

St Christopher's Fostering

St Christopher's Fellowship

4 Viewpoint Office Village, Babbage Road, Stevenage, Hertfordshire SG1 2EQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered with Ofsted in February 2007. It is a voluntary provider. The agency provides task-centred fostering, short breaks and longer-term placements, including parent and child placements. The agency currently has 23 fostering households providing foster placements for 29 children and young people. The fostering agency is part of the St Christopher's Fellowship, which is a registered charity. The St Christopher's Fellowship provides a variety of services nationally to children, young people and young adults in need.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2020. A new manager has been appointed and has applied to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 December 2024

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **requires improvement to be good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 12 July 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency provides good support to foster carers, who in turn provide nurture and care to children. Foster carers know their children well and support them to make progress and have new experiences. The agency supports well-planned introductions, and foster carers provide sensitive welcomes to help children settle into their foster home quickly.

Supervising social workers know carers and all children living in the household well. This means that supervising social workers can provide individualised support to foster carers to help them understand and respond to children's individual needs. As a result, foster carers help children to make good progress across different areas of their development.

Most children have a full-time education provision and are making good progress from their starting points. Some children are exceeding academic and social expectations at school. Only one child is not attending an education provision. The agency is working effectively with the virtual school and other relevant professionals to provide this child with an alternative education provision. Plans are in place to help the child to access education at their own pace as the child works towards increasing their confidence and engagement in school.

Foster carers support children to access all routine health appointments. Foster carers supporting parent-and-child arrangements work sensitively to facilitate and model health visitor guidance and advice. Foster carers demonstrate awareness of children's emotional needs. This includes providing thoughtful care and nurture for children experiencing loss and bereavement. A social worker described a foster carer as 'absolutely brilliant and hugely empathetic'. Another social worker said, 'The child is thriving.'

The agency increases support to children when needed through the provision of a support worker. One child said how much they look forward to the time they have with the support worker, gaining independence skills such as travelling on public transport. Children are given the opportunity to speak to and spend time with the support worker if they have any worries. Children can also share their views through an online platform that is monitored by the agency.

The agency has developed children's guides for different age ranges to ensure that children have access to information about fostering and how they can share any worries or complaints. These guides were shared with the agency's youth advisory panel to gain children's views. However, the agency does not have information available in a format that is specific and relevant to parents moving in with their child.

Foster carers enable children to enjoy a range of opportunities and activities, including holidays, outings and celebrations. These experiences are captured alongside children's achievements in memory boxes. One child said that they have a 'happy life'. However, there are gaps in some foster carers' records. Therefore, some children do not have an accessible record of their time in foster care to help them to understand their experiences in the future.

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

Safeguarding incidents at the agency are infrequent. When incidents do occur, managers meet regularly to maintain oversight and to arrange support for the carers and children and provide additional visits as required. This includes the time of a support worker at the agency, who builds relationships with children and helps them to spend time out in the community. Managers discuss recent incidents or changes to identify learning needs for the service.

Children are supported to stay safe in the community. Children rarely go missing from home. On the few occasions that a child has gone missing from home, this has been reported to relevant professionals by the foster carer and the agency has met with the local authority to discuss support and ways to keep the child safe. The child is welcomed home by the carer and is offered return home interviews by their local authority to help understand why they are missing from home. Over time, incidents of this child being missing from care have reduced.

Children are offered age-appropriate independence. This includes staying at home alone with the child's social worker's agreement. Bedroom-sharing risk assessments have now been established. These are used to support emergency situations to allow children to stay with carers they are familiar with.

Concerns about foster carers' practice are dealt with quickly and formally through standards of care processes. Allegations are escalated appropriately with early review and carers return to panel for additional scrutiny.

The fostering panel is diverse and is led by an experienced panel chair. An independent reviewing chair considers annual reviews for foster carers and provides an independent and objective view of fostering households. Panel minutes are clearly written and outline decision-making on their recommendations. This helps the agency decision-maker to make informed decisions about carers who wish to foster with the agency.

Safe care policies are written for individual children. However, some of these policies are not updated when children's needs or situations change. Some safe caring household plans do not fully consider all children or other household members and how the safer caring boundaries can be discussed with everyone who lives in the home in age-appropriate ways. One safe care policy was not updated to reflect how a baby would be cared for in a parent-and-child placement.

