

The Children's Family Trust

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC477734
Inspection date 22/02/2016
Inspector Tracy Murty
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Children's Family Trust is a registered charity and is administered by a Board of Trustees. The West Yorkshire area office comprises of a registered manager, two supervising social workers and administrative support. It undertakes the recruitment, assessment, approval, supervision and training of foster carers. The fostering agency is primarily committed to providing long-term care for children and young people. This reflects the 'family for life' ethos of the charity. The agency also provides children and young people with short term, emergency and respite foster placements.

At the time of this inspection there were 14 fostering households, and 16 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 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 agency, which provides positive, safe placements for children and young people, some of whom have very complex needs. A particular strength of the agency includes placement stability and longevity, which enables children and young people to make positive progress in all areas of their lives. They have their needs fully met and form positive attachments to their carers and as a result, many achieve exceptional outcomes.

The agency places great emphasis on ensuring that children and young people are well matched with prospective carers. They place great value on providing 'families

for life' and ensuring that children and young people's outcomes and progress improve as a result. The agency values the views of children and young people and uses their feedback to influence and develop the service. There is also a strong family ethos within this small agency, with carers reporting very high levels of satisfaction at the level of support they and their own birth children receive from agency staff and managers.

Foster carers provide excellent standards of care and demonstrate a real insight into the needs of children placed with them. They take great pride and satisfaction in seeing the positive progress made and act as positive and strong advocates for those children in their care. This is attributable to the thorough assessment, approval and support processes in place within the agency. An education provider for one young person said of the carers: 'I have been very impressed not just by how both these carers are committed to the young person's education and their attitude towards school, but also the obvious high levels of care and support they provide at home. The young person clearly respects and appreciates all that they do for her.'

This is the first inspection of this agency, since it registered in 2014. The registered manager and staff team have developed and implemented clear systems for recording and monitoring all aspects of the care provided to children and young people and of the support and training provided to carers. Carers consistently report very high levels of satisfaction. One stated, 'The staff and managers are all brilliant. They are there for us all 24/7 and I couldn't wish to work for a better agency.' Staff within the agency report similar views, with one stating, 'I love the family ethos and values of the agency. I have worked for a lot of other authorities and providers, but this one is the best.'

Minor shortfalls identified as a result of this inspection do not have any adverse impact on outcomes for children and young people. Some checks of the agency's staff require closer monitoring and updating by the manager. Panel members would benefit from receiving specific training in relation to national minimum standards. Recording of allegations against staff needs to be more clearly documented and copies of summaries provided to relevant staff members.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. This is with specific reference to the manager ensuring that all routine checks on the agency's staff identification and key documentation are in date and reviewed (NMS

25.2)

- ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations 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 decision 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 the fostering panel individual members have between them the expertise necessary to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. This relates to training for panel members on national minimum standards. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

This area is judged outstanding because of the impact of placement stability and longevity, which significantly enhances children and young people's experiences, progress and outcomes. There is a commendable focus by the agency on making placements within their 'families for life.' Of the 16 children and young people currently placed, five are in 'family for life' placements with others awaiting confirmation from their placing authorities for similar long-term placements to be agreed. One young person said, 'I am so happy that I am going to be staying here, I love my carers and couldn't be happier.' The agency also supports placements for sibling groups, with four groups currently being placed together. This reflects the ethos of the agency in enabling siblings to remain together, where assessed as being the most appropriate course of action by placing authorities.

The agency also has a clear and robust approach to 'staying put' placements. Detailed policies and procedures have been formulated to ensure that those young people who are eligible, have the option to remain with their carers into adulthood. There are no relevant young people within this agency at present, but a dedicated staff member within the agency works closely with the manager and staff team to ensure that there is excellent forward planning and communication with placing authorities and carers. This demonstrates the total commitment of the agency in providing stable, long-term placements and in enabling young people to achieve the very best they can.

Placing authorities and commissioning services express exceptionally high levels of satisfaction at the quality of care and support provided to children and young people. A social worker for one young person said, 'The carers did a fantastic job. Through their dedication, the young person achieved GCSE results, which was previously not considered possible. They took the young person on holiday abroad for the first time, which they loved. The young person would not be at the stage they are at now, without these carers.' A commissioner for a local authority gave similar praise and said, 'I just wish they had more carers in our area, so we could use them more, as they provide such high quality care and improved outcomes for the children we placed with them.'

Education is promoted to a very high level by agency staff and carers. All placed children and young people have formal educational provision in place and have excellent attendance and engagement. From their starting points, they make significant progress and have goals and aspirations for their futures. Such achievements are also attributable to the tenacity and commitment of carers. They act as very positive role models and advocates for children and young people. They attend all relevant meetings, form close working relationships with education providers and challenge any issues with confidence and skill. Carers work hard to try and ensure that children can remain in the same schools when they move to live with them, providing transport and encouraging their learning. As one placing social

worker said of one set of carers, "They are receptive to discussion and advice, they are strong advocates for the young person and consistently promote her wellbeing. This is evident with the relationship they have formed with both secondary and primary school.'

