

The Together Trust Fostering Service

Together Trust

The Together Trust Centre, Schools Hill, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 1JE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is owned and managed by a registered charity. The charity also provides education services and owns and manages several residential care homes.

The agency registered with Ofsted in 2003.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2017.

At the time of this inspection, there were 30 children placed with the agency in 23 fostering households.

The agency provides short-term, long-term and respite placements.

Inspection dates: 1 to 5 December 2025

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **inadequate**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **inadequate**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 24 October 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

There have been significant shortfalls in safeguarding practice, and these have affected the experiences of some children. However, other children living with carers in this agency have had a positive and stable experience.

Many records across all levels of the service contain language that places blame on children. This includes documents written by the registered manager, social workers and foster carers. As a result, concerns about foster carers' practice and knowledge can be overlooked because the emphasis is placed on children's presenting behaviours rather than the underlying issues. Furthermore, if children access these records in adulthood, the language used could have a negative emotional impact on them.

Foster carers say that they have positive relationships with their social workers and benefit from regular support, including outside of working hours. Most foster carers have worked with the agency for many years and know all the social workers and managers. This enables them to feel confident that professionals know them and the children they care for, when they reach out for support.

Foster carers benefit from therapeutic consultations with an in-house therapist when children move in or when families are struggling. This service helps carers to think about children's experiences and behaviours, to enable them to provide more individualised care for children.

Foster carers speak positively about the agency holiday that is provided for all foster families each summer. This is an opportunity for foster carers and children to come together and enjoy activities while building relationships with other families like theirs. Foster families are also able to build relationships with social workers, support workers and the management team during the holiday.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: inadequate

Children cared for through this agency are not consistently kept safe. Managers and social workers have not provided sufficient challenge to foster carers when expected standards of care have not been met. The agency does not have a clear process for staff to follow when concerns about standards of care arise. As a result, no investigations have been undertaken, and both social workers and managers lack clarity about when such action is required.

Children in this agency rarely go missing from home. However, on the occasions when this does occur, missing-from-care procedures are not consistently followed. This has led to delays in reporting for at least one child who was missing overnight. Of greater concern, when the child returned to school the following morning, the

foster carers refused to collect them despite being asked by at least three different professionals. This neglectful response was neither investigated nor appropriately challenged.

When children have been physically restrained, this has not always been carried out in accordance with the training provided to foster carers. As a result, at least one child was lowered to the floor and sat astride by their male foster carer. Although several concerns arose in this household over a 2-year period, managers and staff did not identify emerging patterns in a timely way. Consequently, the agency did not provide the necessary support to the carers to help them understand how to keep children safe through appropriate and approved methods.

Risk assessments and safe care plans are not robust. These documents do not fully assess potential risks and do not provide strategies to mitigate risks. This has resulted in a convicted sex offender regularly visiting a foster home where children lived, including on one occasion following two younger children having moved in. This was despite the agency's knowledge of this risk. The younger children were not considered in the assessment of risk that the sex offender posed, and no mitigation strategies were in place. In another household, two siblings were sharing a bed for an extended period. There was no consideration of the risks that they potentially pose to each other and no robust safe care plan in place. This does not provide foster carers with strategies to follow to ensure that children remain safe in their care.

Allegations against foster carers are not always investigated or appropriately referred to other agencies. When allegations about foster carers are investigated, carers are not always provided with sufficient support while investigations are completed. Additionally, when a child made an allegation about a member of staff at school, there was a delay in informing the school about the concerns, which left other children at risk.

Managers and social workers in the agency do not provide sufficient challenge to other agencies or consistently escalate concerns when required. For one child, the professional network agreed 10 months before the inspection that information should be sought under Clare's Law regarding the child's boyfriend. Despite no information being returned, the agency continued to wait for the child's local authority to pursue this and did not take proactive steps to obtain the information itself. This has left at least one child at risk of harm and has prevented a full understanding of the potential risk this individual may pose to the child or others in the household.

Social workers, managers and support workers in the agency lack professional curiosity. When one child discussed with agency professionals that they had drunk alcohol, this was not challenged or explored. Additionally, there is no evidence that these concerns have been shared with external professionals. Many social workers

have worked with foster families for over a decade, which has led to complacency within the team and a lack of challenge to carers.

Foster carers receive an annual review of their suitability to foster. However, when writing review reports, social workers focus on positive practice and foster carers' wellbeing, with insufficient attention to practice concerns. This does not enable practice concerns to be fully explored during review meetings or at panel. Additionally, the independent person who chairs the review meetings is unable to identify if anything has been missed from the report, as they do not have access to the relevant files. This does not enable robust and independent oversight.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The registered manager has led the fostering service for a number of years. However, the registered manager is not able to evidence a full understanding of the legislation and guidance relevant to this sector.

