example waiting for a police or health check.

The leaders, managers and workers have strong working relationships with other agencies involved in the child's life such as local authorities. The agency has access to advisers including legal advice. There are at times difficulties in making contact with the medical adviser; the quality of advice is not in question but access to it needs improvement.

Not all staff and panel members have had an annual appraisal and some workers felt the supervision for them in relation to the clinical work they carry out is not frequent enough.

While overall there is a robust process for ensuring that staff are suitable people to be working for the agency some shortfalls were found in some parts of the process for some staff.

There are systematic arrangements for monitoring the work of the agency including the reporting to the trustees specifically to meet the Government's ambitious growth agenda for Adoption services. There are areas which would benefit from further development. For example, while the views and experiences of children and people using the service are gained and acted upon on at practice level, they are not

currently used to significantly influence strategic thinking. The trustees are not monitoring all aspects of the work, for example the agency's performance in relation to timescales for adopters' approvals.

This is a very uncertain time for agencies working in adoption due to the downturn of children waiting for a placement and the national changes being implemented such as regionalisation; the agency pays good attention to these issues and strategic development is focused on the anticipated needs of local authorities in the future.

Shortfalls were identified that relate to administrative matters such as: keeping records of how allegations and complaints have been followed up; ensuring the panel minutes record the reasons for any delays in the timescales for prospective adopters' approvals; including in the safeguarding procedures details of how people can contact Ofsted; developing a guide for children to adoption support; ensuring all records of staff supervision are recorded in line with the standards; and documenting that a full staff recruitment process has taken place.

Areas of 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, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>Arrangements for the protection of children</p> <p>10.—(1) The registered provider and the manager shall prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>(a) is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption—(i) by the agency; or</p> <p>(ii) by another adoption agency but with prospective adopters approved by the agency as suitable to be adoptive parents in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983(a); and</p> <p>(b) sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.(2) The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) shall provide in particular for—</p> <p>(e) written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect and the action taken in response;</p> <p>(g) arrangements to be made for persons working for the purposes of the agency, prospective adopters and children who have been placed for adoption by the agency, to have access to information that would enable them to contact—</p> <p>(ii) the registration authority, regarding any concern about child welfare or safety.</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring the written policy contains the details of the registration authority and records of the action taken in response to an allegation are comprehensive and easily accessible.</p> <p>(Regulation 10 The Voluntary Adoption and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003.)</p>	<p>31/03/2016</p>
<p>Employment of staff</p> <p>15.—(2) The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager, shall ensure that all persons</p>	<p>31/03/2016</p>

<p>employed by the agency—</p> <p>(a) receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring that annual appraisals are held on time and the chief executive officer reviews, with staff and other appropriate professionals, their concerns about the frequency of the clinical supervision.</p> <p>(Regulation 15 The Voluntary Adoption and Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003.)</p>	
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service 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 it is recorded how prospective adopters have been helped to fully understand the child's background, health, emotional and developmental needs and the practical implications for parenting that child. (NMS 13.7)

ensure that where the timescale have not been met, the panel records the reasons in the written minutes of the panel meeting. (NMS 17.8)

develop a specific guide for children about adoption support services that is appropriate to the child's age and understanding and includes a summary of what the service sets out to do for children and that is given to all children and/or their representatives. (NMS 18.6)

ensure the agency can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in the recruitment of staff, volunteers and persons on the central list. With specific reference to recording telephone checks made with referees and obtaining full dates of employment histories so that any gaps can be identified and explored. (NMS 21.2)

ensure the written records of staff supervision sessions kept by the agency detail the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. (NMS 24.5)

ensure the trustees monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users; with specific reference to monitoring the timescales for the assessment and approval of prospective adopters. (NMS 25.6 b)

ensure records of complaints and allegations are clearly recorded on the relevant files, and in particular that the conclusion reached is consistently recorded. (NMS 27.5)

ensure the medical adviser can be consulted; with specific reference to ensuring that social workers and other relevant people can access the medical adviser easily and promptly. (Adoption Statutory Guidance 1.7)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children settle well into their adoptive families, especially when considering their histories. Their diverse needs are identified and their adopters understand and cater for these well. Children develop strong relationships with their families who are loving and attentive towards them; children feel safe and secure and loved by their adoptive parents and have a strong sense of their place in the family.

As their emotional well-being improves children's ability to interact effectively with others increases. Children met with during the inspection were interesting to listen to and were interested in taking part in conversations and activities with others. While they were confident to spend time away from their adoptive parents they showed pleasure when they were reunited with them.

Some children have benefited being placed for adoption with their brothers and sisters; there are a number of families where babies subsequently born to birth mothers have also been placed with their siblings who are already established with their adoptive family. Contact between brothers and sisters and other birth family members, is promoted where appropriate, and this provides them with a sense of their heritage and a level of reassurance about their birth family.

