



Inspection Report on

St David`s Children Society

**28 Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3BA**

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Description of the service

St David's Children Society is a registered charity and has provided adoption services in Wales and Herefordshire since 1942. It has been registered as a Voluntary Adoption Agency since 2006; the position of registered manager is fulfilled by Anna Nyamhotsi and Melanie Oates and a responsible individual has been nominated. The charitable trust is also responsible for the Association of Fostering and Adoption (AFA Cymru) and the Adopting Together project.

The agency's offices are in Park Place in Cardiff.

Summary of our findings

1. Overall assessment

Overall, the agency is well led and managed and works in collaboration with other agencies to improve services and outcomes for children. The service is provided in line with regulations and its statement of purpose and is effective in recruiting; assessing and supporting adopters so children can thrive in stable and sustainable families.

The staff, managers and panel are experienced; well trained and motivated and committed to quality assurance and the continuing improvement of the service.

Improvements

Improvements have been made in relation to:

- Family finding services for specific children and sibling groups.
- The development of the Adopting Together project.
- The integration with AFA Cymru.

2. Requirements and recommendations

No areas of non-compliance were identified.

Our recommendations to improve the service are included in section four of this report and are in relation to the provision of services in the Welsh Language, the development of quality assurance processes and the management of intermediary records.

1. Well-being

Summary

People have good access to the service and initial visits to prospective adopters are made without delay. The agency's recruitment of prospective adopters is targeted to meet identified need and the standard of preparation training is high. The assessments of prospective adopters reflect the insight and experience of the agency's assessors and processes are well developed to ensure children are matched with adopters who can meet their needs.

Our findings

Information and access to the service is good. Feedback from the group of adopters we met with indicated that the arrangements for accessing the service and the information available about the services provided by the agency were very good. They told us they liked the drop in sessions where they could call in on an impromptu basis and have face-to-face conversations with a staff member. They said that any enquiries they made had been dealt with swiftly and that staff had treated them with courtesy and respect. Administrative staff told us that they transferred initial telephone enquiries to the social work team who had the knowledge and experience to deal with them.

In addition to the statement of purpose, the agency provided information about its services on its website as well as in various leaflets and an 'Adoption Information Pack'. The information was comprehensive and was seen to be child focussed and to promote equality and diversity. It included step by step information about the journey adopters would take from initial enquiries to promoting the well-being of children as part of their families. We noted that the statement of purpose nor the information pack made clear the right of applicants to have decisions made about their assessments referred to an independent review panel; although this was made clear in a separate document provided for adopters when attending the adoption panel. Some adopters said there was a need to further develop information about the agency on social media and the staff and managers told us that a working group was addressing this. We conclude that access to the service is good and comprehensive information is available about the services provided by the agency.

Initial visits are made in a timely and professional manner. A designated social worker made all initial visits and adopters told us that their visits had taken place within days of their initial enquiries. They said they had been reassured by the knowledge and skills of the social worker who visited them and confident about being assessed and supported by the agency as a result. Records showed that 100% of initial enquiries had been responded to within five working days and arrangements made for visits where appropriate. This is evidence that prospective adopters are confident and reassured about the calibre of the staff and the agency.

Adopters are recruited from diverse backgrounds to meet the diverse needs of children. The agency's information pack stated that its primary commitment was "*to find local families for local children, whatever their culture or religious heritage*". It stated that "*children available for adoption came in single placements, in two's, three's and even four's*" and that the agency "*specialised in finding families for children over three, children who have brothers and sisters and children who have more complex needs including a disability*". The agency had led the development of the '*Adopting Together*' project to respond to a need identified by the National Adoption Service to find families for children who, for a range of reasons, had waited over a year for adoptive placements. The project employed innovative recruitment techniques and provided intensive support, including therapeutic support for children to develop bonds and attachments in their new families. Managers told us they planned to increase their recruitment adopters. This is evidence that the agency is committed to recruiting and supporting adopters for children who otherwise may not find forever families.

