

St.Christopher's Fellowship

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

St. Christopher's Fellowship is a charitable organisation. It is located in Sandwell and is one of three separately registered fostering offices. The head office is in Putney. The agency offers a wide range of placements. At the time of this inspection thirty four fostering households were providing placements for fifty six children and young people. There were five active vacancies, with one foster household on hold. The agency was first registered on 25 January 2013 and this is the first inspection. The agency aims to provide short term, long term, permanent, emergency, parent and child and remand foster care placements.

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: **requires improvement.**

This fostering agency ensures that children and young people's individual needs are met and promotes their safety and welfare. Children and young people report feeling safe in their foster homes, with some having built very positive relationships in a relatively short period. Foster carers demonstrate a real commitment to meeting the holistic needs of those children and young people placed with them. Children and young people develop in confidence and make progress in all areas of their lives.

The agency has robust and effective recruitment and assessment procedures in place for foster carers and an effective fostering panel. A diverse range of foster carers

provides positive placements, in line with the agency's Statement of Purpose. There are robust systems to ensure that only the most suitable applicants proceed to assessment and approval as foster carers. The fostering panel provides an effective level of scrutiny and quality assurance at all stages of the assessment process, coupled with clear decisions by the agency decision maker.

Children and young people are regularly consulted and asked to express their views and feelings about several aspects of the care they receive. The agency has also forged positive working relationships with a number of partner organisations to further ensure that the holistic needs of children and young people are consistently met. The agency has devised and developed imaginative practices in relation to identifying the starting points of children and young people and in being able to effectively track their progress.

Several shortfalls have been identified during this inspection. These relate to use of discipline; complaints; training of foster carers, and some issues in relation to the monitoring and management oversight of certain aspects of the service, including allegations against foster carers. The identified shortfalls indicate that the service is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good fostering agency. While it requires improvement in a number of areas, there are no widespread or serious failures which affect the safety or welfare of any of the children or young people placed with this 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
12 (2011)	implement a written policy which includes all elements of this regulation, particularly the referral, records to be kept and action taken in response to any allegation of abuse or neglect (Regulation 12(1) (2) (3))	06/01/2014
13 (2011)	ensure that no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. This is with specific reference to the use of food as a disciplinary measure (Regulation 13(2)(b))	06/01/2014
18 (2011)	ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action take in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. This is with specific reference to representations or complaints made by children and young people. (Regulation 18(4))	06/01/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for (NMS 20.8)
- ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegation made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of any action taken and the decisions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file. A copy is provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded. The information is retained on the confidential file, even after someone leaves the organisation, until the person reaches normal retirement age, or for ten years if this is longer (NMS 22.7)
- ensure that as soon as possible after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster is reviewed. There is a clear policy framework which outlines the circumstances in which a foster carer should be removed as one of the fostering service provider's approved foster carers, in the interests of the safety and welfare of children. This is available to foster carers (NMS 22.8)
- ensure that all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and disputes. The fostering service has a clear written policy on managing behaviour, which includes supporting positive behaviour, de-escalation of conflicts and discipline. The fostering service's policy is made clear to the responsible authority/placing authority, child and parent/s or carers before the placement begins or, in an emergency placement, at the time of the placement (NMS 3.8)
- ensure that any areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed. Such matters identified between reviews are addressed at the time they are identified, where appropriate, rather than waiting for a review (NMS 13.9)
- ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality 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 detailed information prior to their placements commencing. This helps them to settle into their foster homes and understand what care will be provided for them. They also have detailed information on how to make a complaint and who they can contact if they have any concerns. Children and young people report feeling safe and happy in their foster placements. One young person said: 'I always feel safe here. I am part of the family and would not want to live anywhere else.' Care and attention to religious and cultural needs, including special dietary needs and celebration of significant religious events promotes a real sense of inclusion and belonging for children and young people, which they respond positively to. Children and young people are included in the development of the agency. They contribute their views, wishes and feelings about how things can be improved. Children and young people live in stable placements, with supportive foster carers, which leads to improved outcomes for them over time.

Children and young people have detailed and up-to-date care plans, which assist their foster carers in being able to meet their complex needs. All children and young people who are old enough attend school or other educational provisions. Their attendance is very good, including pre-school aged children's attendance in nurseries. They make good progress in relation to their learning and development. Over time, this leads to improved educational outcomes and an increased chance of children and young people succeeding in further education or employment.

