

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 is able to provide task-centred fostering, short breaks and longer-term placements. The agency currently has 21 fostering households providing foster placements for 25 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.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 July 2021

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: 5 February 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Due to the staff home-working and the manager self-isolating, this inspection was conducted with some on-site and some off-site activity.

Children receive good-quality individualised care from foster carers who provide a family experience that helps children thrive. Foster carers know the children well and promote children's welfare. Records are thoughtfully written and sensitively record children's experiences and development, including children's achievements. Foster carers talk about children with warmth and respond to children in the context of their difficult pasts. Children make good progress and benefit from a range of positive experiences.

Children are fully included in their foster carers' family lives. They join in on family holidays and important events are celebrated. Relationships between carers and the children are strengthened by the good-quality support from supervising social workers. A therapist offers regular consultations to the carers. Good-quality advice on how to manage some of the more difficult behaviours displayed by children helps prevent placement breakdowns.

Many children continue living with their foster carers long term. Some foster carers and some staff have transferred into the agency. One foster carer said that she had transferred into the agency specifically because of the support provided by the new manager. This carer said that she would not want to work for anyone else.

Some children continue to live with their foster carers after their 18th birthday. A foster carer continues to support young adults when they have left care, offering ongoing guidance and support. This helps children know that they have a trusted adult who they can rely on while they make the transition into adult life.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, staff made sure that children continued to access their education. Some children were helped to attend school regularly. Other children who stayed at home joined online group-learning sessions hosted by staff from the agency. Support groups for children were held virtually. Specialist guest speakers were invited to talk to children about how to keep emotionally healthy while in lockdown due to the pandemic. These measures ensure that children have the best possible chance of meeting their full potential.

Children are encouraged to contribute to decisions about their lives. They access an app, where they can share their thoughts, worries and feelings. The agency has been nominated for an award for its involvement in promoting this online resource. The app is widely promoted among the children. Information shared in the app is used to inform decision-making and influence service development.

Children know how to complain. They are provided with bright, engaging and accessible information about all aspects of the agency, including who to talk to about

any worries. Information is given to children on a range of relevant topics, including helpline numbers about bullying, gender issues and internet safety.

A support worker meets with many of the children regularly. Some children have benefited from spending time with this member of staff for many years. This direct work gives foster carers a break and enables children to pursue their interests. The support worker also enables children to see people who are important to them. Children are taken on days out to enjoy their chosen activity while receiving one-to-one time with an adult. The support worker talked about her role with passion and a real attention to detail in providing children with a positive experience. For example, each child has their own individual playlist of songs that they listen to during car journeys. This service means that children feel valued and offers children opportunities to participate in community-based activities.

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

Children are protected from the dangers in their local community and at home. Risk assessments are written for individual children in consultation with social workers. There is a strong ethos among staff and foster carers of working together to protect children from harm. Social workers said that they are updated quickly about incidents and that communication is effective. Prompt information sharing helps to keep children safe.

Children said that they feel safe. Children trust their carers and feel able to talk to them about anything that is worrying them. Complaints are investigated thoroughly. Learning from complaints is disseminated to the team. A support worker regularly meets with some of the children and builds long-standing trusting relationships with them. This gives children an added layer of protection by providing a trusted adult who they can talk to about anything that is worrying them.

Children do not often display risky behaviour. There are no issues of children being sexually exploited or of involvement with gangs. Children rarely go missing. On the rare occasions that incidents of children going missing occur, children are welcomed home and their whereabouts while away from home are quickly established. Statutory guidance on responding to missing children is followed. Relevant professionals are informed and return home interviews are arranged. Children are not involved in offending or substance misuse. Prompt responses to risky behaviours help to prevent children suffering harm.

Children are encouraged to take age-appropriate risks. Foster carers receive guidance on how to keep children safe online. The agency has partnered with an organisation researching internet use among young people, with a particular focus on keeping children who are looked after protected from the dangers of the internet. A child from the agency is contributing to this work. Staff and foster carers are kept updated on how to protect children from the impact of changes in social media.

When children experience gender identity issues, foster carers are provided with the relevant information and resources to sensitively support them to work through

these issues. Children are protected from racism and radicalisation and other forms of discrimination.

Physical restraint is discouraged. Carers receive training and guidance on behaviour management. There is a multi-agency approach to managing incidents of difficult behaviour. Social workers said they are kept informed of changes in a child's behaviour and support needs. Foster carers use appropriate sanctions and clear boundaries that the children are aware of. This helps children know what is expected of them. These measures reduce the need for restrictive physical intervention and protect children's dignity.

Safe care policies are written for individual children. However, some of these policies are not updated when children's needs or situations change. For example, one child's safe care policy had not been updated since 2017. When new children move into a household, safe care policies are not routinely updated. When children are placed alongside each other on respite, the impact of one child being placed alongside other children is not documented. A lack of impact risk assessments means that foster carers do not receive the guidance that they need on how to manage groups of children together.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, skills-to-foster training has been arranged remotely. Groups of prospective foster carers accessed relevant training via video calls. Relevant checks are undertaken on new applicants. However, assessments have been conducted remotely. This means that some foster carers have been approved without any in-person visits to their accommodation. In one case, children were placed in a household with a foster carer whose home had not been visited during the assessment process. A visit was not carried out until after the children had moved in. Remote assessments limit the opportunity for family dynamics to be assessed effectively. A failure to conduct assessment visits to applicants in their own homes limits an assessment of the physical environment. This does not demonstrate a strong focus on child protection in the assessment process. There has recently been a return to conducting assessments face to face.

