

# The Children's Family Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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**Inspector** Mrs Maire Atherton  
**Type of inspection** Full

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**Setting address** 55 Station Road, Petersfield, Hampshire GU32 3ES

**Telephone number** 01730 770750  
**Email** tom@thecft.org.uk  
**Registered person** The Children's Family Trust  
**Registered manager** Mrs Karen Blackman  
**Responsible individual** Mrs Marina Mulholland  
**Date of last inspection** First inspection since registration

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The Children's Family Trust (the Trust) is a charitable organisation, which operates four independent fostering agency branches from a head office in Bromsgrove. It is governed by a board of trustees. This agency, known at the South East branch and registered in June 2014, supports short-term, long-term, respite, and parent-and-child placements.

At the time of this inspection, it had 18 fostering households with 19 children and young people placed.

### 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 that 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**

The effective and highly committed registered manager ensures that all who work for the agency know that the safety and well-being of each child or young person placed is their priority and responsibility. Staff and foster carers receive the support and training that they need to meet the needs of children and young people placed. Matching is generally a strength of the agency, and the majority of those placed are in long-term placements. One independent reviewing officer (IRO) described the placement of a young person as 'remarkable in terms of his overall development and well-being. It has given him a sense of family and nurturing, and he is responding to that. One of the best teenage moves I have seen in a very long time.' The agency seeks to learn from unplanned endings when these occur.

After a period of limited growth, the agency is poised to develop, with an increased permanent staff team, a relaunch of active recruitment and assessments in progress.

Relationships with partner organisations are effective at ensuring that all work together to meet children’s and young people’s needs.

This is a child-focused agency that seeks the views of children and young people and listens to what they have to say. The skilled foster carers embrace children and young people as part of their families and provide stability and good outcomes for the majority.

One requirement and five recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection. None has a direct impact on children’s experiences, outcomes or progress. There are minor deficits that relate to one element of recruitment procedures, aspects of the agency’s fostering panel, updates to foster carer assessments where necessary, and some records.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards (NMS). The registered persons must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
<b>20</b>	The fostering service provider must not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, and full and satisfactory information is available to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(3), Schedule 1(4)(6))	<b>31/05/2016</b>

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that placement plans detail how children and young people are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their identity, in particular those relating to religious, cultural or ethnic needs (NMS 2.1).
- Ensure that the fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures on recruitment to and maintenance of the central list of persons considered by the service to be suitable members of a fostering panel and on the constitution of fostering panels, in particular to clarify the role of the registered manager and whether South, Central and West Midlands have a jointly constituted panel (NMS 14.1).

- Update assessments when the composition of the household changes, to determine if the household remains suitable (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services para 5.30).
- Ensure that parent-and-child placement plans are comprehensive and detail the expectations of the placing authority (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services para 3.8).
- Ensure that the fostering service's procedure is in line with government guidance and, in particular, that it references current guidance (NMS 22.2).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people placed with this agency enjoy positive experiences, make good progress and achieve well. The agency strives to implement the Trust ethos of a family for life by making planned placements. Children and young people moving in accordance with their plans have introductory visits determined by the needs of the child or young person. A typical introduction includes foster carers meeting a child or young person in their current placement, followed by visits to the prospective foster carers' home for tea visits, overnight and weekend stays. This enables children and young people to move in and settle at their own pace. One described being 'welcomed with open arms'. Children and young people moving in with very little notice may not see the written and pictorial profiles that are available of foster carers. The agency is working on other formats and ways of sharing this information at the earliest opportunity for all children and young people moving in.

Children and young people are well looked after. They feel safe, are confident and are building strong bonds with their foster carers. The majority are in long-term matched placements. Of those in short term placements, all except one have been living with their carers for six months or longer. Their needs are well met by carers who have a sound understanding of the plans and the skills to implement them. A parent placed with her child said of her carer, 'She's made me feel like a mum. If not for her, I wouldn't still have X.' Although this is a new agency, it is already planning for staying-put arrangements, using the expertise developed within the Trust.

Children and young people enjoy a range of opportunities that enable them to establish, develop and maintain skills and interests that support their personal development and identity. They participate in routine household chores, in line with their age and ability. One young person noted that she was 'learning how to be independent.' Foster carers respect the children's and young people's cultural, racial, and religious backgrounds and support them to build and maintain links that keep them in touch with their heritage. This may include going to particular hairdressers or grocers. The written information that supports this good work is limited. Children and young people keep in touch with family members where this is in accordance with their plan. Foster carers advocate on their behalf when contact is not as it should be. Young people may access the records kept and some do. One young person reviews the daily log and is encouraged to express her views of the foster carer's recording, and these are included in the log.