Children are understood in the context of their past experiences. Adopters listen to their children, including picking up on unspoken signs of distress or despair, and support them to understand and come to terms with their situation. As their emotional well-being improves so does their behaviour.

Children progress well in their physical health because their adoptive parents are good advocates for them and ensure that they get the medical attention they need. Likewise children progress well in their education because their adoptive families support them well to achieve and attain to the best of their ability. Adopters challenge education providers if they feel their child is not receiving the support they need, for example through questioning how the pupil premium is being used to support their child in school.

Children grow an interest in the world around them and take part in a range of hobbies and activities that help them develop confidence in their abilities and allow them to have fun, with their family and peers.

Birth family members benefit significantly from the work carried out with them. For some the result has been that they have moved on in their lives and been able to parent subsequent children. Their birth children have also benefitted from the work because birth parents have been supported to provide information about their histories and early life for the child they are losing to adoption.

The work with adults leads to positive, and sometimes life-changing, developments for them. Reunions for people who lost contact with each other many years ago

through adoption mean that their relationships are re-established and there are opportunities to answer long unasked questions. While this life event can be joyful it can also be filled with disappointment. People using the service reported that they were very skilfully and sensitively supported to overcome any disappointments they had experienced.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency takes a lifelong approach to adoption and many of the parents and children using the services have been doing so for many years. Many adopters said that they had chosen this agency because the agency is inclusive and others because they were confident that support would be provided to them if they needed it. They really value the agency and feel a strong connection to it. A professional working with the agency said the agency, 'welcome and are open minded about them (applicants).' An adopter said 'We put faith in St Francis and have been well supported.'

Recent success in recruiting applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds through the diversity project and via word of mouth has widened the pool of prospective adopters for children needing an adoptive placement. People spoke about how the written and verbal information provided to them is useful and informative and enabled them to decide if they wanted to take that next step and make an application.

Assessments of prospective adopters are undertaken with due rigour. Statutory and all other checks are undertaken to ensure the suitability of the applicant. Adopters report that they develop a good rapport with the workers who they trust and who they say are highly professional. An adopter said of their worker that she was, 'very professional; not too close but friendly.' The quality of assessment reports are variable but all demonstrate applicants' skills to parent children with a range of needs.

Preparation training of adopters is thorough and of a high quality. Adopters feel the training is valuable in helping them understand the needs of children waiting for a placement and prepares them for undertaking the often-complex task of adoptive parenting. Some adopters commented they found there is so much more to learn during their adoption journey but that the preparation courses formed a good basis for their learning and development. One adopter spoke about how they still refer back to the handouts provided and have shared the information about attachment and trauma with the child's nursery school so the teachers are more aware of the child's behaviour and can deal with it more effectively.

There is good support to prospective adopters to consider and widen the range of children they could consider parenting and this provides more children with the

opportunity to find a loving, caring home that will help them through their past trauma. When prospective adopters are considering a specific child, workers are tireless in their efforts to ensure they have an understanding of the implications of the child's need on them so they can make an informed decision about whether to progress to a match. An adopter said their worker was, 'very good at supporting us and getting us details about children;' and of the support they received during introductions said that their worker had her, 'hand on our shoulders to support us.' The records made of these discussions are not all as full as they could be.

The adoption panel is properly constituted; it is held on monthly basis to keep delays to approvals to a minimum. The panel and its processes are about to undergo a full review to ensure that it is operating as well as it can and that all members' skills and experience are being utilised to the full. Adopters felt the panel welcomed them and that they had been dealt with in a fair way. Adoption panel minutes are taken and overall provide a good view about how recommendations have been reached. However, they do not detail the reasons for any delays in the assessment and preparation processes. As a good practice issue the areas that prospective adopters may need to develop could be usefully highlighted in the reports and/or the minutes of panel to inform their future training needs and to aid the matching process.

The agency has access to specialist advice, for example in relation to legal and medical issues. The access to the medical advice was highlighted as being difficult to gain although it was stated that once gained the quality was good.

The decision making for the approvals of prospective adopters is undertaken robustly and in a timely way. Following approval all prospective adopters are referred to the adoption register, unless they are already linked to a child, and this means that they are quickly available as potential adopters for children across the country.

Post-approval training is of a high quality and further informs the prospective adopter about future processes such as matching and the challenges they may face such as helping their child through the introduction process in a way that helps them to settle well.

There are a good range of family days, outings for children and training provided on an ongoing basis which support families. Children clearly enjoy the activities and like meeting with other children who have been adopted.

Direct work undertaken to provide support after adoption is skilfully undertaken and purposeful. Workers show high levels of professionalism and sensitivity and support to maintain placements in trouble generally achieve positive endings. An adopter said of the support 'St Francis have been really supportive where the local authority has not.'