Children and young people receive information about foster families before they are placed, whenever possible. The agency places great emphasis on ensuring that placements are planned, as this leads to the most positive outcomes for children and young people. Information is available in very child and young person friendly formats, providing them with a wealth of information about what to expect from the placement and support by their carers and the agency.

Carers promote contact with family and friends to a very high level. They actively support contact arrangements both within their own homes and in the community. They demonstrate high levels of insight into the importance of contact for those children placed with them and strive to ensure that they maintain those links and have enjoyable contact with those important to them. Children and young people are very much a part of the fostering family. They go on family holidays, take part in activities in the community such as swimming, football, rugby, dance and drama groups and enjoy time with their friends. One young person who was taken abroad for the first time by their carer is reported by her social worker to have said that 'every day was the best day of her life during the holiday.'

Children and young people are healthy because carers support them to access appropriate services and advocate to ensure these are provided in a timely manner. The agency and carers not only meet the physical health needs of those placed, but also place a strong emphasis on ensuring that their emotional and psychological needs are met. The agency has provided and funded additional work on such issues as separation and loss, wishes and feelings, anger management and sexual health. Carers have also been supported financially by the agency to undertake training in sign language and to attend conferences on brain development. This reflects the commitment of both the agency and its carers in providing children and young people with the level and type of care they require to ensure their holistic health needs are consistently met.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency offers placements to children and young people with often complex needs, and has also been able to accommodate large sibling groups together. Such commitment has led to placement stability and positive outcomes.

The process for the preparation, assessment and approval of carers is thorough and timely. The approved carers met with during this inspection all spoke very highly of the agency staff. One said, 'We considered other agencies, but this one was the best by far. They responded to us very quickly, the staff were all excellent in sharing

information about the role and we have never looked back.' Carers receive preparation training, which provides them with a clear sense of the fostering task and their role within it. Assessments undertaken are analytical and detailed and reflect the commitment of agency staff and managers in ensuring that only the most suitable and skilled people are approved as carers.

The fostering panel provides effective oversight of the work of the agency. The central list includes members from a wide range of backgrounds, skills and experience. Representatives from health, education, police, youth offending, foster carers and adults who were formally looked after provides a wealth of skills and experiences. Panel members appropriately question and challenge assessment and review reports, prior to making a recommendation. The administration of the panel is efficient, with good quality minutes produced from each meeting. Panel members would benefit from receiving specific training in relation to the national minimum standards. This would further enhance their skills and confidence in their role as panel members.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of training and development opportunities following their approval with this agency. All carers have completed their training and development standards within the recommended timescales. All carers view the training opportunities with this agency as positive and enabling them to improve their practice with children and young people placed with them. The agency has also listened to the views of its carers and is now providing some training opportunities at weekends. This has led to improved attendance for those carers who have work commitments and could not previously attend.

Support and supervision to carers is a particular area of strength in this agency. Supervision is very regular and child focused. Each session has a theme each month, considering such areas as the health needs or safeguarding for those children and young people placed. Supervision sessions also consider the progress made by each child placed, with outcome trackers being completed by carers and staff every six months. This enables carers and agency staff to have a clear sense of the progress made in all areas and to identify any additional support or services, which a child may require.

Carers are consistently positive about working for this agency. They like the fact it is small and friendly and refer to the staff as 'professional but like our own family.' They praise the out of hours support provided, stating that staff and managers 'stay on the phone for as long as we need them, visit and make sure we and the children are safe and issues are sorted.' All carers reported high levels of happiness with their support workers, with one saying, 'I cannot praise my worker enough, they are amazing.' Another said, 'We couldn't do what we do without our support workers and could not wish for better ones. They go above and beyond their role every day of the week for us.'

Carers and agency staff attend all relevant meetings and reviews for those children and young people placed with them. They fully contribute to decision-making processes and advocate for those placed with them. Delegated authority is clearly recorded for each child placed and is chased by the manager from the start of the

placement. This ensures that children and young people do not miss out on opportunities and that carers know what authorities have been delegated to them.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Agency staff and managers ensure that children and young people feel and are kept safe in their placements. Staff present as very competent and skilled in the identification and response to any actual or potential safeguarding issues. Carers and staff attend a wide range of training opportunities, enabling them to respond to safeguarding, child sexual exploitation, missing from care and allegations with confidence. This is supported by detailed and regularly reviewed policies and procedures within the agency. Training has also been sourced in relation to radicalisation and extremism, providing further insight and skills for carers in the identification of such potential safeguarding concerns. This provides agency staff and carers with a detailed awareness and understanding of the complex needs of looked after children and young people.

Children and young people report feeling safe in their foster homes and able to speak with their carers about concerns or issues they may have. One placing social worker commented, 'My young person built up such a trusting relationship with their carer that they felt able to disclose historic abuse issues. This reflects the positive relationship formed and really helped the young person.' Risks are well assessed, documented and updated in light of any identified changes. Agency staff and carers demonstrate diligence in considering and responding to all concerns, amending and updating care plans and other documentation to manage risks safely and to minimise harm.

