

The Children's Family Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sue Young
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Children's Family Trust (hereinafter the Trust) is a charitable organisation operating as an independent fostering agency. The Head office is in Worcestershire with registered offices currently in Worcestershire, Yorkshire, Hampshire and County Durham. The Trust offers short and long term, respite and parent and child placements. It undertakes recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers. At the time of the inspection the Trust's West Midland Office supported 43 approved foster carers with 61 children and young people in placement.

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

Since the last inspection the agency has moved premises and is now located in Bromsgrove alongside the agency's head office. The agency has grown considerably over recent years and now consists of four separate registered branches. The agency is child focussed. Managers demonstrate clear vision for the development of the agency and for improving the outcomes of the children and young people placed with them. They are quick to respond to any concern, to improve the running of the agency and improve outcomes for children and young people. Managers have strengthened the agency's systems and procedures to ensure a strong focus of safeguarding is embedded within the agency. Unannounced visits, safer caring plans and risk assessments further support this. Children and young people do not run away or regularly put themselves at risk.

Children and young people are living in well matched placements where they are

able to develop safe and secure relationships. They are having their individual needs well met and are positive about the care they receive. As a result, placement stability is good and children and young people are making good progress. The agency's ethos is a 'family for life'. They excel in the support they provide to young people approaching adulthood and for those post 18.

The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers to meet the needs of the children and young people they care for. Assessments of prospective foster carers have improved and are robust and analytical. Foster carers express a high level of satisfaction with the agency and feel well supported and informed. One foster carer commented, 'what I have received has outstripped my expectations by a long way.'

The fostering panel and agency decision maker make well-informed decisions based on sound reasoning. Recent changes in procedures have further strengthened this process. The fostering panel, however, is not ethnically diverse. The lack of knowledge regarding cultural difference and confidence in challenging this has effected its ability to make informed recommendations regarding suitability of prospective foster carers.

One requirement and three recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection. None of which have a direct impact on children's experiences, outcomes or progress. These relate to recruitment procedures, training and the agency's fostering panel.

Areas of improvement

Statutory Requirements

Requirement	Due date
ensure the fostering service provider does not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(1)(a)(3))	31/12/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure the number, skill, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. This refers specifically to the ethnic and cultural diversity of those on the central list (NMS 14.8)

ensure the learning and development programme equips staff and panel members

with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up to date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. This refers specifically to equality and diversity training (NMS 23.1)

ensure each person on the central list is given induction training which is completed within 10 weeks of joining the central list. (NMS 23.9)

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

Judgement outcome:
Good

Children and young people experience safe and nurturing placements where they form strong attachments to their foster families. They are making good progress because they feel secure and are able to develop in confidence and self-esteem. Foster carers help them to understand their past and identity. They are encouraged to maintain family links and sustain relationships which are important to them. If required, children can access play therapy funded by the agency to help them develop in confidence. Wherever possible children and young people experience planned introductions to foster families. Careful matching results in good stability for the vast majority of placements. One child commented, 'I love it here'.

Children and young people are supported to be healthy. They attend routine and specialist health appointments. This ensures their basic and more complex health needs are met. Matching is carefully considered to ensure those children with very complex health needs are placed with foster carers who are skilled and experienced to enable them to meet their needs well. For instance, the agency are in discussions with a local authority about the alterations needed to a foster carer's house before a young person, who is in wheelchair, can move in. They are also offering to help pay for a specialist wheelchair to meet his needs.

Children and young people are making very good progress in their education. This is because education is given a high priority both by foster carers and the agency. Foster carers attend educational meetings and children and young people's achievements are celebrated both by foster carers and by the agency. The agency employs the services of an education advisor who liaises with the virtual head for schools to ensure all children and young people have prompt access to a school place. As a result, all children and young people of statutory school age are in full time education.

Children and young people are supported to express their wishes and feelings. Supervising social workers actively seek their views during home visits and through individual direct work. One foster carer commented, 'My children and any fostered children are regularly visited and supported... They love visits from our supervising social worker and always ask when she is coming to visit again.' There is active engagement and participation of children and young people throughout their placement. This enables them to influence their day-to-day care and have a say in the running of the agency. For example, following feedback from children and young people, the agency has changed the way it seeks to gain their views prior to annual reviews. The agency are also developing foster carer family profiles so children and young people can see and understand more about their prospective foster families before placement.

The agency provides excellent support to young people approaching adulthood and for those post 18. The ethos of the agency is that all children have the right to a

family life, for life. Young people are able to remain with their foster families when they reach 18 and only move into independence when it is appropriate for them to do so. When this happens their foster carers and the agency provide continued emotional, practical and financial support. The agency has a post 18 'staying put' advisor who provides consultation and ensures that adequate transition arrangements for young people are in place. Over recent years the agency has funded driving lessons, child care costs and independent living accommodation costs. As a result, young people are well supported to reach their potential and achieve economic well-being.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome:
Good

The preparation, assessment and support of foster carers are effective and timely. If there is any delay in the assessment process there are good reasons for this. The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers to meet children and young people's needs. The quality of foster carer assessments have greatly improved and these are now detailed and analytical. This is because the processes around the recruitment and assessment of foster carers have been strengthened. For example, all foster carer assessments are continually reviewed throughout the process by the principle supervising social worker to ensure their quality and to assess the content before allowing the assessment to continue.

