

Clifton Children's Society (CCS Adoption)

Inspection report for voluntary adoption agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Clifton Children's Society, known as CCS Adoption, is a voluntary adoption agency. It operates in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

The agency was established in 1904, as the Clifton Rescue Society, it was incorporated in 1982 as the Catholic Children's Society (Diocese of Clifton). In 2008, the trustee body passed a resolution to change the name to Clifton Children's Society. It is now a charitable, not for profit organisation welcoming enquiries from people from all faiths or none. The agency's offices are located just outside the city centre of Bristol, in accessible premises.

The agency carries out the preparation, recruitment, assessment and approval of domestic adopters based in the geographical area of the South West of England. The agency also undertakes a range of adoption support services for both children and adopted adults. It does not undertake recruitment in respect of inter-country adoption. The agency focuses on recruiting adopters who can offer a permanent home to children for whom finding a placement will be difficult. This would include, for instance, large sibling groups, older children and children with a disability. Bath and North East Somerset Council has a service level agreement with this agency to provide their step-parent adoption assessments.

Since the last inspection, there has been a new manager appointed. The responsible individual who used to hold this position is now the agency's chief executive officer. Both report to a board of trustees. There is a staff team of 8 social workers, supported by an office manager and small team of administration staff.

The number of packages of adoption support provided to families in 2011 to 2012 was 20. During the time of 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012, 16 children were placed for adoption and 18 families made an application to adopt. At March 2012, the agency had 24 adoptive families approved to adopt, 16 of which had children in placement and 8 were matched to children, but the placement had not yet occurred. 2 step parent adoption assessments were carried out in 2011 to 2012.

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 agency has maintained itself at the forefront of adoption practice, particularly in placing large sibling groups of children and children with disabilities or complex emotional needs with well prepared and trained adoptive families. The agency achieves excellent outcomes for children and adopted adults. Safe caring is robust and is underpinned with reference to current safeguarding research. The agency organises annual conferences which are well attended and presented by specialists in adoption practice.

Adopters and children receive an excellent service from highly competent staff. Prospective adopters are well prepared and highly supported, which assists them to make sense of the complex and varying needs of children being placed with them. Assessment reports of prospective adopters are of a very high quality, in both their content and analysis. Processes for approval are rigorous, with two workers carrying out assessments throughout. As a consequence, adopters are prepared as much as possible when matched to parent children with complex needs or large sibling groups. Adopters report a very high level of satisfaction regarding the support they receive from the agency, this support is easily accessible and described by adopters as 'lifelong'. Assessment and support work is carried out by members of staff who are appropriately qualified, knowledgeable, skilled and supported. There is regular and effective group and individual supervision, carried out by highly skilled and experienced management.

CCS Adoption is committed to helping people affected by adoption, by providing a highly supportive and individual service to adults, who commend the service for its help and assistance. Although the agency does not have statutory responsibility for children placed with adopters, the agency has a significant input into ensuring that children's needs are met. It ensures a highly child-centred approach, carrying out tailored packages of assessed support with children and families; these are based on a range of relevant and well-established therapeutic techniques. The agency is proactively involved in children's educational outcomes and delivers training to teachers and teaching assistants. Adopters report that staff at the agency are very skilled at carefully matching the right children with families, which results in a very high level of placement stability.

The board of trustees is comprised of experienced former practitioners in adoption social work who closely scrutinise the agency's work, together with ensuring the agency remains financially stable and active. Leadership and management of the service remains very strong, following a recent change in its structure and appointment of a new manager, who is very well respected by both staff and external child care professionals. The service is highly regarded by partner agencies, who report a close and positive working relationship. Detailed development plans are in place to expand the service going forward, including developing its adoption support services, and in response to the Government's recent promotion of adoption activity.

One recommendation is made in relation to information being kept together regarding the outcome of notifications. The manager is aware of this matter, which does not have a significant impact on the service provided to children or adopted adults.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that a written record is kept which includes details of the action taken, and the outcome of any action or investigation, following a notifiable event, which is kept alongside the original notification (NMS 29.2).

