

St. Christopher's Fostering

St Christopher's Fellowship

Suite 66, Waterhouse Business Centre, 2 Cromar Way, Chelmsford CM1 2QE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is able to provide task-centred fostering, short breaks, and longer-term placements. The agency currently has 27 fostering households providing foster placements for 32 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.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 February 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 13 March 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The children consistently speak very positively about their carers and feel that they are valued members of the family.
- The children flourish in stable and nurturing homes in which they feel safe and loved.
- The children are, when appropriate, helped to move on in a planned way to adoption, independence or to other carers.
- The children know that their carers believe in them and will support and advocate for them.
- The children make good progress because of the help and support that they receive.
- New carers feel well supported, respected and valued.
- Carers have access to a wide variety of good-quality training.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Matching information is not sufficiently detailed. It does not consistently identify and explore all issues, such as how accommodation of groups of children will be managed, carers' skills and parenting capacity, and ways to bridge any gaps.
- Agency records are not consistently maintained to a high standard and do not always reflect the actions taken by carers and staff to promote children's welfare.
- Staff's and panel members' vetting practices are not consistently sufficiently robust.
- There is no system for requesting local authorities to undertake return home interviews following the occasions when a child goes missing from home.
- The office security arrangements are poor.
- Household safe-care policies are not consistently sufficiently detailed to reflect the particular household and placement arrangements.
- The quality of care review does not include the views of children and other stakeholders, nor does it give a clear sense of the strengths and areas for development at the agency.
- Electronic administrative systems are not efficient and robust, which limits staff's ability to perform their roles effectively. There has not been an effective business continuity plan to implement when information technology systems have failed.

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, 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 not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or allow a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so. The regulation requires the fostering service to evidence that the person is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform and that 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)(b)(3)(c))	09/04/2018
The fostering service provider must ensure that any records or register are kept securely and may not be disclosed to any person. (Regulation 32(5)) In particular, ensure that suitable security arrangements are in place for equipment and offices used for the purposes of the fostering service.	30/03/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. (National Minimum Standards, 4.1)
In particular, ensure that individual household safe-care policies are sufficiently detailed to reflect the particular household and child in placement.
- Ensure that when a child goes missing and there is concern for their welfare, or at the request of a child who has been missing, the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and the responsible authority to consider the reasons for their going missing. (National Minimum Standards, 5.9)
In particular, establish a system to prompt the arrangement of a return interview after each missing from care event.
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. When gaps are identified, the fostering

service should work with the responsible authority to ensure that the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. (National Minimum Standards, 15.1)

- Ensure that the registered manager has a qualification in management at least at level 4. (National Minimum Standards, 17.2b)
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. (National Minimum Standards, 25.1)
In particular, ensure that the quality of care review report is evaluative of the strengths and areas for development of the service and includes the views of children and stakeholders.
- Ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). Ensure that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (National Minimum Standards, 26.2)
- Ensure that there are efficient and robust administrative systems, including information technology and communication systems. (National Minimum Standards, 27.1)
- Develop a business continuity plan, which staff understand and can access, which will include both provision of premises and safeguarding/back up of records. (National Minimum Standards, 27.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The way in which matching decisions are reached is not always clearly evidenced. Carers are approved by the agency decision-maker with no specifications, such as the number or type of children for whom the carers have the skills or parenting capacity or accommodation to safely care for. There is reference to matching documentation held on the organisation's systems. However, the information does not provide clarity on the skills, accommodation arrangements or matching preferences of the carers. Therefore, there is potential for information to be missed in the matching process. For example, two fostering households were noted to have one bedroom available for fostering, with no information about how many children can be accommodated. In one household, one child was placed and in another household, three children were placed. There is no information about how parenting capacity and accommodation arrangements have been assessed and deemed appropriate. Some carers say that inappropriate potential matches have been suggested. These shortfalls in process have not had a negative effect on the children, who are well matched with carers who are able to meet their needs effectively.

The children live in stable, secure and caring environments in which they receive individualised care and support. When asked about their fostering experience, the children's comments included:

- 'My carer is very caring, supportive, fair and kind, and she gives good hugs.'
- 'I've been in placement for five years. It's been a brilliant placement. If I need them, they're always there for me.'
- 'I would give it the gold buzzer. I've got people to play with, a nice bedroom and I like my carers because they're nice.'
- 'The best thing is spending time and going out with the carers.'