Children's and young people's voices are actively sought, central to and valued by the foster carers and the agency. Children's and young people's views influence their care when this is possible. When it is not, an explanation is provided. The children and young people are given the information that they need to complain and to access independent support. The home visits by the supervising social worker provide them with another avenue through which to express any concerns or worries. Children and young people are confident in sharing with foster carers when they feel bullied, and foster carers take the action necessary to support the child or young person, for example contacting the school, requesting details of how the

school has managed the concerns and challenging when they think that not enough has been done.

Children and young people have a good, age-appropriate understanding of personal responsibility. Those spoken with understand the house rules, know what the consequences for breaking these are and think that they are fair and proportionate. They gave examples such as early bed and loss of console time. Those children and young people at the time of this visit presented limited risk-taking behaviour. Those with risky sexualised or self-harmful behaviour are learning about what this may mean for their future.

Children and young people live healthy lifestyles and know how to sustain this, as they talk about regular exercise and healthy eating. An IRO said of the foster carers, 'She is encouraging the young person's physical and emotional well-being.' The children and young people benefit from routine healthcare arrangements, and any specialist healthcare needs are met. This includes professional guidance from a therapist to direct and inform the care given by foster carers in managing specific issues, for example that of developing attachments.

All children and young people are in education that meets their individual needs. Foster carers know what children and young people are entitled to and successfully advocate on their behalf to secure the support that they need, for example ensuring the wise use of pupil premium funding. As a result, children and young people are achieving well and making good progress. For example, a child improved her assessed spoken language skills from that of an 18-month-old to a four and a half-year-old in under six months. One young person recognised that she had 'grown up since being here, learning independence skills and having more me time and space.'

Children and young people are part of the family and so share the family leisure interests. They belong to clubs, have friends to stay and go to friends' houses, develop hobbies, and take their first foreign holidays with their foster families. These experiences enable them to expand their horizons and to promote a positive self-view. As an IRO said, 'The foster carers are very encouraging in terms of resilience, building on the strengths and skills of the young person and building her self-esteem.'

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has had a quiet year, and undertaken very limited recruitment while staffing levels were low. The manager has sustained the number of fostering households during this period. At the time of this visit, there are five assessments in progress, with more enquiries resulting in initial visits being made following a recent radio advertisement. The agency is actively looking at ways to increase the diversity of their foster carer base through targeted recruitment drives, for example by having a stall at local gay pride events. The agency offers placements to children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Foster carers have access to

support from a qualified mental health worker who through discussion enables foster carers to reflect on their attachment style and to devise strategies to manage the challenges that they face.

Foster carers speak very positively about the preparation, assessment, training and support provided by the agency. They say that the ethos of the agency, keeping the child or young person at the centre and providing them with a family for life, is woven through all aspects of their engagement with the agency. They say that training equips them for their role as far as it can. They appreciate and value the opportunity to revisit training in the light of their experiences. Foster carers readily relate how particular courses have informed and changed some aspects of their care. They were particularly complimentary about the attachment training, and many were looking forward to a three-day course. Comments included, 'It blew my mind and helped me to understand the reasons for particular behaviours', and 'without attachment training, I couldn't have sustained the placement'. The registered manager monitors the timeliness of foster carers completing the training and development standards within 12 months of approval, and the majority achieve this. Where this is not the case, there are valid reasons and work towards completion is focused.

Foster carers maintain a strong focus on ensuring that children and young people become and feel part of their families. They provide a warm and nurturing atmosphere that builds bonds with the children and young people. As a result, children and young people relax, begin to develop confidence and enjoy themselves. Foster carers are skilled at developing relationships with others significant to the children and young people in their care. This is used to good effect to underpin the stability of the placement. There are sound systems for children and young people to enjoy short breaks with other foster carers. These breaks are in their best interests and meet their needs. They are planned and discussed to ensure that the match is good and that the timing suits the needs of the child or young person. The strong foster carers' network provides opportunities for informal 'sitting' services alongside the more formal short-break arrangements.

