

The Children's Family Trust

The Children's Family Trust

First Floor, SMS Meer UK, Henson Close, South Church Enterprise Park, Bishop Auckland, County Durham DL14 6WA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The Children's Family Trust is a charitable organisation which operates nationally. This agency covers the north-east of England.

The agency registered with Ofsted in 2009. It offers long-term and short-term fostering placements, emergency placements and short breaks.

The manager registered with Ofsted in April 2022.

At the time of this inspection, the agency has 35 fostering households providing care for 64 children. There are two placements for young people under 'staying put' arrangements. These are arrangements that enable care leavers to remain living with their foster carers when they turn 18 years old.

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 September 2024

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

Date of last inspection: 25 October 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The 'family4life' ethos of the agency is shared by staff, foster carers, and children. Children are at the heart of the agency's practice. Leaders and managers have high expectations and are aspirational for children. Consequently, children make progress from their starting points.

Children receive nurturing care that helps them to develop a sense of belonging and permanency with their foster family. Children say that they like living at their foster home. Most children have lived with their foster family for several years and are integrated within their wider foster family network. This provides stability for children and helps children to feel part of their foster family.

Children develop positive relationships with other children who they live with, for example their foster carer's birth children, and this can reduce potential stigma children in care may experience.

Children make progress towards their individual targets and achieve well at school. They continue to learn and attend further education or start employment. Children develop independent skills such as money management and learn how to drive. Collectively, this increases children's future life choices.

Foster carers understand children's health needs, including complex health needs or diagnosis. Foster carers can access additional support from therapists for advice and guidance. The agency has recruited a psychotherapist, who will support carers and undertake assessments with children to identify the support that they need.

Foster carers share the same culture and diversity needs of children, which are considered prior to children moving in with their new foster family. This helps children to settle and provides a sense of familiarity and helps children to communicate, particularly when English is an additional language. Children's guides are adapted into different languages. This means that children understand about fostering and their rights and entitlements and how to make a complaint.

The agency recognises and celebrates children's achievements. Children receive certificates as well as monetary rewards for achieving individual targets, such as educational or personal development. This gives children a sense of pride and increases their self-esteem.

The fostering agency plans social events and activities that children enjoy. This includes regular craft sessions as well as trips to theme parks and residential trips. The agency extends offers of activities and trips to the foster carer's children. This imbeds the whole family approach. Foster carers understand the importance of children's experiences and ensure that memory boxes and important memorabilia are kept for children.

Social workers for children say that they have good working relationships with foster carers and the agency. Children are supported to attend family time and maintain relationships with people who are important to them, so long as it is safe to do so.

There is a strong focus on 'staying put' arrangements. 'Staying put' arrangements are seen as natural outcomes for children who wish to remain with their foster carers. Some children remain with their foster carers beyond these arrangements. This provides children with support and consistency into their early adult life. Additionally, the agency occasionally provides support for foster children who are now adults. The longstanding relationships increase children's sense of permanence and ability to form and sustain positive attachments.

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

Foster carers and staff know the children well and help children to understand their past experiences. Foster carers use careful and sensitive language to describe children's risks and challenges.

Allegations made by children are taken seriously. The agency responds appropriately and follows its allegation procedure. When allegations are made, the manager prioritises the safety of the child involved and balances this effectively with supporting the foster carers. Foster carers have access to external support and advocacy.

The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced professional. The panel members have a wealth of experience and knowledge and represent diversity of society. Independent scrutiny is provided by a suitably qualified and experienced person. The analysis, evaluation and quality assurance processes are of a high standard, which is reflected in fostering panel and annual review minutes. The agency decision-maker provides thorough oversight. This helps to ensure that children are being cared for by adults who are safe and able to meet their needs.

Agency staff speak to children at their foster home and during activities. Staff's records of observations of children ensure that staff are capturing how children present as well as what they say about their care. This means that staff can monitor and respond to potential risks that the child may not be able to verbalise.

Foster families' homes meet health and safety requirements. Safer care plans are in place for all households and are regularly reviewed and updated. Unannounced visits take place, more than annually. The agency has implemented additional checks of children's bedrooms to be reassured that children have essential items. This ensures that children's care needs are met and reduces the risk of unsafe practice or environments.

Foster carers say that they enjoy a mixture of face-to-face and virtual training to help them to understand and respond to potential risks to the children. These include risks regarding children's health needs as well as wider risks such as through internet use and social media. Foster carers attend training about child exploitation

and trauma. This gives foster carers the knowledge to be able to recognise if children are at risk and to help educate children about keeping safe.