The children grow in confidence and maturity, showing improved resilience and self-esteem. The majority of children make good progress from their particular starting points. One child said, 'It's made my life better. I feel relaxed, and my lifestyle has changed. Nothing could be better.'

The children develop close relationships with their carers and feel embedded into the fostering family. One child said that they are most proud of 'being kind and using my manners'. Another child spoke of how they enjoyed spending time with the extended fostering family, particularly the carer's grandchildren. Carers and the agency staff recognise the importance of the extended fostering family as an essential support for the children. One carer said, 'I'm really proud of how my family has pulled together to support her [a parent] and the children. She is now a very different young lady.' The children speak warmly about their foster carers. One child said, 'I call her mum, because she's mum. I feel like she's like a mum to me.' Another child said, 'I like the fact that it's relaxed and really helps me. I can talk to her [the carer] about anything.'

The children receive good support to maintain a healthy lifestyle. One child has gained a new, confident smile now that she has new teeth and good dental care, having previously lost 19 teeth to decay. All children of statutory school age are enrolled in education and are making good progress from their particular starting points as a result of the support and encouraging attitude of their foster carers. One child said, 'I like when [my carer] looks after me and helps me with my homework.' Another child who prior to placement had extremely low school attendance said, 'School is good. I have lots of friends.'

The children have fun and participate in activities that they enjoy, such as dancing and attending Brownies and gymnastics. The children build happy memories of family experiences. One child joyfully described their eight pets, including dogs, cats, rabbits, fish and their own guinea pig. Carers who are supporting children to move on to adoptive families make memory books for the children, to help them understand their past.

Some older children choose to remain living with their carers after their 18th birthday. These children continue to access suitable further education or employment while preparing for independent living with the stable support of their carers. This helps to ensure a smoother transition into adult life.

Carers understand the importance of contact and family relationships for the long-term life successes of the child. The majority of placing social workers are complimentary about the support that the children receive. One placing social worker said, 'It's been a very positive placement with effective support.' Another social worker said, 'It's been a long-term, stable positive placement. The carers have stepped up and been really good foster carers.'

New carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed effectively. They receive suitable training and support to help them undertake the fostering task. Carers who undertake parent and child placements do so only when they have completed suitable training. A young parent placed in a parent and child arrangement said, 'She [the carer] supports me to be a better mum.' Carers work positively in partnership with other professionals to promote the children's well-being but are not afraid to challenge placing authorities on behalf of children to obtain support, such as independent advocacy, to ensure that the child's voice is heard.

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

The children feel safe. The fostering staff ensure that the children receive effective help and protection. Carers undertake suitable training in safeguarding and preventing radicalisation. Consequently, the carers understand their wider responsibilities to keep children safe. Safeguarding matters and quality of care concerns are managed effectively in partnership with other agencies.

The children feel able to talk to their carers about anything that is worrying them. Risk-taking behaviour, such as offending and going missing from home, is rare, and incidents reduce for the vast majority of children during the time that they live with

their carers. One carer said, 'Her [the child's] attitude to life has completely changed. We are very confident that she will make much better choices. She's come on a journey and she's got lifelong, really good solid friends.'

Risk management is effective. Older children say that their carers balance the children's growing need for personal freedom consistent with their age, with keeping their safety and well-being at heart. However, household safe-care policies do not consistently reflect particular household and placement arrangements. For example, there is no reference to the parent in parent and child placements and how this prevents or reduces risk.

The carers follow the agency protocols when children go missing. However, information held by the agency does not consistently provide sufficient detail or clarity regarding the missing-from-home episodes. For example, a child was noted as going missing and was still missing some days later. Agency staff were, however, unable to identify when the child was found and returned to the carer. There is no system in place to request that placing authorities conduct a return interview following each occasion that a child goes missing. As a result, few of these interviews occur and opportunities to gain a greater understanding of how to keep the children safe are potentially missed.

There have been no incidents of physical restraint. The agency provides carers with clear guidance on behaviour management. The consistently applied boundaries contribute to a feeling of well-being and security for children.

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

The manager is a qualified social worker with many years of experience in fostering services. She has managed the agency for three years and provides consistent leadership to staff. However, she has yet to complete a suitable management qualification.