Children and young people enjoy positive and meaningful contact with family members, friends and significant others. Foster carers support this through providing transport, supporting indirect contact and completing memory boxes, so children and young people have a positive sense of their backgrounds and significant people in their lives. Children and young people also feel supported to try out new activities and to learn more about their cultural and religious needs. The agency imaginatively supports them by providing tutors to help them learn about their specific religious practices, and ensures foster carers are able to meet all of their diverse needs. Children and young people receive good health care; including specialist support and services. As a result, children and young people feel that their holistic health needs are met at all times.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers, in line with their Statement of Purpose, who are able to meet the needs of the children and young people referred to the agency. Children and young people report feeling part of the fostering family and that their needs are met by them. Children and young people have a wide range of social activities to take part in, with foster carers actively supporting and promoting this. Some children and young people have also been on holidays with their fostering families, with some travelling for the first time abroad, which further enhances their life experiences and increases their sense of worth.

Carers speak very highly of their relationship with the agency and its staff. Most

carers chose to apply to work for this agency, based on its relatively small size and sense of being like a family. Carers feel that all staff in the agency know them and the children and young people placed with them really well. This promotes a real sense of confidence for carers, who feel that the support they receive from the agency is consistently high. One carer stated: 'Every member of staff in this agency knows me and the children I care for. It doesn't matter what time of the day or night I call, they are there for me and always make me feel supported and valued.'

Carers receive regular and good quality supervision and have a wide range of training and development opportunities offered to them following their approval. This includes on-line training and evening courses, to meet the work commitments of carers. Carers are also invited to attend regular support group meetings, which include attendance by guest speakers. This has included a session with a local accountant, who was able to assist carers with tax return queries, at their specific request. Carers can also book sessions with the agency's therapist following support groups, in order to discuss any specific issues relating to children and young people placed with them. Carers also bring children and young people to a range of social events, organised by the agency for them to get to know each other and share their experiences.

Not all carers have taken up training opportunities, particularly in relation to behaviour management. As a result, not all carers are suitably equipped to deal with challenging behaviours presented by children and young people. Similarly, not all carers have completed their training, support and development standards for foster carer prior to their first annual review. The lack of a clear strategy by managers to address this issue undermines their ability to monitor, track and ensure that all carers undertake and complete training within agreed timescales. This is particularly relevant in relation to those hard to reach carers, who would most benefit from attending training and development opportunities.

The agency has taken proactive action to ensure that local authorities' written policy on delegated authority is provided at the time of placements being made, or as soon after as possible. This enables carers to be clear as to their delegated powers and to be able to meet the needs of children and young people consistently and with confidence.

Placing social workers speak very positively of the level of communication from carers. One social worker praised a particular carer for their work with a child, stating: 'The carer just gets on and does what is needed to meet the needs of the child. They are confident and do not come to me with things that they can sort out themselves, which really impresses me.' Carers also advocate for the needs of children and young people. One carer had consistently raised and challenged a placing authority about delays in securing specialist health services for a young person placed with them. The agency also employs the services of a qualified therapist, who is able to provide consultation and advice to foster carers and agency staff on such areas as behaviour management and mental health issues.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are robust and detailed. The central list of

panel members is diverse and reflects a wide range of skills and experience, including foster carers and care leavers. The panel chair has a wealth of relevant experience and has consulted with applicants to improve the panel experience for them. Applicants attending panel are provided with a guide which includes photos and a pen picture of each panel member and what to expect. Carers report a positive experience of attending panel and feel the information provided to them enabled them to participate with more confidence and reduced their anxieties. Panel minutes effectively record lines of discussion, questioning and reasons for making recommendations. The reasons for decisions is clearly recorded by the agency decision maker. Decisions are made and communicated within the required timescales.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Children and young people clearly state that they feel safe living with their carers and in the wider community. Reports of bullying are minimal and have been dealt with promptly and appropriately by both carers and staff in the agency. Children and young people feel able to express any concerns about their carers to agency staff. Any concerns raised have been fully addressed by the agency, but have not been recorded as formal complaints. Children and young people have not routinely been given clear feedback on the outcome of their concerns and as such, have not had the opportunity to state if they were satisfied with the outcomes.

Placement plans and risk assessments for children and young people reflect their current and on-going needs. Foster carers demonstrate a clear understanding and awareness of how to meet the needs of children and young people. Supervision sessions with carers clearly address potential or actual safeguarding issues and set action plans. The agency works closely with placing authorities to ensure plans continue to meet the needs of children and young people. One placing authority praised the agency and its carers for consistently communicating with them on all aspects of the care provided and identification of changing needs.

The agency has taken a proactive stance in relation to joint protocols for children and young people who may go missing from care. Close working with local police and relevant agencies has led to an increased awareness of actions to support the most vulnerable children and young people placed with the agency. The incidents of children and young people going missing from their placements is minimal.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers is robust and prevents unsuitable people from being able to work as carers for this agency. Not all carers have taken up training however, particularly in relation to behaviour management. Some areas of concern were also identified in relation to behaviour management techniques employed by some carers. While this has not had an adverse impact on the care provided to children and young people, it reflects the need for all carers to be trained and competent in the use of de-escalation and appropriate sanctions.