Outcomes for children and young people

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

CCS adoption specialises in providing adoptive families for large sibling groups and children with more complex needs. It is fully committed to improving outcomes for children by providing secure, stable and permanent adoptive family placements. The agency ensures that children and young people live with safe and secure adoptive families, where they make exceptional progress in all aspects of their development. The success rate and progress of these placements is excellent, with no disruptions having taken place for several years. Once placed, children settle very well, as a consequence of a high level of personalised support from the agency. Young people also experience long-term stability in their adoptive families, with many staying beyond eighteen years of age.

Improving children's confidence and self-esteem is a key aim of the agency and they achieve this through the use of a wide range of therapeutic services; these are readily available to adopters at all stages, in what they refer to as, their 'adoption journey'. The result of this is that adoptive families are helped to meet a child's emotional needs and this results in dramatic and positive improvements in their behaviour. Adoptive parents receive a fast response from a proactive agency that provides skilled help and support. The agency has recently appointed an art therapist while one member of staff is undertaking play therapy based training. There is access to consultation with a clinical psychologist which adopters regularly use and report as being an invaluable source of assistance. An adopter said, 'this kept us going, when things could have broken down' and another wrote, 'you always feel you are making progress.'

Children and young people achieve well in their education, in relation to their starting points. The agency has realistic aims of children and young people and is proactively involved in education matters. For example, staff at the agency delivered training at

a child's school, on attachment related issues and the impact these can have on a child's learning. This was well received by the staff and the adoptive parent and resulted in an overall improvement in the child's emotional and academic progress and stability within the school environment. Several children have progressed well in mainstream education, where previously they had to be educated away from their peers.

Children's health needs are met well. Adopters are fully supported and encouraged to access all medical services and register with dentists, GPs and opticians, making sure that any health related issues are identified swiftly. The agency understands the need for children to maintain a sense of belonging and identity through actively promoting contact arrangements with their birth families and older siblings; this takes place in some placements on a regular basis.

Adopters are provided with additional support when contact takes place. Actively promoting contact enables children to maintain a connection to their family of origin, who remain as significant people in their lives. This has resulted in some birth siblings being reunited and allowed for family connections to be maintained; this makes it easier for young adults in the future to meet their birth families. The agency makes itself available to carry out all several aspects of life story work and it passes on the skills in this specialist and delicate area to adopters, from the very beginning of any adoptive placement.

A young adult, who was adopted as a child with CCS adopters said, 'the agency has done so much for me, they have been a huge part of my happiness. CCS as a whole has helped my own personal image with kindness, honesty and genuine care.'

Quality of service

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

The quality of service provision is a major and positive strength of this service. Prospective adopters are recruited, prepared, assessed, trained and supervised to an extremely high level. The service recruits a range of adoptive parents who are specifically able meet the needs of children and young people, for whom permanence may be more difficult. Prospective adopters come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences and include single applicants, same sex couples and adopters who are dedicated to looking after sibling groups of children and children with disabilities.

The adoption panel is constituted in accordance with regulations and guidance. There is a very experienced, competent and knowledgeable panel chair. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker, who is appropriately qualified, are responded to and ratified in a prompt manner, which reduces the time that children wait for appropriate permanent placements.

The central list of panel members is diverse in its composition and members bring a broad range of relevant experience; this ensures that the panel is representative of

the wider population. The strong and positive panel benefits children placed and there is an awareness of issues relating to adoption from a variety of personal and professional viewpoints. Panel members are well trained, regularly supervised and receive an annual performance appraisal. The panel also monitors the progress of the service's development and regularly consults with the service's trustees.

Minutes of panel meetings are concise. They clearly detail the discussion of issues and show that the recommendations are reached following extensive consideration of the suitability of applicants in each case. This ensures that children are placed with people who are suitable to parent them. The panel chair highlighted to the manager that the quality of prospective adopters' reports could be further improved by more detailed analysis and this was promptly responded to.

Assessment of prospective adopters is rigorous. Adopters who were recently approved, reported that there was a timely and personal response to their initial enquiry, followed by a prompt invitation to an information evening. Preparation and training consists of a comprehensive 4-day programme and always includes participation from adoptive parents. CCS adoption uses a well-established and thought out co-working model of assessment and training, which contributes greatly to the comprehensive and detailed assessments which are presented to the adoption panel for approval. Training groups, which take place during and after approval, are well attended and delivered by people with a range of experiences of adoption; the content of training is based on up to date research. This enables adopters to be prepared well for looking after children who have a range of complex needs and for the life changing experience and challenges of adoption. The timescales for completing assessments have improved over the past year. Most recommendations about the suitability of applicants take place close or within the prescribed timescale of eight months. Although some adopters reported, 'we preferred a more thorough process from two workers who got to know us well than a quick assessment.'