The fostering agency is adequately resourced, ensuring that the services are delivered in accordance with the statement of purpose. Equality and diversity are threaded throughout the service and children's needs are consistently prioritised.

The quality of care review does not evaluate the strengths and areas for improvement at the agency effectively, nor does it include the views of children and other important stakeholders. Therefore, some of the opportunities for the manager to celebrate success and drive improvement are not fully explored.

Centrally managed vetting procedures for fostering agency staff and panel members are not consistently robust. For example, two of the three recruitment files sampled contained the applicant's employment history specified in years, with no further exploration. One applicant's references were not verified and no applicants' physical or mental fitness for the role have been explored. These shortfalls limit the ability of the manager to scrutinise applications effectively. Consequently, information which may potentially have a bearing on suitability may not have been obtained.

Panel processes are challenging and effective, with membership drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds and life experience. Panel members are well supported through regular training, appraisal and good administrative systems. When any complaints are received about the agency they are managed effectively and in a timely manner, in partnership with other agencies when appropriate. The agency is introducing independent review of complaints to ensure greater objective scrutiny.

The staff are supported through regular team meetings, supervision and training. They are, however, deeply frustrated at the lack of investment in information technology and the inefficient computer systems used for their day-to-day work. The agency operates a paper-free system. However, the systems are incapable of keeping pace with the demands of the fostering service. This has an impact on the ability of the staff to work effectively and efficiently. The fostering service was recently subject to ransomware demands, which further significantly undermined the ability of the agency to carry out its day-to-day administration, as the business contingency plans were not effective.

Staff and carers generally maintain records of suitable quality. However, there is a lack of consistent attention to detail. Important documents, such as foster carer agreements and induction records, are on occasion unsigned, undated or unnamed, and information is not always current. Information held does not consistently and sufficiently demonstrate the actions that carers and staff take to ensure that children are well safeguarded and their outcomes consistently promoted, such as in relation to missing-from-care incidents.

The security arrangements for the fostering office are poor and fail to adequately protect confidential data. The two offices used by the agency are part of a publicly accessible business centre. Neither the fostering social workers' office nor the computers automatically lock. Furthermore, staff do not consistently take appropriate personal action to maintain good levels of data security. As a result, the inspector, and possibly others, were able to freely enter the office where emails and other confidential data, such as referral information, were on view. It is noted that children's and carers' central files are stored on additionally secured systems. However, all sensitive information must be held in accordance with data protection regulations.

The training provided to carers is relevant, varied and of good quality. The carers particularly enjoyed the recent 12-week course 'fostering changes', which they found to be challenging, in-depth and valuable. The carers also value the small group-support workshops led by a supervising social worker, which assist them to progress through their training, support and development standards.

The loss of a specialist-scheme contract two years ago resulted in reductions in the levels of support and payments that some carers receive. As a result, these carers express discontent about the changes. However, there has been clear communication and phased introduction over a significant period of time. The majority of carers describe the agency as one that offers high-quality support and

recognises the contribution of the carers and the fostering families. The carers appreciate that the agency recognises the achievements, in award ceremonies, of the children who are fostered and those people who foster. The carers also value that all children are able to participate in parties and events, such as last summer's day trip to a safari park. The carer's comments included:

- 'I feel that I can talk to [my supervising social worker]. It's like talking to a friend. She has really good empathy.'
- 'I love my supervising social worker. She is so supportive, it's the best thing about the agency.'
- 'They [staff] are always there for us. They help me and help the children to have a better life.'
- 'The agency has been amazing. There is 24/7 support and really good training.'
- 'Everyone is so professional and has a lovely and kind manner.'
- 'We are constantly told "no question is stupid, you ask whatever you need to ask".'

The agency and carers build positive relationships with partner agencies that are focused on the children's and young people's best interests. The carers are not afraid to challenge local authorities when their responses are not effective.

The children make positive progress with the support of their carers. The children consistently speak very positively of their experiences, rating the care and support as '10 out of 10' and 'brilliant'. One older child said, 'Everyone is supportive and caring. I live in a very positive environment.' Another child, when asked what could be improved, said, 'Nothing'.

The provider has addressed the majority of requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. Leadership and management are judged as requires improvement to get to good because although some breaches of regulation and best practice have been identified at this inspection, these have had no identifiable impact on the care of children and young people.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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

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