

# St Francis Children's Society

St. Francis Children's Society

Collis House, 48 Newport Road, Woolstone, Milton Keynes MK15 0AA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this voluntary adoption agency

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 lifelong 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. At the time of the inspection there were 27 children placed with 23 adoptive families.

**Inspection dates:** 21 to 24 January 2019

**Overall experiences and progress of service users, taking into account** **requires improvement**

How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected **requires improvement**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

**Date of previous inspection:** 18 January 2016

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Key findings from this inspection

This voluntary adoption agency requires improvement because:

- poor recording practices mean that the manager is unable to sufficiently evaluate the quality of service provision
- insufficient monitoring of the quality of service provision has inhibited the manager's ability to improve the service
- staff and managers lack an understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard children
- employment practice is weak, resulting in insufficient scrutiny to ensure that those working directly and indirectly with children are fit to do so
- managers have not been able to identify safeguarding concerns, which has resulted in the lack of notification of such instances to the regulatory body
- adoption support is not underpinned by a written plan, so the extent and purpose of intervention is unclear.

This voluntary adoption agency's strengths:

- Children are making good progress in their adoptive families. They are developing positive attachments and are thriving.
- The recruitment, preparation and assessment of prospective adopters are good. This has helped in the provision of placements for harder to place children, including older children and sibling groups.
- Social workers carefully match children with prospective adopters, and despite the complexity involved in many placements, there are few placement disruptions.
- Staff operate in an environment of support and encouragement, they value each other, this provides the staff with strength and shared objectives.
- Birth relatives benefit from a range of highly sensitive services delivered by highly knowledgeable and experienced staff.
- Adult adoptees receive safe and sensitive help in accessing their records and tracing birth family members.

## What does the voluntary adoption agency need to do to improve?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 or any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>8: Registered provider, manager and branch manager – general requirements</p> <p>The registered provider, the manager, and the branch manager (if any) shall, having regard to the size of the agency or (as the case may be) branch and the agency's statement of purpose; and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who may be, or have been, placed for adoption by the agency, carry on or manage the agency or (as the case may be) branch, with sufficient care, competence and skill. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 8(1)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, this relates to the lack of robust monitoring of the service provision.</p>	31/03/2019
<p>10: Arrangements for the protection of children</p> <p>The registered provider and the manager shall prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard from abuse or neglect children placed for adoption—</p> <p>by the agency; or</p> <p>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(1); and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) shall provide in particular for—liaison and cooperation with any local authority which is, or may be, making child protection enquiries in respect of the child; notification to the registration authority of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries;</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect and the action taken in response;</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures that may be necessary to protect children placed with prospective adopters following an allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>In this regulation 'child protection enquiries' means any enquiries</p>	31/03/2019

<p>carried out by a local authority in the exercise of any of its functions conferred by or under the Children Act 1989 relating to the protection of children. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 10 (1)(a)(i)(ii)(b)(2)(a)(d)(e)(f)(3))</p>	
<p>14: Fitness of workers  The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager, shall not—  employ a person to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency; or  allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the agency unless that person is fit to work for the purposes of an agency.  This paragraph applies to any person who is employed by a person other than the registered provider, in a position in which he may in the course of his duties have regular contact with children who may be, or have been, placed for adoption by the agency.  For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of an agency unless—  he is of integrity and good character;  he has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work he is to perform;  he is physically and mentally fit for the work he is to perform;  and  full and satisfactory information is available in relation to him in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 2.  The registered provider, the manager and, in relation to any branch, the branch manager, shall take reasonable steps to ensure that any person working for the agency who is not employed by the agency and to whom paragraph (2) does not apply is appropriately supervised while carrying out his duties. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 14(1)(a)(b)(2)(3)(a)(b)(c)(d)(4))</p>	<p>31/03/2019</p>
<p>19: Notifiable events  If, in relation to an agency, any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 4 takes place, the registered provider and the manager shall without delay notify the person indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of that table.  Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally shall be confirmed in writing within 14 days.  In the table—  ‘approved by the agency’ means approved by the agency as suitable to be an adoptive parent in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 1983;</p>	<p>31/03/2019</p>