The agency works very well in family finding with various local authorities throughout the country. To ensure that it makes appropriate and well thought out matches of children to adopters, CCS has developed a matching risk assessment 'triangle' document based on the Department of Health's assessment of need. This is a tool designed to identify, with adopters, the potential risks and strengths of the match and covers the child's past experiences and the child's current functioning. This holistic method of risk assessment offers opportunities to identify gaps in information. It also identifies areas of potential vulnerability, and the ability of the adopters to meet the needs of the child. Its use is very positively commented upon when presented to placing local authority adoption panels and some have requested to use the tool within their agency.

Prospective adopters say they received full and detailed information about children and were gently guided to make a considered decision about whether they have the ability to meet children's needs. An adopter said, 'we were walked through the matching process - to make sure everything was ok for us' and a placing social worker commented about how, 'CCS were great at finding a placement of twins with developmental delay, all work done very efficiently, they managed the flow of information very well and the adoptive couple was supported well.'

Post adoption support is of exceptionally high quality. One member of staff has specific skills in post adoption support work. The agency sees this support as lifelong and families say they are responded to promptly and remembered even if they have not had contact with the agency for several years. This level of on-going support has been essential in preventing disruptions. An adopter confirmed this stating, 'they helped us out. We had the back up of CCS who are really accommodating.' At the time of this inspection, the agency is in the process of developing its range of post adoption services through the procurement and management of a separate building from which adoption support and a further range of resources, such as after school clubs, play schemes, respite activity and play groups are planned to be provided. This is in addition to existing support services such as training, support groups and family fun days.

Feedback from adopters and professionals connected with the service is wholly positive and demonstrates a high level of regard for the service. Comments from social workers include, 'they are well organised', ' I am impressed that a decade after a placement, CCS still supports adopters and children, I would jump for joy if they had a placement for us and we needed it', ' they have always delivered their services to a high standard, always looking to improve services to support local authorities.' Adopters commented, 'If the government wants to know how to 'do' adoption come here' and ' There is a fantastic feeling here, training is very good, staff are amazing, so thorough' and another adopter said, ' A very non-judgemental agency, they are helping to stop children who wait.'

The agency provides a service to adopted adults and birth relatives, where the agency was involved historically in their adoption. The office manager stated that there are well established systems in place for this aspect of the service. Staff are well prepared, sensitive and welcoming when an adult contacts the service. This work is supported by established policies and procedures and by very skilled and experienced staff who undertake intermediary and tracing work. Referrals are dealt with in a timely manner. There is a secure archive in the building; cabinets are fire-proof and stored in a dry and secure area.

The agency is commissioned to carry out specific pieces of work on behalf of local authorities. They provide an assessment service for step parent adoptions for a nearby local authority and were also commissioned to provide a mentoring support service for another authority in the region. Managers of these agencies spoke very highly of the efficient service provided with one stating that, ' I have nothing negative I can say about the service, this agency is top of my list of ones that I would recommend, I am really happy with their quality of work.'

The agency strives to inform their practice with current and relevant theories; a new member of staff is also undertaking a piece of qualitative research in experiences of adoptive fatherhood. The agency also hosts an annual conference on specific topics, last year this was headlined with a lecture from Dr Richard Bowlby, and this year it will be Dr Margot Sunderland, who are both expert speakers on adoption matters.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The approach of the agency to safeguarding is robust. There are clear arrangements in place to make sure that the people who work with and care for children are thoroughly vetted and checked. Several members of the panel have an extensive background in safeguarding and child protection, which is a great asset to this service. CCS Adoption has appropriate policies and procedures for dealing with disclosures and allegations, accessible to all staff and reinforced with frequent and mandatory training. Procedures are implemented in practice by staff, who demonstrate a strong awareness of safeguarding issues, embedded in research and practice.

During specific sessions, which form part of the preparation and assessment process, the service provides information to prospective adopters about abuse and neglect and its impact on children. The service's medical advisor is a consultant paediatrician, who attends the prospective adopters' information day as a presenter to discuss attachment, loss and safeguarding matters. As a consequence, adopters feel prepared to protect and support children and have an understanding of the potential long-term impact of any previous abuse, including reference to recent research in brain development.