Adopters receive high quality preparation and assessment. Adopters attended three days of preparation training prior to the commencement of their assessments and told us the quality of their preparation and the skills of the staff and trainer had been excellent. One adopter said they had felt a little intimidated when attending their first preparation session because about thirty people attended and it was at City Hall. They said that any initial fears were quickly overcome however when they were welcomed by the staff and introduced to other prospective adopters. Managers told us that some preparation events had previously been held in larger groups and venues but they generally took place at their offices and in much smaller groups. They said they always sought feedback from people about their preparation training so they could make any necessary improvements.

The assessments were seen to be high quality and mid-point reviews were held to discuss the progress of assessments with the prospective adopters, the assessor and their manager. All adopters told us their assessments had been completed in a timely manner and that their assessors had been skilful in their role. A couple who were third time adopters said '*our assessments were carried out with skill and professionalism and full consideration was given to our differing circumstances in each assessment; and our whole family were engaged in these*'. One adopter told us '*I appreciated the flexibility employed by my assessor when I needed to delay the assessment due to work commitments*'. Another adopter told us '*my partner and I appreciated the opportunity to reflect on our past and current relationships and consider how this would influence our ability as adoptive parents*'.

For some people the adoption assessment process can provoke anxiety and this was reflected in comments made by some adopters who described finding the assessment process difficult at first. Adopters were able to reflect on this, they understood the need for a rigorous process and described subsequently feeling confident and well supported by their social workers. The statement of purpose made clear that all applicants would be provided a copy of their assessment. Adopters told us they had been reassured by staff when attending the adoption panel and that its members treated them politely and professionally.

This is evidence that prospective adopters are prepared and assessed thoroughly to ensure they can provide sustainable placements for children.

Children are matched with adopters who can meet their needs. The agency provided support to adopters during linking and matching processes and evidence in records and feedback from adopters and staff indicated the agency was effective in ensuring that full information was made available about children so that effective matching could take place. The agency also made sure that life journey work and later life letters were completed by local authorities and supported adopters to create age appropriate information for children as part of their introduction to their new homes. This is evidence that children are provided support and information to understand the circumstances surrounding their adoption.

Children are protected because safeguarding procedures are implemented. The agency's safeguarding policy was comprehensive and relevant to its roles and responsibilities. Managers confirmed that all staff; including administrative staff had received safeguarding training and that systems were in place to ensure their training was renewed every three years; and provided for newly appointed staff. We confirmed that safeguarding training for adopters was included within preparation and assessment processes and that specialist training and support was available for adopters of children who had experienced abuse or neglect. Managers told us they had employed a lessons learned approach to any disruptions that had taken place and that they had implemented the recommendations arising from a recent child practice review in regard to an adopted child in a neighbouring local authority. We confirmed that records were in place in relation to safeguarding concerns and that these had been dealt with appropriately. This is evidence that the welfare of children is promoted effectively by the agency.

2. Care and Support

Summary

The agency provides robust and high quality support for adopters so they have the knowledge and skills to promote the well-being of children.

Our findings

Adopters receive advice, training and life-long support. Adopters told us how much they valued the wide range of training and support they received from St David's and the relationships they had developed with the staff and other adopters approved by the agency. Records showed the social workers were experienced and well trained so they could provide high quality support for adopters to understand and meet the diverse and sometimes complex needs of children. The agency organised quarterly support meetings which included guest speakers, and adopters told us these increased their knowledge and understanding and gave them the opportunity to discuss their own experiences with other adopters. The agency circulated an annual newsletter to all adopters they had approved and encouraged them to contribute any news and information about their experiences and the achievements of the children.

In addition, the agency provided a telephone helpline and where necessary, signposted people to other helpline services including one provided by the AFA Cymru. They provided a twice weekly drop in session at their offices and adopters told us they were made welcome at any time they chose to call in. Stay and play sessions had been introduced for adopters with pre-school children to provide them the opportunity to talk with other adopters whilst their children played together. Adopters were linked with a buddy (an approved adopter) to provide peer support and some told us they had developed important and lasting friendships with their buddies. They said they enjoyed the social events organised by the agency and that these provided children the opportunity to meet other children who had been adopted. They said they were able to access support at any time including on weekends and that they were confident speaking to any of the staff team because of the relationships they had developed with them at training and social events. One adopter told us *"To know they are there if we need them makes such a difference."* Another told us about a time they had phoned their social worker late at night and how much they had appreciated being able to do that. They said their social workers never made them feel they were a nuisance whenever they contacted them.