Vetting and recruitment processes are robust for both carers and panel members. Panel members receive annual reviews of their performance, as does the panel chair. Feedback is sought from panel members in relation to the panel chair, which is then considered by senior managers within the organisation. Such transparent processes further ensure that only suitable and competent staff are recruited to work for the agency.

Agency staff demonstrate a detailed and clear understanding of whistleblowing procedures and report confidence in being able to use them. Prompt action is taken in relation to any concerns identified about staff working for the agency, including foster carers. Allegations against foster carers are generally dealt with swiftly and effectively, protecting children and young people against potential harm while providing support to individual foster carers. However, the Registered Manager has failed to ensure clear and comprehensive records are maintained following an allegation against a foster carer, or that the record is placed on the carer's confidential file.

The Registered Manager has also not always ensured prompt review of foster carers' approval after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded. Additional support for carers, in relation to unmet training needs has not consistently been addressed for those carers who have been subject to an allegation. Not all allegations have been referred to the local authority designated officer by the Registered Manager. While shortfalls are identified, the inspector found that these are not serious or widespread and do not have any significant negative impact upon the welfare or safety of children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

A Registered Manager is in post. They are in the process of completing the necessary management qualification, having made positive progress in this regard. External independent social workers undertake most of the assessments of new foster carers and present their reports to the fostering panel. The Registered Manager provides supervision and support to the supervising social workers and independent social workers in the agency and provides all leadership and management tasks.

The Registered Manager is supervised by an experienced, knowledgeable and child-focused regional manager who is also based in the same office. Senior managers within the organisation demonstrate a detailed awareness and understanding of the service and provide additional support and supervision to the regional manager and Registered Manager. The agency works closely and positively with the panel chair and agency decision maker, with a clear focus on quality assurance and a desire to further improve the services they currently provide. Social workers and commissioning managers from placing authorities confirm the positive working relationships with the agency and positive and regular communication. Such close working ensures that the needs of individual children and young people are identified

and addressed.

Leaders and managers have a clear focus on ensuring that the views of children and young people are central to the work they do. Regular social events and engagement has resulted in children and young people being able to contribute to the development of services and activities during the year. The agency has detailed systems in place to consider the starting points of children and young people and positive assessment tools to identify their needs and monitor progress by them. Such systems enable the Register Manager to monitor and track the needs of individual children and young people during their time in placement with carers.

This has led to the agency employing the services of an education consultant recently. This person has considered the internal education audit completed by the agency and to plan training for carers. Such training includes the impact of attachment on educational achievement for looked after children. There are also plans for a training session on bullying to take place in the New Year with carers. This demonstrates the commitment of the agency and managers to ensuring that the educational needs of children and young people are clearly identified and that carers receive the support they need to be able to meet those identified needs.

The agency has a clear and detailed Statement of Purpose and children's guide. Placing authorities, children and young people and relatives understand the aims and objectives of the agency and report satisfaction in how such services are provided. The agency has adopted the Foster Carer's Charter and ensures that this provided to carers at the point of approval and in subsequent training and supervision sessions with them.

Children and young people feel able to raise any concerns they may have with agency staff. These have not been recorded as complaints to date. This reduces the ability of the Registered Manager to track and monitor any areas of concern and to ensure that accurate records are kept. Formal feedback to children and young people has not been consistently or formally provided, further reducing their ability to state if they feel their concerns were dealt with in a satisfactory manner.

The agency employs staff and panel members who are appropriately qualified, experienced and who receive regular supervision and annual appraisals. Sufficient numbers of staff provide support to carers, with both staff and carers having appropriate training opportunities. Carers maintain detailed weekly and monthly reports of each child or young person placed with them. Supervising social workers consider these reports in supervision with carers. Action plans are set for any identified areas of need from those reports. Agency staff discuss each carer and placement with the Registered Manager in supervision, to ensure that any safeguarding concerns or unmet needs of children and young people or carers are taken into account and addressed. However, not all areas of need or concern relating to carers have been addressed through supervision or management oversight of records. This undermines the agency's ability to ensure that foster carer's continue to safely meet the needs of children and young people placed with them.

There are some shortfalls in leadership and management systems. These relate to how safeguarding and review of foster carer suitability are managed and action about foster carer training and development. Allegations against carers, review of their approval, training and performance issues have not all been dealt with in a timely or consistent manner. Additional minor shortfalls were identified during this inspection. However, immediate action was taken to address these matters. Consequently, there is no need to make requirements or recommendations to improve the quality of standards of care. The shortfalls that have resulted in requirements and recommendations are not considered to be serious failings that impact negatively upon the welfare or safety of children and young people. As this was the first inspection of this agency, there were no requirements or recommendations to be taken into consideration from previous inspections.

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.