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

The manager joined the agency at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and has a suitable management qualification. Weaknesses in management oversight were identified during this inspection. A failure to monitor the service effectively resulted in the effectiveness of leaders and managers to be judged requires improvement to be good. Managers have acknowledged the shortfalls and are beginning to put action plans in place to address the issues. None of the gaps in practice have led to children suffering harm, but have the potential to do so if not addressed quickly.

Processes for arranging exemptions are ineffective. One foster carer was over the legal fostering limit on three separate occasions with no exemption in place. When an exemption was granted, the foster carer's terms of approval were not amended to reflect the children in placement after six days. One exemption was sought after

the children had already moved into the household. Failure by the agency to seek an exemption from the relevant authority prior to children being placed leaves foster carers open to committing an offence of running an illegal children's home.

There are gaps in monitoring some children's sleeping arrangements. In one case, two three-year-old children were sleeping in the foster carer's bedroom. The supervising social worker had not seen the bedroom to check it was safe and met the children's needs. Confirmation in writing from the children's social worker that the suitability of this arrangement had been agreed was not on the children's records. A bedroom-sharing risk assessment on file was not sufficiently detailed. In another case, a child was sleeping on a sofa bed. The child's social worker, who did not consider this to be a suitable arrangement, brought this to the attention of the agency. A new bed was provided quickly at the request of the child's social worker. Some children's bedrooms have been seen remotely during the pandemic. However, some supervision and unannounced visits continue to be conducted remotely. The rationale for these decisions is not clearly recorded on children's case files.

Gaps in management monitoring mean that there is a lack of follow-up of missing documentation. The panel picks up on some gaps, but these are not always put right by the agency. For example, a foster carer having no MOT certificate and expired insurance documentation has not been followed up. A lack of management monitoring of relevant documentation leaves children at risk of being in unsafe environments.

Some foster carers have not undertaken core training within timescales. Requests by the panel for carers to complete training are not actioned. For example, one carer was recommended in February 2019 to complete a training course online, however, this remains outstanding. Gaps in training do not ensure that foster carers have the most up-to-date information on how to care for children's individual needs.

The panel provides an effective quality assurance role to the agency. Panel members are experienced and from a range of diverse backgrounds. Panel minutes record the reasons for a foster carer's approval. However, panel minutes do not set out the approval terms. The foster carer agreement does not state the number of children that a foster carer is approved for, nor does it detail the age range of children or type of placement. This means that foster carers and staff do not have clarity about how many or what type of placements a foster carer is approved for. A failure to set out the terms of approval means that foster carers are open to being matched with children who are outside of that foster carer's skills and experience.

There has been some turnover in staff, but with the arrival of the new manager things are more settled. Recruitment processes are effective. The staff said that they are happy in their roles. Staff are committed to the agency and feel supported by the leadership team. Additional support is put in place for foster carers who are facing challenging situations. The agency has taken steps to try and secure alternative housing for a foster family who require larger accommodation.

Staff and foster carers receive regular supervision. Annual reviews are chaired by an independent chair. Virtual team meetings and support groups have ensured that people remained connected during times when it was not possible to meet in person. There is an effective out-of-hours service.

Managers belong to a 'race matters' group and are taking steps to implement recommendations from a recent report on how to improve the experience of ethnic minority children in care. This involves ensuring that discussions are taking place with children about their culture and making sure that children's individual cultural needs around haircare and diet are fully explored and met.

The pandemic has had an impact on the usual activity of the service, but the manager has tried to mitigate this and work creatively to ensure that staff and foster carers are supported. Social workers are positive about the quality of care provided for children and the levels of communication about children's progress.

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
A person may exceed the usual fostering limit if he is exempted from it by the local authority within whose area he lives. (Children Act 1989 Schedule 7 (4) (1)) This specifically relates to the placement of more than three children with a foster carer when those children are not related.	30 August 2021
The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are— where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given. (Regulation 25 (1)(b)) This specifically relates to agreeing and setting out the terms of approval for each fostering household, including the number of children, type of placement and age ranges that foster carers are approved for.	30 August 2021
The registered person must maintain a system for— improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b)) The registered manager should ensure that monitoring systems are effective enough to identify shortfalls and drive improvements.	30 August 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person 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 person should ensure that, in the foster home, each child over the age of three has their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom should be agreed by each child's responsible authority. Each child should have their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts should be considered. The decision-making process and outcome of the assessment should be recorded in writing when bedroom sharing is agreed. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 10.6)
- The registered person should 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. This particularly relates to situations when children are moved between foster carers who foster for this agency. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1)

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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Inspectors

Angela Weston, Social Care Inspector
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