

St. Christopher's Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency has its office base in Southend and sub offices in Putney, Chelmsford and Peterborough. The fostering agency is able to provide task centred fostering, short breaks, and longer term placements. The fostering agency also has a specialist fostering scheme in partnership with the local authority. The agency currently has 40 carers providing foster placements for 31 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 nationally provides a variety of services to children, young people and young adults in need.

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**.

Overall this fostering agency provides a good level of care for children and young people. Managers have taken action to address the requirements and recommendations made at the previous inspection. There have been two changes in managers in the previous 12 months, for reasons unconnected with the agency. There is now a new manager in post who has applied to register with Ofsted.

Children and young people make good progress and achieve good outcomes while

living with foster carers from this agency. This includes progress in their education and behaviour. They are happy and well cared for in their foster homes. They have opportunities to take part in a range of leisure activities and are treated as part of the carers' families.

The agency supports carers well through the work of supervising social workers and support workers, out of hours contact and specialist workers. Along with careful matching of placements, this helps to ensure that children and young people have stable and positive foster placements. The foster panel is made up of people with a good range of experience. They undertake a rigorous quality assurance function, however, while most of the minutes of panel meetings are comprehensive, some are not, so important information has not always been recorded. There is generally good training for carers and this helps them to provide good care of children and young people. There is however, a lack of clarity over the expectations of second carers to undertake training.

Carers speak to children and young people about important issues such as personal relationships, sex and smoking. This helps to equip children and young people with the knowledge they need to keep themselves safe. Children and young people say they do feel safe in their foster placements. There are risk assessments and safe care policies to help carers provide safe homes. The assessment, preparation and training of foster carers has a focus on the safe care of children and young people. The arrangements for respite care need to be clearer to make sure that it is only provided in the interests of children and young people.

The Statement of Purpose has been reviewed to provide up to date information on the management arrangements for the service, but it also states that the agency provides parent and child placements, which it does not. The new manager is undertaking a monitoring role, but this is not yet fully effective in identifying areas of missing paperwork. In particular it had not identified that several supervising social workers had not received an annual appraisal within the last 12 months. There are very good working relationships with other agencies and commissioners and placing social workers speak highly of the agency.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
24 (2011)	ensure that there is a written record of the foster panel's proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 24(2))	24/04/2015
27	ensure that the foster care agreement includes details of the	08/05/2015

(2011)	training for foster carers (Regulation 27(5)b))	
3 (2011)	ensure that the Statement of Purpose includes a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service (Regulation 3(1)(b))	24/04/2015
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed by the agency receive appropriate appraisal. (Regulation 21(4)(a))	05/06/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure that any respite care is planned to take account of the needs of any children placed. This relates to respite care only being provided if in the interests of children (NMS 21.5)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. (NMS 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people receive very good care for in their foster homes. They develop secure attachments to their foster carers. Some of them made comments such as 'I feel a part of the family as they do stuff with me, they look after me well and I feel comfortable living with them' and 'I am happy where I am so I don't want anything to change about me or the family'. Children and young people have good opportunities to take part in a wide range of activities, both as part of a family and also by following chosen interests such as scouts or horse riding. This provides the children and young people with highly beneficial experiences that are part of growing up, including developing relationships, building self-esteem and preparing for later independence.

Where it is identified to be in young people's interests they are able to stay with families beyond their 18th birthday. This provides young people with stability and security to prepare for independence at a realistic pace and to complete further education. It also allows them to begin to experience adulthood with the safety net of the foster home and with foster carers to support them. In addition to this there is a well set out independence programme that provides young people with important skills and experiences.

Placing authorities and commissioners are very positive about the outcomes for children and young people placed with this fostering agency. These include notable improvements in behaviour as well as significant improvements in their educational attendance and attainment. Children and young people do well in education which

will help them in their later life and independence. It also contributes to raising children and young people's feelings of self-worth. One social worker spoke of a young person who was regularly excluded from school now being settled in school, making friends and friends and progressing well.

Children and young people have stable and (were required) long-term placements, so that they have less experiences of change and disruption. Some placements are made as part of a specialist scheme. This scheme allows children and young people who would otherwise be unlikely to manage in foster care, to have experiences of life in a family. Children and young people have their health needs met well so they can live healthy lives. This includes basic needs as well as individual needs involving specialist health services.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering agency offers placements to children and young people with a range of needs, including those with complex and challenging behaviour. Carers are supported to provide positive and stable placements through support from their supervising social workers, access to support at any time of day, input from support workers, education advisors and a psychologist and regular carer support groups. Carers speak of the agency being genuine and supportive. They also say that support is excellent. One carer commented on the 'friendly professional team who have helped me deal with some complex issues with my foster child'. The success and stability of children and young people's placements is enhanced by the support that the agency provides for carers.