<p>'area authority' means the local authority in whose area the child is placed for adoption;</p> <p>'placing agency' means the adoption agency that placed the child for adoption with the prospective adopter;</p> <p>'Primary Care Trust' means the Primary Care Trust in whose area the child is placed for adoption by the agency; and</p> <p>'Local Health Board' means the Local Health Board in whose area the child is placed for adoption by the agency. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, Regulation 19(1)(2)(3))</p>	
<p>24F: Provision of services (Part 4A provision of adoption support services)</p> <p>The registered provider, the manager and in relation to any branch the branch manager, shall ensure that the adoption support services provided to any person are appropriate having regards to the needs for such services identified by an assessment carried out by the agency or by a local authority. (The Voluntary Adoption Agencies (Amendment) Regulations 2005, Regulation 24F)</p>	<p>31/03/2019</p>

## Recommendations

- 15: Adoption support
  - Ensure the service user knows, and receives written information about, the service they are to receive; what the service is designed to achieve; what is involved in the particular service provision; and how the service will be monitored to ensure that it is delivering the intended outcome. (NMS 15.3)
- 19: Fitness to provide or manage
  - The manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the agency is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care (in respect of adoption agencies)/service provision for the agency's service users (in respect of adoption agencies/adoption support agencies). (NMS 19.6)
- 24: Staff support and supervision
  - Staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. (NMS 24.4)
- 24: Staff support and supervision
  - Ensure there is a written record detailing the time and date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)
- 25: Managing effectively and monitoring
  - The agency takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which is raised with them. (NMS 25.7)
- 27: Records

Ensure the agency implements the written policy that clarifies the content of information to be kept on the agency's files, and on the child's and prospective adopters' case records. (NMS 27.1)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of service users: requires improvement**

Poor understanding of safeguarding responsibilities and inconsistent safeguarding practice have had an impact on this judgement.

Prospective adopters are provided with information about adoption and say that this information helps them to understand the needs of children who are waiting for an adoptive placement. The preparation course prepares them well for adopting a child. From this learning, prospective adopters develop a good understanding of the impact that abuse and trauma have upon children's behaviour and attachment styles.

Assessments of the suitability of prospective adopters are thorough. The adoption panel comprises a diverse range of people with differing experiences and knowledge of adoption. The panel is chaired by an experienced, knowledgeable and appropriately qualified chairperson. Panel members take their responsibilities seriously and are well prepared to ask appropriate questions. Panel members give proper consideration to their recommendation, and the agency decision-maker adopts a very thorough approach to making the decisions, which she does in a timely way.

Social workers have built trusting relationships with prospective adopters and children and know them well. One adopter said, 'I trust my social worker, who I feel is understanding of our situation and is helpful. This is exactly what my family needs.'

Family-finding processes are robust and prospective adopters say that they were supported through the matching process. Social workers are rigorous in their approach to ensuring that prospective adopters have full information about children they are considering. Some prospective adopters are supported to attend life-appreciation days. However, the agency is not always persistent in its endeavours to get written information from these meetings from the local authorities.

Outcomes for most children are good. They are making significant progress in all areas of their development because adopters are attuned to their needs. They settle well and start to make attachments. Adopters ensure that children make good educational progress and that their health needs are met. Children make good progress socially and emotionally.

Children generally experience good placement stability. Placement disruptions are analysed carefully by managers, but the learning is not consistently shared within the agency to improve practice.

Post-adoption support is variable. Some adopters have become dependent upon the agency for support. Adopters have limited information about their entitlements as a family once an adoption order is granted. Support is not based upon a written assessment, so adopters are not clear about the length, required outcomes, or the review and evaluation of the service provided.

Work with adopted adults and birth relatives result in good outcomes and highly positive

experiences. Skilled practitioners support adults to understand situations and manage their expectations in this process.

Access to records, including the intermediary service, is an area of strength, and is very highly regarded by its users. The work is carried out promptly and sensitively, with full regard for all involved in the adoption triangle. One service-user commented, 'The support given to me has vastly exceeded my expectations. My dedicated and caring social worker offered me everything I needed at the beginning of my journey to find my birth mother – to allow me to feel fully prepared when making my first step. She continued to support both my birth mother and me after we made contact and thanks to her advice and ongoing support, the relationship with my birth mother is steadily developing at a pace acceptable to us both.'

