

The Children's Family Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Children's Family Trust is a registered charity and a limited company. The company head office is located in Droitwich. The north east area office comprises a Registered Manager, principal social worker and four full-time social workers. The agency also employs an educational advisor who works directly with young people and has an administrative team of three. Currently the inspection the Registered Manager's post and one of the social worker posts was vacant. At the time of the inspection the agency was supporting around 45 young people in 29 fostering families. The agency has a focus on providing 'families for life' which are long term matched foster placements although it also provides some short term and emergency 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: **good**.

This is a good fostering service which works effectively with its well trained, supported and supervised foster carers to provide a good quality of care to children and young people. Assessments are rigorous and thorough and this, with the very strong ongoing support, means that foster families are well equipped to look after children and make very good relationships with them.

The agency and its carers have a strong focus on permanence and are successful in

providing long term matched families for children. Some young people who were placed in emergency have since become permanently matched with their foster families. The agency works effectively with young people's placing authorities and contributes well to young people's care plans; this helps them make good progress.

The agency provides an education advisor who works directly to support the academic achievement of fostered young people and also has a part time social work post devoted to working with and supporting adults who have been fostered by the agency. These elements of practice are excellent and provide a basis which supports the achievement of outstanding outcomes for young people in these areas. The agency provides strong support to help young people maintain and improve their relationships with their birth families and to involve birth families in the lives of their children where this is appropriate.

Elements of the agency's leadership and management are not as strong as they should be. The agency recognised this and has developed a new structure nationally. It has also addressed some previous leadership issues within this branch. Positively, this has resulted in improvements which are recognised by staff and foster carers alike. However, some elements still require improvement in order to be good. The quality assurance and monitoring of some of the agency's practice and recording is not as effective as it should be. This has resulted in some inaccuracies in records and some practice not being sufficiently well monitored and controlled. For example, some key information was missed from a foster carer's review, the assessment of a prospective foster carer was presented to panel without important evidence and work to match a placement was undertaken before a foster carer was approved. In order to improve further, more robust monitoring is required to ensure the agency's practice is at a consistently high standard.

Safeguarding practice is effective in the agency. Young people feel safe and are able to make progress in their foster placements.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that records are clear and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. Specifically, that records are accurate, demonstrate the work done to deliver a quality service and provide the agency with the information needed to monitor its activities (NMS 26)
- monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies. Specifically, ensure that full information about events happening to and in foster placements is considered in the foster carer's review to ensure it is a fully effective consideration of the carer's continued suitability (NMS 25.2)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for ensuring the quality of the

service. Specifically, that the agency does not progress to undertaking matching visits, with placing authority social workers, to prospective foster carers who have not yet been approved (NMS 25.1)

- ensure that all fostering activity is consistent with the national minimum standards and the service's policies and procedures. Specifically, that all cases presented to panel include all the information about the prospective foster carers that is known by the agency. (NMS 25.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Young people fostered by the agency make good progress and achieve positive outcomes in all areas with support to achieve excellent outcomes in terms of education and support into adulthood being outstanding.

Young people make secure attachments to their foster carers. The agency has a focus on providing long term placements within their 'families for life'. It is noteworthy that emergency placements made on a short term basis can often become long term placements which provide young people with emotional security and a sound basis for their future growth and development. Matching is done carefully and levels of placement stability are good. This means that young people are able to experience a positive family life. A social worker with a number of children placed with the agency described the agency and its carers as 'highly committed' and said 'I cannot praise the agency and carers I've worked with highly enough.'

Young people are provided with good information about their carers before they are placed. Careful introductions take place wherever possible. This helps them to understand and influence what is happening to them. In emergency situations young people are helped to settle by the provision of good information about their new carers and high levels support from the agency's social workers. The agency's young person's guide is produced in a range of formats suitable for children and young people of different ages. It also has a symbol version available to where necessary. These guides provide very good, age appropriate information for children about being fostered and how to speak to someone if they have concerns or worries.

Young people are well cared for and fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers. Young people's lives are improved by the work of their foster carers and the agency with their birth families. They are helped to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate and in line with their plan. Foster carers work very well with birth family members, demonstrating an understanding of and empathy for their situation. They offer good practical and emotional support. This means that contact is a positive experience for young people which enables them to maintain important family ties.