Work with birth parents is of a very high quality. One described the worker working with them as 'fantastic' and said there was 'no need to second guess her as she is non-judgemental.' Birth parents also highlighted the peer support during the group sessions as being really valuable as they have shared experiences and can talk to each other from experience. One said 'it helped me move on in life' and that the

group 'feels like a family.' Though the individual birth parent counselling service, commissioned by two local authorities, positive outcomes are also achieved. Birth parents and other family members losing a child to adoption are exceptionally well supported and enabled to take an active part in the planning and implementation of the plan for their child. They are supported meeting with their child's prospective adopters and this provides them and prospective adopters with first-hand knowledge about each other. Birth family members unanimously commended the skills of the workers. Commissioners of the birth parents' service said, 'it is an excellent service, excellent exemplar.'

Adopted adults or other adults wanting to find a birth family member receive an equally high quality of support. They are extremely satisfied with the service provided. The work is very sensitively undertaken, and users of the service reported positive changes in their circumstances. A service user said that the worker 'gave me the space and support I needed (to deal with the emotional aspects).' Another spoke about how their worker have given them 'massive support, she was exceptionally understanding, helped me to think through the issues: magnificent.' Another user of the service said that the worker is 'very insightful; nothing could have been done any better.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency demonstrates a sound knowledge about child protection. The assessment and preparation of adopters is grounded in supporting them to understand the impact abuse and neglect has had on children waiting for adoption. They learn about attachment issues that children who have experienced trauma are likely to experience and are supported to learn specific styles of parenting that traumatised children respond best to.

One adoptive parents spoke about how when she has told her child off they had said that they were going to call St Francis and ask for a new mummy; this indicates that the agency is viewed by children as a safe base. The agency has a safeguarding policy and associated child protection procedures. These do not contain information about how Ofsted can be contacted. However, staff are trained in relation the child protection procedures and understand what they need to do if they have a concern about a child.

Safeguarding referrals are promptly made to the relevant local authority and social workers continue to support the family during any assessment or investigation. One referral has been made in the past 12 months and while this was dealt with effectively the records of the actions taken were not collated and it took some time

for the agency to gather the information together.

Adopters are aware of the need for children to take age-appropriate risks as they grow. Where adopters have struggled with this concept social workers have helped them develop the confidence to allow their children to try new things so that they learn new skills and develop an appropriate sense of how to keep themselves safe.

Adopters, children and young people know how to complain and feel able to do so. Complaints are dealt with effectively and issues raised are used to develop practice. However, the records of the actions taken in response to complaints are not collated and it took the agency some time to gather the information.

There is a recruitment and vetting process for staff and panel members to ensure that people working for the purposes of the agency are suitable to do so. There were some shortfalls in evidencing some recruitment practice, for example recording of the verification of references for some, and for one staff member their employment history was not fully detailed to allow for full exploration of any gaps.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The Statement of Purpose underpins the work of the agency and overall the agency operates in line with it.

At the last inspection a requirement was made regarding making notifications to Ofsted of any significant events. There have not been any matters that have needed to be notified and the leadership and management are now clear about the circumstances under which notifications need to be made; this requirement has not been restated. The two recommendations made at the previous inspection have been implemented. Children's views are extensively used on a practice level; the recommendation is restated for the additional reason of affording opportunities for children's views to feed into the agency's strategic planning. In relation to the second recommendation the trustees now receive written reports, on a six-monthly basis, that include quality assurance feedback from the adoption panel, but this information does not include details of the timescales for assessment and approvals of prospective adopters.

The agency has improved its business management systems and arrangements and, in these difficult times for agencies nationally, it has a strong focus on managing its resources effectively to balance these challenges against the needs of the people it works with.

Senior managers, leaders and trustees show a strong commitment to adoption and the agency has maintained strong working relationships with local authorities, partner organisations and other adoption agencies. A professional working with the agency said if there are problems the agency is good at addressing them as they

arise.

Leaders and managers have a well-developed sense of the needs of the local authorities that they work with. There remains a strong will and desire to develop the services the agency provides to meet the changing needs of local authorities nationally. The chief executive officer is active in national developments and keeps abreast of matters as they evolve.

The recruitment of adopters is well planned and successful. It takes full account of children waiting for families and the national initiatives in adoption that are developing.

The agency has a general guide for children about adoption but this does not fully focus on the support the agency can provide and the current guide is accessible to an older age range only.

Managers are appropriately qualified and experienced and their further professional development is supported through the good training opportunities they are provided with. Staff are of a high calibre and highly thought of by service users and other professionals they work with.

Support to staff in relation to their work is provided through supervision by their managers, although not all supervision is fully documented in line with the standards. Some staff who carry out therapeutic work feel the frequency of their clinical supervision is not sufficient in light of the emotional weight of this complex work; the responsible individual has agreed to review this situation with the affected staff.

Staff appraisals clearly link to improving staff performance and opening up the opportunities for further professional development. However, not all staff and panel members' appraisals have been held on time and this impacts on their professional development opportunities.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of voluntary adoption agencies.