The pattern of supervision, tailored to individual circumstances, is effective in keeping the focus on the needs of the child or young person and enabling the foster carers to meet these. Supervising social workers have two distinct visit types each month. One is for foster carers' supervision and the other for a home visit with a focus on the children and young people, including talking to them on an individual basis. The aim of this pattern is to sustain placements. This has not proven successful in every case as there have been some unplanned endings. Some have come about due to issues outside the control of the agency. Health issues, for example, have been a factor. In other cases, the placing authority has agreed with the decision to end a placement, and foster carers have facilitated moves that take into account the children's and young people's needs.

Foster carers are very complimentary about the agency and the 'family feel' engendered by the registered manager. They describe feeling part of a team caring for a child or young person, and are taught to be professional foster carers by the agency. They have a good understanding of their role and that of other professionals who form part of the team. An IRO commented, 'We are working well together: the school, the local authority social workers, the supervising social worker and the



foster carers. Communication is dynamic and of a very good standard.' Foster carers report that the level of support has been sustained despite staff changes and vacancies. They say that there is always someone at the end of the phone, and that they have never been left in the lurch, and they describe the out-of-hours system as robust. The agency understands the role of all family members, not just those living in the fostering household. They have, on occasion, given information and support to extended families to meet an identified need. Foster carers are fully involved in placement planning, and their views are actively sought and taken into account in looking forward with the child or young person.

The experienced and established panel does not meet very frequently in this area. It met three times last year due to the low level of business. The central list, though balanced in respect of gender, is limited in diversity, and current recruitment aims to address this. The list is shared between two registered Trust agencies, with some of the South Central business being dealt with in the West Midlands office. It is not clear whether this is a jointly constituted panel. The registered manager attends panel in South Central and, although clearly not considered a panel member, her role is not defined. She may be asked for supplementary information by panel members. This has the potential to compromise independence and accountability because she may well have had input into the assessment being considered by panel.

Assessments are generally of a good standard and robustly consider the suitability of prospective foster carers. An IRO observed, 'The quality of foster carers is very good. I am very encouraged.' Panel members identify areas that they wish to explore further, but these are not followed up in every case. For example, one assessment did not evidence that the applicants' motivation to foster had been fully explored, and the panel identified but did not pursue this. Where there has been a change to the composition of foster carers' households, for example a family member moving in, assessments have not been updated to assess the impact of this. There are well-established formal quality assurance processes that serve to improve practice and report writing, and support the agency in developing. The agency decision maker is knowledgeable and experienced, and makes timely, well-evidenced decisions in the light of panel recommendations and the supporting documentation.

Matching is a strength of the agency. Supervising social workers, who know the foster carers very well, manage referrals, in consultation with the registered manager. This underpins the careful matching of placements. The supervising social workers seek additional information, where necessary, to assist them in their decision making. Foster carers appreciate having a voice in matching and express the view that matching is of a good standard. One carer said, 'it can take time, but is worth the wait to get it right.'

Professionals working with the agency are very complimentary about the role of the agency in improving outcomes for children and young people, describing it as 'supportive and involved'. Children's and young people's reviews take place as required with good quality contributions from the agency and foster carers. Foster carers are knowledgeable about, and secure, delegated authority arrangements where these are in the child's or young person's best interests and have not been provided by the local authority.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people feel and are safe. One young person described her foster carer as 'a protective parent, always looks out for me, senses when I'm upset and comforts me and gives me advice'. Foster carers have a sound understanding of risk management and apply this well. They carefully consider risks, and the voice of the child or young person is taken into account. This approach enables age-appropriate risks within a structured framework, with support strategies identified that the child or young person contributes and signs up to. Management monitoring and evaluation of risk are thorough.

Children and young people know how to complain. They have very regular, usually monthly, opportunities to speak to the supervising social worker alone on a home visit. The agency holds regular social events, for children and young people, and these provide times when they can talk freely to agency staff, as do the unannounced visits. These events may also comprise a learning element. However, as it is a small agency, awareness raising and education about keeping safe are mainly done on an individual basis by foster carers or the supervising social worker. Children and young people report that this works well.