Recruitment checks for new staff are thorough, obtaining additional relevant details to ensure safer recruitment. This helps the manager to ensure that all staff working with children have the right qualifications and are suitable for the role. However, a different recruitment process is in place for panel members and independent assessors. As a result, some checks are not carried out and recorded as required. This does not help the manager to understand safe checks across the workforce.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

Since the last inspection, there have been unplanned changes to organisational leadership. In 2023, due to an unexpected and significant event that led to an extremely difficult period for the provider, other leaders and managers had to change their roles quickly. This was a significant change for the service. Since that time, the registered manager has taken on additional leadership roles and an acting manager has been appointed. The acting manager has applied to register with Ofsted, and the current manager intends to apply to be the responsible individual. Some of these changes have resulted in reduced capacity for leadership and management oversight that has led to some shortfalls across the service. None of the gaps in practice have led to children suffering harm, and children continue to have good experiences.

Despite changes to the service in the last year, foster carers and supervising social workers spoke positively of the leadership and support offered to them. Foster carers praised the support that they continue to receive from the agency and staff. Overall, the agency provided management support and consistency to staff and foster carers at times of change. However, management monitoring systems are not yet good enough, resulting in shortfalls in the completion and quality of paperwork and identification of gaps in other areas, such as training and practice.

Foster carers receive regular supervision sessions to help them to think about the children they are caring for and how to best meet their needs. Carers said that the support that they receive from these sessions is good. Some carers receive a mix of virtual and face-to-face supervision sessions. However, this has resulted in one household not being visited in person for three months. On one occasion, when it was identified that a carer needed additional visits, the plan was not fully implemented, with a supervision conducted virtually on one occasion. Managers were not aware of this gap. This does not help leaders and managers to ensure that carers are receiving the agreed levels of support and supervision.

Supervising social workers undertake core training identified by the agency as well as sharing practice learning through team meetings. Foster carers have individualised personal development plans that identify learning that is relevant to children's needs, training identified by the agency as mandatory, or training identified following incidents or standards of care. Training is incentivised and most foster carers complete regular training. However, one foster carer does not have up-to-date first-aid training and another did not complete training identified from a

standards of care review. These gaps had not been identified by managers. In addition, two carers have not completed their relevant training and development standards in a suitable time frame. Effective systems are not yet in place to support managers to monitor all training and development needs.

Since the last inspection, the agency has a permanent recruitment team in place to help support foster carer recruitment and assessment. In addition, the agency involves the recruitment team when foster carers leave the agency to explore why carers want to leave. This helps leaders and managers to understand changes and make improvements to the service. Assessments of foster carers are suitable and receive good scrutiny at panel. However, on one occasion, when ex-partner references were not received, managers had not captured decision-making effectively in respect of this gap and what additional checks would be undertaken to mitigate this risk. While additional references were obtained on this occasion, this lack of management oversight does not ensure that good practice is consistently followed to inform decisions about foster carers' suitability.

The agency works well with other agencies. The staff often lead additional meetings to help understand and meet the needs of children, including additional meetings before the agency accepts a referral or meetings about children who might need increased support to remain living with their foster carer. However, for some children, the agency does not have local authority care plans and other important plans for children and these gaps have not been identified and addressed effectively.

Overall, foster carers are happy and proud to work for the agency. Foster carers specifically highlighted the responsiveness of supervising social workers and managers and the focus on their birth children or family circumstances when making decisions. Foster carers spoke about aligning with the values of the charity organisation and praised staff for maintaining a 'family feel' to the agency.

Despite several shortfalls in leadership and management, managers are aware of areas of development and the recent change to management has increased capacity in the service to implement improvements.

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 fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1)) In particular, the registered provider should ensure that foster carers attend the training that the agency has identified as mandatory, including first-aid and induction training (TSD).	1 July 2025

Recommendations

- The registered provider should ensure that safe care policies are sufficiently detailed to reflect the particular household and child in placement. In particular, safe care policies should be updated when new children move into the household. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- The registered provider should ensure that supervision meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work and ensure that the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings. In particular, that foster carers receive the agreed level of supervision and face-to-face visits as set out by the agency's policy or the foster carers' individual support plan. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered provider should demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.2)
- The registered provider should ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker needs to make an objective approval decision. In particular, ensure that managers' decision-making and rationale for progressing with assessment without ex-partner checks is clear, with the steps to mitigate this. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.7)

- The registered provider should ensure that the foster carer is given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service should follow this up with the responsible authority. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 31.2)
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.6)
- The registered provider should ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before they move in with them in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. In particular, ensure that information about fostering and fostering households is available in an appropriate format for parents who join a fostering household with their child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 11.3)

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: SC069455

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