### **How well children, young people and adults are helped and protected: requires improvement**

Safeguarding incidents are not always managed in a consistent manner. All staff, including the manager, are unclear about their roles and responsibilities in relation to their responses to safeguarding incidents and concerns. This is exacerbated by written guidance to staff, which lacks clarity and precision about what to do and how. Consequently, a number of safeguarding concerns have been well managed, but others have not. For example, a concern reported by a member of the public was not adequately followed up, and safeguarding agencies and Ofsted were not informed. When matters have not been reported as required there is no evidence that this has been challenged, reviewed or evaluated to ensure that weaknesses in practice are improved.

The agency does not always ensure that staff are suitable to undertake their respective roles. Exploration of employment history is not always undertaken. Other examples demonstrate sound recruitment practice.

There is a clear process for complaints in relation to the agency. Information is given to adopters and children on how to access the complaints procedure. There have been no complaints made by adopters or children within the last 12 months.

Adopters say that the training they have received prepares them well to understand the impact of trauma, abuse and neglect on how their children feel and present. One adopter said, 'My social worker has been really helpful in helping me to understand that my children speak to me through their behaviour, and that I speak to them through mine.'

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate**

Senior leaders, including the responsible individual and manager, have failed to sufficiently act upon some of the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection.

The requirements related to areas of poor safeguarding practice, and supervision and appraisal arrangements for staff. Neither of these requirements have been adequately



addressed and demonstrate the manager's failure to pay due regard to the regulations. Both of these requirements are repeated. There has also been an inconsistent response to the previous recommendations, resulting in additional requirements now made at this inspection.

The direct observation of staff meetings demonstrates that agency staff, including the manager, have a thorough understanding of their cases. This good practice is let down by poor record-keeping, which is then poorly monitored by the manager. This is a risky strategy, which fails to document children and family's journeys and experiences sufficiently.

Feedback from service-users is sought, but this has not been evaluated or used to improve practice or improve the quality of service provision. Managers are therefore unable to identify the impact of their practice upon children's lives. The agency is not able to demonstrate an understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses and does not have a development plan to address these areas. Given that patterns and trends are not identified, areas for improvement are not obvious to senior leaders.

Social workers are appropriately qualified and trained. However, supervision does not provide an opportunity to reflect upon the impact of their practice, and supervision records do not consistently detail the time and length of supervision and are not routinely signed by staff members or managers. As a result, it cannot be confirmed that the records are accurate or that the appropriate attention is given to the matters discussed.

Staff report that they are well supported by managers who are approachable. They say that managers operate an open-door approach and that time and care is given to ensuring that children are well cared for and making good progress. These informal discussions are not recorded. Team meetings occur on a regular basis and staff say that these provide a useful forum for support, information-sharing and an opportunity to examine wider practice within the world of adoption.

Multi-agency working with placing social workers is good and local authority staff and managers commented positively about the strong relationships they have with the agency. They report good communication and excellent partnership working. One local authority social worker said, 'Myself and the adoption social worker work collaboratively, providing a consistent response to the adopters. The adopters feel secure knowing that we work so well together to support them and their children.'

Strategies for the recruitment of adopters are aimed at meeting the needs of children who have varying and complex needs and are waiting for adoptive families. The agency reaches prospective adopters from a wide range of backgrounds including those from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, single adopters and adopters from differing ethnic, religious and cultural groups. All feel welcomed and included in all aspects of the agency.

The agency has an up-to-date statement of purpose, which clearly outlines the nature of the service and how this is to be provided. Children's guides provide comprehensive

information about the service in language that enables children to understand what to expect. This is supplemented by further written information about other specific aspects of the service, including birth records counselling, intermediary service and services to birth relatives.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children, young people and adults. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children, young people and adults. They watched how professional staff work with children, young people, adults and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families, and adult service users. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the voluntary adoption agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children, young people and adults whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Voluntary Adoption Agencies and the Adoption Agencies (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2003, the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005, any other relevant legislation, and the national minimum standards.

## **Voluntary adoption agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC049107

**Registered provider:** St. Francis Children's Society

**Registered provider address:** Collis House, 48 Newport Road, Woolstone, Milton Keynes MK15 0AA

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## **Inspectors**

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Amanda Maxwell, social care inspector



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