There have only been three incidents of young people going missing from care since the agency was registered. Carers and agency staff followed all relevant policies and procedures to ensure the safe return of those young people. Close and proactive partnership working is evident with placing authorities, police, health and education providers. Carers demonstrate a robust understanding of how to respond to such incidents, supported by regular training of a high quality.

Allegations against foster carers receive prompt attention by agency staff and managers. Carers feel well supported throughout the investigation process and demonstrate a clear understanding of the processes to be followed. Records held within the agency reflect the close working with the placing authority, police and any other relevant agencies or professionals. The agency diligently ensures that early reviews of carers takes place to consider any training or approval issues. The agency does not currently ensure that all records relating to an investigation of an allegation against a carer are held in a central or confidential part of their electronic recording system. Carers have also not been provided with a copy of the investigation, actions taken and outcomes. There has been no adverse impact on children or young people as a result of this shortfall, but it would provide carers with a clearer sense of the processes followed.

Agency staff and managers ensure that safe practice is central to their assessment, approval, training and support of foster carers. Appropriate checks and references are taken up for all household members and significant others. The fostering panel minutes reflect a diligent and close monitoring of all such checks being undertaken. Carers demonstrate a strong understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people through the training and support they receive. This is further evidenced in supervision records for carers, as they regularly consider safeguarding as an agenda item. Carers receive at least one unannounced visit to their homes by agency staff each year, with children and young people and birth children being seen alone during those visits. This promotes a positive relationship between children, young people, birth children and the agency's supervising social workers. One carer commented, 'My own children are always seen by our supervising social worker, who gave them his contact details early on. They know and trust him and can call or speak with him about anything.'

The recruitment of agency staff and panel members is robust and overseen by human resources colleagues at the agency's head office. Some key documentation in the form of driving licences and car insurance is not evident on files for some members of staff. A clearer and more robust system is needed to ensure that such documentation is systematically recorded and updated on the agency's staff personnel records.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has a comprehensive and detailed statement of purpose in place, clearly setting out its aims, objectives and services provided. This is available on the agency's website. Children and young people receive good information about the agency, complaints procedures and other interesting information in the form of a children's guide. The guides are produced and accessible for different age ranges. This provides them with clear, accessible and very child friendly information at the start of their placements.

Leaders and managers have established very positive and highly effective working relationships with all relevant agencies and professionals. They routinely challenge placing authorities for any missing documentation, as well as requesting and attending meetings to consider the needs of those children and young people placed with their carers. All placing authorities and involved agencies contacted during this inspection were very positive about the working relationship with staff, managers and carers of this agency. As one placing social worker commented, 'I found the communication with the agency to be swift and thorough when they identify risks.' Another placing social worker said, 'So far, I have found the agency to be excellent and cannot fault them in any way.'

Children and young people's positive experiences include their inclusion at social events organised by the agency, consultation and a clear ethos of their voice being central to the care they receive. The outcome tracking systems reflect agency staff

and carers commitment to ensuring that needs are identified, considered and met at all times. Such close monitoring of their holistic needs provides the support and services needed and leads to improved outcomes. They receive the care and support they need in a timely manner, with the agency doing such things as supporting carers with loans to buy larger vehicles and paying for driving lessons for all 17 year old young people. This reflects the commitment of the agency to ensuring that not only children and young people, but also carers feel valued, respected and having the skills necessary to make positive progress.

Regular management meetings take place at a regional and national level to consider the monitoring and analysis of services provided. Detailed reports by the manager for this agency reflect their clear oversight of all aspects of how the agency is run. The manager has a clear and robust development plan in place, with staff and carers all feeling very much 'team members' and able to influence the agency and its vision.

The agency has a clear ethos of not wishing to get too large and in wanting to recruit carers of a high calibre and quality. There are clear plans in place to develop the services in other areas of the region, based on local knowledge and discussions with commissioning services. Retention of carers is very good and reflects the agency ethos and commitment to being able to offer high levels of support to carers. Caseloads for supervising social workers are manageable and enable them to offer excellent levels of support to carers. As one carer said, 'They are there for us all the time, they are like family and we never feel on our own in our role, no matter how difficult things might be at times.'

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. All staff spoken with during this inspection reported feeling very well supported through regular supervision and training. They feel proud to work for this agency and in feeling listened to and valued. Staff have access to a wide range of internal and external training opportunities and can request additional training relevant to their needs. This promotes a skilled, confident and competent workforce of staff and carers. As one agency worker stated, 'The fostering service is receptive to my thoughts and opinions and continually asks for my thoughts and feelings.'

Notifiable events are completed and acted upon in a timely manner. This leads to a safe and effective service. As this was the first inspection of this agency, there were no requirements or recommendations to consider from previous inspections.

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.