Several adopters told us how the agency had advocated for them to ensure children received additional support and provided examples where this had led to children accessing the therapeutic and the educational support they needed. The agency provided support and guidance for adopters to write contact letters to children's birth families and when undertaking life journey work. This is evidence that adopters receive expert and robust support to safeguard children and to ensure they access any support necessary to achieve good outcomes.

People are supported through disruption. There had been one disruption of an adoptive placement supported by the agency in the year 2017 – 2018 and one in the year 2018 - 2019 to date. No disruptions had been reported after adoption orders had been made. We saw detailed records of the support the agency had provided for a family during a disruption and evidence that they had attempted to engage with a local authority to ensure the child received any support they needed. The records indicated the local authority had been reluctant to engage in reviewing the circumstances surrounding the disruption but the agency had reviewed and considered any lessons that could be learned to inform future practice. Managers told us the staff and panel members had received training from AFA Cymru in understanding and addressing the complex issues surrounding adoptive placement disruptions. This is evidence that the sustainability of adoptive placements is high and that the agency is committed to preventing and managing placement disruption.

People have access to high quality intermediary services. The agency had produced an information booklet that made clear the intermediary services it provided and how to access these. Records showed there had been no delays for people accessing these services and that they were primarily provided by one social worker who was knowledgeable and experienced in their role. Records indicated that the social worker had engaged sensitively and professionally with people using these services and 'thank you' correspondence provided evidence they had been appreciative of the quality of support they had received. Managers told us they planned to develop the expertise of additional social workers to provide these services in the future. The agency did not charge for providing intermediary services but we saw that records had been made of any donations people had made. Notwithstanding the high standard of the intermediary services provided by the agency, files were not well organised and did not provide a clear audit trail of the checks and work that had been undertaken. This is evidence that people receive good support when accessing intermediary services but the management of some records need improving.

3. Quality Of Leadership and Management

Summary

The agency is well led and managed and operates in line with regulations and its statement of purpose. Some aspects of the service have been further developed since the last inspection and the agency is committed to high standards and continuous improvement.

Our findings

There is a clear vision for the service and it is managed by people with suitable skills and experience. The statement of purpose dated December 2018 provided comprehensive information about the operation and resourcing and the aims and objectives of the service. It generally reflected the diversity and equality promoted by the agency but did not make clear whether the agency could provide the Welsh Governments' 'Active Offer' of providing services in the Welsh language. The responsible individual was appointed following the retirement of the previous longstanding CEO; they had previously been the Director of the British Association of Adoption and Fostering before becoming the deputy director of St David's; then the chief executive officer, responsible individual and agency decision maker in December 2018. The two managers that fulfilled the registered manager position had considerable relevant experience, within St David's and in other child care and adoption services. A new deputy director had been appointed but had not started at the time of the inspection. Consultation from the adoption team indicated they had confidence in their managers to deliver and further develop the service.

The quality of staffing is good. The staff team told us that staffing levels were generally sufficient to maintain high standards of practice although there was a staff vacancy at the time of the inspection. Managers said the vacancy had been advertised; that the team had worked well to cover the vacancy and that independent assessors had been employed to undertake some assessments to prevent any delays. Newer staff told us they had received induction to their roles and the staff team told us they had access to a wide range of training to develop and maintain their expertise. The training matrix confirmed the staff had attended a considerable range of training and reflected the agency's commitment to high standards of professional practice. The staff team confirmed they attended regular supervision and team meetings and managers told us that independent assessors were also provided training and supervision to fulfil their roles. Managers confirmed they had appraised the performance of all staff members to ensure high standards of professional practice were fulfilled. Adopters told us they were appreciative of the skills and dedication of the agency's social workers and the high standard of support they provided them. Adopters, staff and panel members' files provided evidence that all necessary recruitment checks had been undertaken. This is evidence that staff are safely recruited and well trained and supported to deliver the service effectively.