There is a 'family and friends' course, which people within prospective adopters' support networks are invited to. This training enables relatives and friends to increase their awareness of safeguarding matters related to adoption. Prospective adopters are shown 'protecting our children', a locally filmed documentary series regarding child protection services. They are also supplied with a safer caring handbook publication to refer to and to revisit as part of the matching process; this makes sure that they consider a range of issues around safety.

Children and young people say they feel safe and adopters have a good awareness of children's needs. Young people say that an adoption social worker is available to talk to if they have any problems. Support and advice is available to adopters. Disclosures and allegations are dealt with in a prompt manner, through reference to the South West's local safeguarding procedures and policies. Allegations of historical abuse are always referred to the relevant local authority and the outcomes of these allegations are proactively pursued. However, this process, although followed up actively, is not recorded alongside the original notification to the local authority or Local Area Designated Officer, which makes it less clear to follow the progress of any allegation.

There is an up-to-date, thorough recruitment and vetting process. This ensures that staff and carers who are appointed or approved are checked correctly and that they are aware of their duties and responsibilities to keep children safe. Staff and carers' files are subject to a regular audit process to ensure that all statutory checks are kept up to date.

Referrals from adopted adults who wish to see their records are dealt with promptly and they are also signposted to relevant support agencies should they wish to trace their birth families. The agency has a safeguarding policy and procedure in place to deal with these matters should they arise.

Leadership and management

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

The performance and delivery of this adoption service is very closely scrutinised, monitored and reported upon to trustees and leaders of the organisation in various forms. The adoption monitoring report is extremely detailed and superior in content when compared to others.

The service has an ambitious three-year business plan in place. This identifies areas where the agency strives to develop, expand and respond to tackling delays in the adoption system. The service is financially stable. There is a Statement of Purpose which is clearly written, regularly reviewed and describes in detail the aims and objectives of the service. A children's guide is accessible and inclusive for children of differing abilities. There are numerous social events for adoptive families, including birth children, which they say they enjoy and look forward to attending. Children and young adopted adults remain actively involved in the service development through their attendance and feedback from support groups. This ensures that their voices are heard in developing the service.

The social work and administrative staff appointed are highly competent, trained, supervised and well supported. Several members of staff have extended their learning further than social work qualifications. There is an extensive induction process for new staff. This equips them with necessary skills to supervise and assess adopters, support adopted adults and make sure that adopted children's needs are properly considered. Appraisals of social workers and the manager's competency takes place at least once a year. The actively involved manager of the service is a professionally qualified and registered social work practitioner with several years' experience in adoption work and holds the appropriate management qualification. The high levels of support from management ensure that children receive an excellent quality of care from well prepared and supported adoptive parents.

Support group meetings for adoptive families and on-going training and social events are well attended. This further ensures that children are cared for by informed parents who contribute to the development of the service and say that their feedback is taken on board and responded to. Managers of the service have developed positive and close working relationships with placing authorities, education and health services. The agency is an actively involved member of the south west adoption consortium. This ensures that there is a joint multi-agency approach to being aware of trends in adoption, finding families and meeting the needs of adopted children.

Members of staff are also effectively supported by good supervision and accessible managers at a local level. There is a mix of staff, some who have been with the agency for a long period and others who have recently joined. Staff are highly committed to supporting adopters and adopted adults and demonstrate a wide range of experience and knowledge necessary to deliver an effective and empowering service. This is recognised and valued by partner agencies and adopters. There is a high level of positive feedback from adopters and placing social workers and managers who say the service is, 'thorough professional and trusted. It's smashing to work with good managers.'

The agencies premises are accessible and welcoming. Rooms are available for training, staff supervision and meetings. There are displays promoting diversity in the office's waiting areas. This ensures there are positive images of people from a range of backgrounds and experiences and emphasises the agency's commitment to promoting equality and tackling discrimination.

There was one recommendation made at the last inspection, which was promptly addressed. This has resulted in copies of information required for statutory check and references on staff and panel members being kept in records. The manager is aware of the area highlighted for development at this inspection and is highly committed to improve outcomes for children who are placed in adoptive families as well as those who wait.

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.