Missing-from-home incidents are low and foster carers know how to respond if a child goes missing. Additionally, physical holds are infrequent and foster carers adopt a therapeutic approach. Foster carers receive training in how to de-escalate situations. However, one child was held, even though the foster carers are not trained in skills to ensure that the hold is safe and proportionate. This places the child and the foster carer at risk of harm.

Furthermore, some carers have not completed mandatory refresher training for several years. This means that not all carers have the most up-to-date knowledge to meet children's needs.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager is highly motivated and committed to children, staff, and foster carers. She is visible in the agency and receives positive feedback from staff and external professionals. The manager adopts a proactive approach to her role, which means she understands children and foster carers well and knows what is going on in their lives. The manager and senior leaders are committed to continuous improvement to provide quality care to children. A five-year development plan is underway which has included employing a psychotherapist.

The agency has experienced some changes in staffing recently. However, this has not negatively impacted on foster carers. Foster carers say that they receive 'amazing' support from staff and leaders. Foster carers feel listened to and are confident their requests for help and support would be responded to. Foster carers know how to contact the agency after office hours if they need to. This helps to ensure that foster carers are supported to meet children's needs and keep them safe. Some foster carers have celebrated many years as a foster carer for the agency. Foster carers feel valued, which is demonstrated by their stability and consistency.

Staff receive regular and practice-related supervision. This provides an opportunity for staff to discuss carers' and children's experiences and progress made. Supervision is also used as an opportunity for staff to discuss any concerns or achievements. Additionally, foster carers receive regular supervision from supervising social workers. This provides focused time for foster carers to discuss their experience as a foster carer, and any additional learning opportunities to build on their skills.

The manager and staff are held in high regard by professionals and safeguarding agencies. Positive feedback was provided by all those spoken to.

The manager and senior leaders meet regularly to review practice. Changes to documents and processes are actioned promptly and disseminated throughout the agency. However, the manager and senior leaders do not consistently carry out a

review when serious safeguarding incidents occur. This hinders the manager's ability to recognise areas for improvement and implement strategies to prevent future incidents.

The manager uses effective tools to monitor children's progress. However, the manager's monitoring systems do not consistently identify gaps in children's records. This includes missing statutory documents, which means the manager cannot be assured that staff or carers are following the children's most up-to-date care plans. Additionally, when there is a delay in receiving documents, she does not use the agency escalation policy effectively.

Safe recruitment procedures are used to recruit staff and foster carers. However, safe practice is not consistently implemented when other adults move into a foster carer's home. This includes recording verification of police checks from overseas checks, as well as verifying other adults' identification.

Some foster carers use monitoring and surveillance devices in their home. The manager does not receive explicit consent from the child's placing authority to agree to these measures. Additionally, the manager does not review the necessity of the measures to be satisfied they are necessary and proportionate. The agency has responded and taken swift action by preparing a policy to reflect this.

The manager understands risks to children and regularly reviews risk assessment. Children's risk assessments are individualised and updated when new risks emerge. Although risks are identified, the strategies in place do not help staff to know what to do in the event of future incidents. Additionally, the manager completes risk assessments for planned activities, which include residential trips. However, the manager does not update risk assessments to include all factors that mitigate the potential risks to children, for example, when new information is known about the venue. This is a missed opportunity to be reassured that children are kept safe.

The manager and senior leaders are committed to developing the agency. Children, foster carers, and birth families are given the opportunity to share their views about the agency in preparation for foster carers' annual reviews. However, the agency does not regularly consult with children and their birth family to consider their contribution on how the agency can improve. This is a missed opportunity to develop the agency further.

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 registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (3))	30 November 2024
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents. The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that— no form of corporal punishment is used on any child placed with a foster parent, no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable, and restraint is used on a child only where it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or other persons, or serious damage to property. (Regulation 13 (1) (2)(a)(b)(c) This specifically relates to foster carers receiving appropriate training to use physical holds.	30 November 2024
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information, and support,	30 November 2024

including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.

The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17(1) (3))

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the wishes, feelings, and views of children and those significant to them are considered in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 1.7)
- The registered person should ensure that checks are carried out in line with regulation 26 and include enhanced CRB checks which includes adult members of foster carers' household. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 13.5)

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: SC402365

Registered provider: The Children's Family Trust

Registered provider address: Hanbury Court, Harris Business Park, Hanbury Road, Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 4DJ

Responsible individual: Marina Mulholland

Registered manager: Jacqueline Dixon

Telephone number: 01388779444

Email address:

Inspectors

Cat Makel, Social Care Inspector

Joanne Wallis, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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