The agency works in collaboration with others. St David's operates in partnership with the National Adoption Service in Wales as well as other voluntary adoption and adoption support agencies. It led the development of the Adopting Together project which was launched in June 2018 and worked closely with AFA Cymru. We saw good evidence that the agency had worked closely with local authorities in supporting adopters during the linking and matching processes; when children were being introduced and living in their new families and when any disruptions occurred. We conclude that the agency is committed to joint working with other agencies to improve services and outcomes for children.

The location and premises provide well for their purpose. Adopters spoke positively about the city centre location of the service and we saw there was sufficient space for the staff and managers and to provide training and panel meetings. The AFA Cymru team are located by prior arrangement in the Children in Wales Office and the Director of AFA Cymru is located in the St. David's office. The Adopting Together project is located at St David's. We confirmed there were suitable arrangements for security and the secure storage of records.

The agency is committed to quality assurance and continuing improvement. The strategic plan for 2019 – 2022 set out the vision and aims of the service and managers provided quarterly reports to the board of trustees for 'St David's Children Society'. An annual report completed by the managers for the year ending 31 March 2018 included data and an overview of the provision of the adoption service including the work of the panel. This is evidence that systems are established for monitoring, reviewing and improving the services provided by the agency.

One complaint had been made in the twelve months prior to the inspection. Records showed that the complainant had been provided information about the timescales to deal with their complaint and that their complaint was being handled in line with the agency's procedures.

The adoption panel promotes safe and secure placements for children. We confirmed that the constitution of the panel was appropriate; that its membership had remained consistent for several years and that its proceedings had only taken place when quorate. We confirmed that panel members had been provided induction and ongoing training and that they had been subject to annual appraisal. The panel meeting we observed provided time for members to consider the application, to discuss it with the assessing social worker and to meet with the applicants and involve them in discussion about their application. We saw that rigorous scrutiny was made by panel members of the application and the panel chair told us that the quality of assessments was consistently good. We confirmed that the reasons for recommendations made by panel were included in the records of their proceedings. This is evidence that the panel provides rigorous scrutiny of applications for prospective adopters to ensure they can provide safe and sustainable homes for children.

4. Improvements required and recommended following this inspection

4.1 Areas of non-compliance from previous inspections

No areas of non-compliance were identified.

4.2 Recommendations for improvement

- To further develop quality assurance processes and include an assessment of the degree to which the aims and objectives of the statement of purpose are met and evidence to demonstrate how these support well-being outcomes for children.
- That the statement of purpose includes information to make clear if the agency is able to provide the Welsh Governments' 'Active Offer' of providing services in the Welsh language.
- That the statement of purpose and adopters information pack includes information about the independent review mechanism so adopters are aware of this at all stages of their journey.
- That intermediary files include a clear audit trail of work that has been undertaken.

5. How we undertook this inspection

This was a full inspection undertaken as part of our inspection programme.

We made three visits to the service:

- Monday 11 February 2019 between 9:30 am and 5.00 pm.
- Tuesday 12 February 2019 between 09.00 am and 5.00 pm.
- Monday 18 February 2019 between 11.00 am and 19.45 pm

Information for this report was gathered from:

- Information held by CIW about the service.
- The self-evaluation and data return completed by the service.
- Documentation and records including; the statement of purpose and quality assurance reports; files relating to children, adopters; staff and intermediary services.
- Three case files that were subject to case tracking (adopter & child file were viewed together and followed by discussion with the social worker and line manager).
- Attending the adoption panel.

Interviews were held with:

- A group of adopters
 - The staff team
 - The responsible individual
 - Two registered adoption team managers
 - A registered manager and social worker together
 - The panel chair
 - The director of AFA Cymru
 - The project manager of Adopting Together
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- Viewing the premises.

Inspection feedback was provided to the responsible individual and registered managers.

Further information about what we do can be found on our website:

www.careinspectorate.wales

About the service

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| Type of care provided | Voluntary Adoption Agency |
| Registered Person | St David`s Children Society |
| Registered Manager | Melanie Oates Anna Nyamhotsi |
| Registered maximum number of places | Not applicable. |
| Date of previous Care Inspectorate Wales inspection | 21st May 2013 to 13th June 2013. |
| Dates of this Inspection visits | 11/02/2019. 12/02/2019 and 18/02/2019 |
| Operating Language of the service | English |
| Does this service provide the Welsh Language active offer? | No |
| Additional Information: | |