The agency decision-maker, who has been in post since January 2025, does not meet the basic criteria laid out in the national minimum standards. This means that all decisions made by this agency decision-maker are unlawful.

Leaders and managers do not maintain sufficient oversight of practice and have failed to identify the significant safeguarding concerns identified at this inspection. These have, therefore, not been appropriately responded to, and patterns of poor practice have been missed. When social workers fail to appropriately record their visits, or fail to challenge carers, this is not identified by the registered manager.

The registered manager makes attempts to learn from disruptions. However, there is no joint reflection with carers or other professionals, which means that consideration of challenges is done from only one perspective. The purpose of these reports is not clear, as there is no learning identified that would enable the agency to take action or the foster carers to improve their practice.

Social workers and support workers in the agency feel well supported by their manager. Staff are provided with regular supervision and appropriate opportunities for professional development. Social workers benefit from exceedingly low caseloads that enable them to focus on the families that they support.

What does the independent fostering 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 Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
*The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a)) Specifically, the registered person must ensure that risk assessments and safe care plans are robust and include potential risks as well as mitigation strategies. Additionally, when practice concerns arise, appropriate challenge should be made to ensure that carers are suitable to continue to meet children's needs.	10 March 2026
*The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must manage the agency with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(b)) Specifically, the registered manager must monitor all records to ensure compliance with the service's policies, identify patterns and trends and take immediate action to respond to concerns raised by this monitoring.	10 March 2026
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service. (Regulation 19 (a)(b)) Specifically, the registered person must have a clear understanding of the regulations and standards that govern the service. Additionally, the registered person must ensure that the agency decision-maker is a qualified social worker with a minimum of 3 years post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice.	10 May 2026

The registered person must maintain a system for— improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b)) Specifically, the registered person must ensure that opportunities to learn are taken at the earliest possible time to ensure that children are kept as safe as possible, as quickly as possible.	10 May 2026
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which— is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b)) Specifically, the registered person must ensure that foster carers and staff know what to do if an allegation is made, and that allegation policies are consistently followed. The fostering service must ensure that the required actions are immediately taken in any relevant situation of which it is aware. Foster carers and staff must have clear guidance about how carers will be supported during an investigation into an allegation.	10 May 2026
The registered person must ensure that foster carers and staff know and follow policies and procedures relevant to safeguarding children, behaviour management, and children who are missing from home. Additionally, the registered person must ensure that foster carers act in accordance with the agency's statement of purpose and children's guide. If foster carers do not follow agency policies, this must be challenged and revisited. (Regulation 17 (2))	10 May 2026
The registered person must ensure that all relevant information about foster carers' practice is provided within the carers' annual review, to enable robust oversight and decision-making about their suitability to continue fostering. (Regulation 28 (1)(3)(a))	10 May 2026
The registered person must ensure that all relevant information is provided to panel, including comprehensive information about concerns relating to the practice of foster carers. (Regulation 25 (3))	10 May 2026

* These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

Recommendations

- The registered person should have a policy that sets out what constitutes a concern about standards of care, when an investigation should be initiated and how standard of care concerns will be investigated. The fostering service should ensure that a clear distinction is made between investigations into allegations of harm and discussions over standards of care. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 22.10)
- The registered person should take efficient action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. When concerns are not rectified in a timely manner, the registered person should provide appropriate challenge and escalate the concern further. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.8)
- The registered person should ensure that staff within the fostering service are professionally curious to ensure that children are safeguarded both within the fostering household and in the community. Meetings should have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work and ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about its carers' ongoing suitability to foster. Specifically, the registered person must ensure that those chairing foster carer reviews are provided with all information relevant to the review to provide robust and independent oversight. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.8)
- The registered person should ensure that managers, staff and foster carers write about children in a way that is non-stigmatising, distinguishes between fact and opinion and does not apportion blame to children. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.5)
- The registered person should ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.2)
- The registered person should ensure that when reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision-maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM* [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin), in which the court set out guidance for the way in which an adoption agency decision-maker should approach a case, whether it is a decision based on the agency panel's recommendation or the independent review panel's recommendation. This applies equally to fostering decision-makers. The court said that it would be good discipline and appropriate for the decision-maker to:

- list the material taken into account in reaching the decision;
- identify key arguments;
- consider whether they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel(s) and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel(s) has properly addressed the arguments;
- consider whether any additional information now available to them that was not before the panel has an impact on its reasons or recommendation;
- identify the reasons given for the relevant recommendation that they do or do not wish to adopt; and
- state (a) the adopted reasons by cross reference or otherwise and (b) any further reasons for their decision. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.40)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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 Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC031288

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Inspectors

Aislinn Cooper, Social Care Regulatory Inspector
Sarah Probert, Social Care Regulatory Inspector

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