Young people approaching adulthood or these who have become adults receive

outstanding levels of support which improves their lives considerably. Whether young people remain with their foster carers when they become adults or move away, the agency continues to engage with them and support them. The agency supports placements continuing under 'Staying Put' arrangements and carers often continue to provide care on individual and informal arrangements. The agency provides a 'half-time' social work post to support young people in transition to adult and those adults who used to be fostered by the agency. Even when young people have been left foster care for a significant length of time the agency continues to support them to a high level if necessary. This support enables ex-fostered young people to develop the skills, relationships and emotional security needed to function as an independent adult. For example, the support provided to one young person has had a transforming effect on their life when compared to the likely outcomes without this help. Fostered young people are helped to develop the skills they will need for independence in a planned manner that they can engage in.

Young people take part in a wide range of activities to increase their skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. Their health improves and they have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. Young people's emotional health is improved by their ready access to any therapeutic support they need.

Young people's educational progress is marked and impressive. High levels of support from their carers, and the agency's supervising social workers form the basis of this. Where additional support is needed this is provided by the agency's education advisor. Young people received direct, individual and one-to-one tuition, education and support. This can be provided to help them establish an interest in education, help them feel confident in school work or to achieve success in exams. This staff member works well with schools and placing authorities to ensure that young people benefit from a consistent approach to the teaching they receive. Foster carers speak highly of this support and cite numerous examples of young people achieving academic success at levels significantly higher than could be expected. For example, one young person with special needs living in a long term foster placement sat a number of GCSE exams this year which would not have been considered possible at the time the placement was made. The agency and its foster carers work hard to ensure that young people are in schools that meet their needs best. Although this sometimes means a change of school, young people benefit from being able to develop friendships with young people in their own area and an education which helps them achieve to the best of their ability.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has an effective foster carer recruitment process which ensures it is able to assess and approve the right sort of carers for the young people who need families. Initial contact with potential foster carers is open and honest. People considering fostering are provided with detailed information about what they can expect. This enables them and the agency to make an early decision whether fostering is for them. Consequently when an application is accepted there is a high

degree of certainty that people will be successful in their application.

The preparation and assessment of prospective foster carers is thorough and robust. Suitability checks are rigorous and the preparation and training process is of good quality. This means that carers who complete the assessment process and are approved are suitably competent. They have a good understanding of the needs of young people who may need their care and how they will care for them. The assessment process is timely but ensures that applicants are able to develop through the process to ensure they are properly ready to care for young people. This effective assessment process means that potential foster carers are not unnecessarily deterred from applying to foster.

The agency's fostering panel is constituted of members with a wide range of appropriate backgrounds and skills. Panel gives careful consideration of the cases presented to it and makes well-judged recommendations to the agency decision maker. Generally, the quality of assessments and accompanying information presented to panel is high and panel is confident in deferring a case if it is not able to make a recommendation. For example, the panel deferred one case as members did not feel they were able to make a recommendation that the applicant was suitable on the information presented. In this case the agency was aware of additional information about the applicant which was not available to panel. This is referred to in the leadership and management section of this report.

Once panel has made its recommendation, decisions are made promptly and applicants are informed of the outcome in a timely manner.

The agency provides its foster carers with good training and very good supervision and support. Supervision and support visits are very frequent and well recorded. Supervision covers foster carers' own development as well as monitoring and guiding the care provided to and outcomes being achieved by the young people. Agency workers maintain close involvement with young people in placement. They meet them regularly to ensure their needs are being met and they are able to express their views. Foster carers have development plans in place and a wide range of mandatory and optional training is provided to them. The agency has consulted with carers and is working towards a more individualised provision of training rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. Most of the agency's carers have completed the training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care.

The agency matches young people and their foster carers in a careful and considered manner. Where placements are planned information is shared appropriately and time is given to ensuring the placement is as suitable for the young person as possible. In emergency or short notice placements, the agency is careful to put forward only carers who have suitable skills and approval terms for the young person concerned. The agency works hard to make sure that full information is gained from placing authorities for short notice placements and continues to work hard to access any outstanding information. Foster carers are fully involved in this process so that they are able to be a full part of the team working with the young person. Effective matching promotes stable placements despite the complex needs of the young

people the service works with. Often short term placements made at short notice eventually become long term matched placements providing young people with much needed stability. Where placements do not work so well the agency works hard to learn lessons to help when matching and making placements in future.

The agency and its carers communicate effectively with young people's social workers keeping them fully informed of young people's progress. One social worker said the balance of information communicated to them is 'fantastically right' with the foster carers showing insight in deciding what the social worker needed to know about. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and the agency ensures that carers are aware of these arrangements. This helps ensure that young people receive the care they require.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good.**

The agency works hard to make sure that foster carers receive comprehensive information about young people when they are placed. Clear risk assessments are developed and regularly reviewed and updated. Foster carers have individualised safe caring guidelines in place based on each young person's needs. These help ensure that care is provided to young people in a way that helps to keep them safe while allowing them to take age appropriate risks. Young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster homes. When asked about their carers one young person simply said, 'They're brilliant.'