Good communication and joint working between foster carers, the agency and other linked professionals ensure that action for individual children and young people is effective in securing their welfare. Rigorous monitoring and evaluation by the manager underpin learning and inform strategic approaches. There are limited instances of children and young people going missing. Foster carers manage such instances well, with good support from the agency. Foster carers are knowledgeable about and alert to child sexual exploitation concerns. They take prompt and appropriate action, working as part of the professional team to support and safeguard the child or young person. They use established links and forge new ones in the light of emerging concerns. Where risks have been too high, the agency has worked with placing authorities to find placements that are better suited to the child or young person's needs. Placement plans for parent-and-child placements provided by local authorities are not sufficiently specific about, for example, the level of monitoring required or the expected sleeping arrangements, and so do not enable a thorough analysis of risk. Foster carers report that the preparation course and other training, such as that on managing challenging behaviour and safe care, provide them with insight into the impact of trauma on children and young people. Supervising social workers ensure that safeguarding is actively considered in each foster carer supervision meeting. The support that the agency routinely provides to foster carers enables them to respond properly to safeguarding issues raised by children and young people. Foster carers know how to report such events in line with the policies and procedures, and staff understand and fulfil their responsibilities. The child protection policy does not reference one current guidance document, but the comprehensive range of linked policies are well written and provide foster carers with up-to-date, easily accessible relevant information.

Staff and panel member recruitment and vetting are generally thorough. There is one instance where a gap in an applicant's employment history was not identified.

The registered manager promotes an open culture. Any instances of poor practice are robustly challenged, with a supporting plan to address identified issues. The registered manager does not shy away from difficult decisions. The safety and welfare of children and young people is her primary objective.

The registered manager has grown the agency and has a detailed working knowledge of the carers and the children and young people placed. The chief executive officer and the board of trustees maintain a good oversight of any safeguarding concerns and ensure that they have the relevant training and knowledge to inform their monitoring.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Before being registered in June 2014, this agency operated as a sub office of another branch. The person who is now the registered manager, working with the office administrator, built a small carer base and was then able to employ additional supervising social workers. Staffing issues have had an impact on the growth of the agency, but the core group of foster carers has been maintained. The manager also built, and continues to develop, effective working relationships with relevant professionals. She is described by one as 'approachable, friendly and happy to help in resolving any issues'. The management analysis of referrals is used to identify the needs of local authorities seeking placements, for example parent-and-child placements. Commissioners are complimentary about the agency, one said 'they do not make many offers but those that they do are matched well.'

Agency monitoring of the activities that children and young people are engaged in is sound. Foster carers complete detailed recordings, which are read by the supervising social worker, and may be used to inform their discussions with children and young people. The foster carers' use of the outcomes tracker on the electronic systems also informs management monitoring, as do the daily interactions between supervising social workers and the registered manager. These provide opportunities to reflect on the progress of children and young people, to see their journey so far and to consider how the agency can support and promote ongoing progress.

The agency is financially viable and this is rigorously monitored by the trustees. As part of a wider organisation, the agency has a place in the overall development plan for the Trust, with its own key targets informed by the regular monitoring by the registered manager. The monthly reports are limited in evaluation and analysis but do contain the key areas. The registered manager is eloquent in her aims for the service, underpinned by her learning through monitoring all aspects of the agency's work.

There is an overarching statement of purpose for all four agencies run by the Trust, as they share a common ethos. The registered manager conveys this ethos very effectively with conviction. This ethos has been absorbed by staff and foster carers, as they strive to provide families for life alongside meeting local authority demands for short-term placements or particular pieces of work. The foster carers' charter has been adopted and is being updated by foster carers in meetings facilitated by social work staff. The agency promotes an open culture, and staff and foster carers respond positively. They appreciate knowing that they 'are not expected to be perfect, just honest'. In this way, children and young people are cared for by foster carers who acknowledge their own needs, understand how these may affect the care that they provide and gain the support necessary to sustain a placement.

Those working for the agency are qualified for their respective roles. The registered manager has challenged staff practice when she is not satisfied with the quality of the work, and some staff have left. The registered manager has been pragmatic in maintaining the current group of foster carers in the light of staffing difficulties. Foster carers speak very positively of the role of the administrative officer in maintaining continuity and a sense of belonging. With a full social work team now in place, described by foster carers as 'the strongest team to date', recruitment of foster carers is again under way. The agency recognises that there is no room for complacency in settled placements, and it continues the regular pattern of supervision and home visits. There are good systems for monitoring placement stability, with a range of support strategies available and deployed when necessary.

Staff are well supervised, both formally and informally. Staff appreciate the time to reflect on their work, both in supervision and at the monthly team meetings. They are enabled to attend a range of courses that promote their effective support of foster carers. They share their learning and discuss the impact on their practice and that of their foster carers. The manager undertakes staff appraisals and the views of foster carers form part of this process.

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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, and 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.