In order to ensure the quality and safety of foster placements, the agency provides regular supervision for carers with a clear focus on the needs of carers and young people. There is careful matching of children and young people with foster carers. This helps to ensure that children and young people's needs can be met and they can be kept safe in their foster homes. Social workers spoke of well-matched placements where young people are thriving.

The fostering panel is made up of a wide range of people, including a care leaver and people with experience of education and health. The panel take a rigorous approach to issues to help ensure that safe and secure foster placements are available to children and young people. However, while records of foster panel meetings are mostly full and informative, on at least one recent occasion they have not provided full information on the panel's discussions. It is possible that this omission may have been identified at the next panel meeting, but failing to provide a full record of the proceedings and reasons for recommendations does allow the potential for important information to be missed. The panel undertakes a robust quality assessment role, with this being a standing agenda item for each panel. The panel feel supported by the agency through their training and their ability to be fully independent.

The agency has reviewed its policy on respite care, so that this is only available in the interests of children and young people. This is important in making them feel part of the carer's family. It is recognised that carers on the specialist scheme are more likely to require respite in order to safeguard placements. However, while there is a general view it is something that is provided as needed, rather than a right, there is some lack of clarity over this.

There are generally good training opportunities for carers. They can undertake a wide range of training to help them look after children and young people safely and well. Carers said that if training was needed to meet any specific needs, it would be provided and cost would not prohibit this. The main carers are expected to undertake specified core training, but there is a lack of clarity over the expectations for second carers to undertake training. In some cases the training undertaken by second carers is very limited.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are supported and encouraged to take age appropriate risks within their foster placements. For example, some are helped learn how to safely make their own way to school and use public transport. Carers speak to children and young people about issues such as smoking, sex and personal relationships. This helps them to a greater understanding of issues and increases their ability to protect themselves in their everyday lives. Children and young people say that they feel safe in their foster placements.

Careers have access to clear missing from care protocols, risk assessments and management plans to help them look after and safeguard young people who go missing from care. Clear risk assessments also help carers to support and safeguard children and young people who show self-harming behaviour. There are good working relationships with external specialist agencies such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). These also help carers to provide safe placements for children and young people. Carers say that the agency has a focus on the welfare of children and young people. Carers and agency staff say that they would feel able to raise any concerns and they believe that the agency would take them seriously. Having an open culture where concerns are listened and responded to provides an important safeguard for children and young people. Local Authority Designated Officers (LADOs) say that the agency responds appropriately to any safeguarding concerns or allegations.

Safe care of children and young people is a central focus of the assessment, preparation and training of foster carers. One carer spoke of how the training that she had received allowed her to respond appropriately when a child made an historic disclosure of abuse. This resulted in a successful conviction of the perpetrator. Supervising social workers make regular unannounced visits to carers. During these unannounced visits supervising social workers look at issues such as health and safety, carer's records and young people's bedrooms.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Two Registered Managers have left the agency in the last 12 months. They have both left for reasons unconnected with the agency. A new manager has been appointed and has submitted an application for registration to Ofsted. There was a view expressed by several people that the agency has significantly improved since the previous inspection three years ago. The requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed.

There is a Statement of Purpose which provides clear information on the agency. The only exception to this is that it states that the agency provides parent and child placements, which it currently does not. The Children's Guide provides clear information for children and young people. It is also available in an alternative symbol format for those that require this.

There is monitoring of the service but this is not consistently effective. The new manager holds regular quality assurance meetings to look at the quality of records. She has begun to review files and develop an understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development, but has not yet had an opportunity to do so in depth. Consequently, while records are mostly clear and accurate, some records are not readily available on the carer's electronic files. Furthermore, while fostering agency staff speak about good and regular supervision, some have not had an appraisal within the last 12 months and this shortfall had not been identified. While it is understandable that the new manager will take some time to fully and effectively carry out her monitoring of the service, failing to have a clear picture does prevent shortfalls such as the lack of appraisals being addressed in a timely way.

The organisation and senior managers do have an awareness of the areas they want the service to develop in. New staff have been appointed within the organisation with a focus on development in areas such as carer recruitment and children's participation. Staff and foster carer are happy to be part of the agency. There are very effective working relationships with placing agencies. A commissioning officer said that the partnership working with the agency is really good.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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, 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.