The agency's young person's guide gives young people clear information about how they can make a complaint or express any concerns they may have. Supervising social workers visit young people in placement regularly and spend time alone with them in order to seek their views and ensure that they feel safe.

Young people rarely go missing, or are absent without authority, from their foster homes and this situation has not occurred in the agency for approximately one year. Where the agency or its carers identify that there is an increased risk of a young person going missing this is proactively addressed. The situation is discussed by foster carers, the agency and young people's social workers and strategies are put in place to discourage this or to respond if necessary. There is good information about prevention and response in relation to young people going missing in the foster carers' handbook.

The agency has good policies and procedures in place to ensure that young people are safeguarded. The agency works closely with placing authorities and those in which young people live with their foster carers. The agency keeps copies of the various authorities' safeguarding, child protection and missing from home and care procedures and protocols. Where safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur the agency responds to these promptly, notifies the relevant agencies and cooperates with any action required to ensure that young people are safe. For example, in the case of the one allegation made against a foster carer since the last

inspection the agency took prompt action to protect the young people concerned.

Recruitment processes in the agency, for foster carers and staff and panel members, are rigorous and thoroughly check on the background and suitability of applicants. This helps to ensure that those people who have contact with young people or sensitive information about their whereabouts are suitable to work with them. This helps keep young people safe.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency's statement of purpose clearly describes the its operation and is available on the agency's website as well as being provided to interested parties. The agency provides good information for young people about being fostered who they can speak to and how to complain in the young people's guide to fostering which is accessible to children of different ages and reading ability.

The agency has good working relationships with placing authorities and works with them well to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs and is line with their local authority plan of care. This helps ensure that young people get the support and are able to access the services they need.

The agency has undergone a recent reorganisation at branch level and is changing its national structure as well. During this period the previous manager and some social workers left the agency and, at the time of the inspection, there was no registered manager in place. The agency is taking suitable steps to recruit a new person to this post. Despite these changes and the lack of a registered manager the agency is making improvements to its level of service provision. For example, a previous inconsistency of support and response to foster carers from some staff members has been addressed. Support for foster carers is now much improved. All stakeholders consulted were very positive about the changes and felt that the agency is improving.

The agency's strategic development plans are clearly set out. However, despite this, elements of the management's monitoring and controlling of the detail and quality agency's work is not as effective as it should be. This lack of quality assurance has manifested itself in a number of ways.

Details in foster carers' records are not always accurate or do not capture information correctly. For example, actions taken following a foster carer being deferred at panel are not clearly recorded and, in some cases, addresses and terms of foster carer's approval were incorrect in some records.

Foster carers' reviews do not always capture and consider all key events that took place in the year being reviewed. For example, the review of one carer made no reference to a placement being made in the year which resulted in an unplanned ending. This key information was, therefore not considered during the review.

The process of considering potential matches between young people and foster carers do not always happen at the correct time. For example, in one case placing social workers were taken to visit the home of a prospective foster carer who had not yet attended panel or been approved. This is not good practice as it prejudices panel's opinion and raises expectations which may not be met.

In one case, an assessment of a prospective foster carer was submitted to panel without key information of some concern which was identified after the assessment was complete but before the date of panel. This meant that panel considered the application without key information which may have affected their discussion.

These matters should have been identified and addressed by the agency's ongoing quality monitoring and supervision processes and, as such the agency's leadership and management requires improvement in this regard.

The agency provides its foster carers with high levels of support and supervision. Supervision takes place frequently, is of good quality and detailed records are maintained. This means that the agency can monitor its carers' work with young people to ensure it delivers positive outcomes for them. Foster carers take part in regular 'team meetings' to discuss key matters. The views of carers have influenced the way the agency operates and the agency is developing further ways of seeking foster carer' views and input. Work is taking place involving a care experienced young person in order to engage with fostered young people more effectively.

The agency provides regular reports and management information to the board of trustees and an annual review takes place. Senior managers and trustees visit the agency regularly and speak to staff and foster carers. This accessibility of senior management is highly valued by staff and carers.

Staff and panel members are appropriately qualified, supervised and supported. They are able to influence the running of the agency and are motivated to work to a high standard, Workloads are suitable to enable social workers to spend time getting to know the young people, to seek their views and to ensure that suitable care is being provided to them. Staff and panel members share expertise and a range of good quality training is available including training from national organisations specialising in fostering and family placements.

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.