The agency's fostering panel and agency decision maker generally make timely and appropriate decisions which promote the welfare of children and young people in foster care. Systems have been introduced to strengthen robustness in the decision making process and to ensure appropriate matching takes place. The panel has a balance of gender, age and qualifications and has an ex-looked after young person as a member of the fostering panel who is able to make a useful contribution to panel's decision making processes. The fostering panel, however, is not diverse in respect of culture and religion. The lack of knowledge regarding cultural difference and confidence in challenging this when required has proved problematic in the past when making recommendations on the suitability of foster carers. Although all new panel members are able to observe a panel prior to starting they do not receive induction training to help them develop in competence.

Foster carers receive a high level of support from the agency. Feedback from foster carers has been universally positive. One foster carer commented, 'The fostering service is second to none...It's like having an extended family.' Another stated 'It has a good family feel and we feel supported and valued.' Foster carers are supported through regular and frequent home visits and supervision. They have access to a therapist to provide advice and support regarding children and young people's behaviour.

Foster carers receive regular and ongoing training covering a diverse area, including, safeguarding, first aid, drugs and alcohol use and attachment. Developments in

practice and legislation are further disseminated to carers through monthly team meetings and in quarterly newsletters. The vast majority of carers have either completed or are currently undertaking the Training Development Standards.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome:
Good

The agency is prompt to ensure any allegations against foster carers are referred appropriately. This is because there is a strong commitment to ensure the safety and welfare of children and young people in their care. There is an open and honest culture within the agency. When shortfalls are identified managers act swiftly to strengthened their processes and systems. For instance, following a safeguarding concern regarding a foster carer, managers engaged an independent investigation to improve their recruitment and approval procedures. As a result, children and young people feel safe in their fostering households and are safe. There is a strong focus of safeguarding within the agency which is embedded in policy and procedure which underpin the recruitment, assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers. Foster carers and staff know how to respond to safeguarding allegations, risks from child sexual exploitation and risks associated with the use of the internet.

Children and young people do not regularly engage in risk taking behaviours or go missing from their foster placements. There has only been one incident of a young person going missing in last the last 12 months. Return to home interviews are completed and staff and foster carers are fully aware of the joint police protocols for missing children in their area.

The agency complete safer caring plans and risk assessments to ensure children and young people are effectively supported and protected. These are detailed and specific to children and young people in placements. Unannounced visits and health and safety checks are completed by staff members other than the supervising social worker to ensure independence and robustness.

Children and young people have made no complaints during the last 12 months. They are aware how to make a complaint if they are unhappy and have access to a range of adults with whom they feel able to raise any concerns or issues. Supervising social workers ensure they see them alone on a regular basis to discuss any concerns they may have. There have been two complaints made to the agency in the last 12 months by foster carers. These were responded to quickly and concluded promptly, with satisfaction to the complainants.

Thorough recruitment and vetting procedures are in place for permanent staff and panel members. One consultant employed on a casual basis, however, has not had written checks conducted as required. The impact of this is negligible as he does not have direct involvement with children and young people or their records.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome:

Good

The agency grown considerably since the last inspection and there are now four separately registered branches across the country. They have recently moved to larger premises in Bromsgrove which incorporates the Midlands branch and the Trust's head office. There is effective administration systems to support the work conducted by the agency. Electronic records ensure accessibility and confidentiality.

The agency has a new manager who is in the process of registration. The previous registered manager has taken up the position of regional manager. The agency is effectively resourced and staff feel supported and well trained. There is a small but skilled and experienced staff team. This has been further strengthened by the recent engagement of an experienced senior practitioner and the development of a participation worker post. Foster carer recruitment in the West Midland region is steady. The agency have been successful in recruiting foster carers and increasing placement numbers. The vast majority of foster carers are recruited through word of mouth.

The statement of purpose, foster carers' charter and children's guides are easily accessible on the website and accurately reflect the functions of the agency and the service offered. There are four children's guides developed in word and Makaton to cover all ages and abilities. These ensure all those using the agency are aware and understand the aims and objectives of the service provided.

Strong management arrangements are in place. Managers have a clear vision for the development of the agency and for the children and young people placed with foster carers. The agency is delivering a service that is improving outcomes for children and young people. They regularly monitor the activities of the agency and the progress of individual children and young people placed with foster carers. For example, the manager has developed outcomes trackers which follows the development and progress of children and young people. These combined with monthly management and quarterly trustee reports demonstrate the agency is committed to driving continuous improvement in the outcomes for children and young people and in the delivery of service provision.

The agency work well in partnership with other agencies, including placing authorities. This is because managers, staff and foster carers have developed effective working relationships with placing social workers and commissioners. One local authority social worker stated, 'I have had fantastic support from the agency. I can't praise the foster carers enough.' Another stated, 'there is very good partnership working.'

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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 independent fostering agencies.