

The Children's Family Trust

The Children's Family Trust

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

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

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

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

The agency provides placements for 52 children in 36 fostering households, as of 25 October 2021. There are six placements for young people under staying put arrangements. These are arrangements that enable care leavers to remain living with their foster carers when they turn 18.

As of 25 October 2021, there are 35 children in long-term placements.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 October 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 15 January 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children are welcomed into the foster family well and they are accepted unconditionally. The agency works extremely well with social workers to ensure that as much information as possible is shared with the foster carer before a decision is made on placing children. Children receive child-friendly pictorial profiles of the carer's family prior to moving into the home. This positive visual profile helps the children to gain an understanding of their potential family. Consequently, children settle into their new homes quickly and develop positive relationships with their carers, who support them to make exceptional progress.

Children thrive in their placements as a result of the bespoke care and support that they receive. Carers' own children are very much part of the welcoming party, and many of the children who are placed develop positive relationships with their peers quickly. The children and their foster families take part in activities and enjoy time together. They do a vast array of different activities arranged by the agency. For example, they attend seasonal events, both physical and practical, such as gymnastics, pumpkin picking, a virtual party for Christmas with quizzes and a visit from Santa, and many craft-focused events. These opportunities, that everyone in the family is encouraged to take part in, help the children to build strong and positive relationships with their foster families.

Carers and the agency staff referred to the ethos of the service as: 'Once a child is placed with the agency, they will always remain a child with the agency.' This cohesive approach helps the children to develop positive, trusting relationships with their carers. The warmth and acceptance generated in the family environment ensure that many of the children develop a sense of permanence and belonging. As a result, a number of children have been matched to their long-term carers or they have a plan for permanency in place.

Children make excellent progress in their health and education. During the COVID-19 lockdown periods, many of the children were educated at home. Carers identified the positive progress made by some of the children, such as engaging in one-to-one sessions. This has enabled the children to make huge steps forward in their ability to concentrate on tasks. This helps them with their learning. Carers also advocated well for the more vulnerable children to be educated in their schools during this period, where it was possible. The effective relationships that are maintained between the carers, the agency's staff and educational professionals help to maintain excellent communication. A social worker said:

[Name] was excellent during this time. She worked extremely well and in partnership with the school and the local authority. She demonstrated that she is an excellent advocate of [Name].

The well-being of children and their foster families is central to safe care practice. During the COVID-19 lockdown periods, the carers and the children used technology to maintain contact with professionals from the agency and the children's placing local authorities. Children often used technology to enable their supervising social workers to visit their homes virtually. This ensured that everyone's needs were being met and that the children were safe. In addition, the supervising social workers provided food parcels and gifts, such as 'movie-night hampers' full of goodies, for those who were isolating. This care and interaction helped to promote the health and well-being of the children and their carers during these challenging times.

The creative use of technology ensured that the children's family time was maintained and promoted throughout the COVID-19 lockdown periods. Children's face-to-face family time was also promoted, and took place in accordance with social distancing rules and boundaries. Carers and the staff spoke about compromises being made, but always in the best interest of the child.

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

Children are carefully matched to their foster families. Management and staff are extremely proactive in ensuring that the safe care of the children is paramount. Staff advocate strongly on behalf of the carer to ensure that the risks and the needs of the children are clearly identified prior to the children being placed. Particularly good, child-specific safe-care plans provide the foster carers and the children with guidance on the boundaries and expectations in the home. These are always based on basic house rules for everyone, with specific reference to safe care in the home. This helps the children to settle quickly, because they are aware of the expectations in the home.

During the COVID-19 lockdown periods, children and their foster families were provided with an additional layer of safeguarding. This was in the form of an individual 'COVID-19 contingency plan'. These plans identified the additional risks and the actions that the agency would take should a child's placement be placed at risk. As restrictions have been lifted, the agency has reverted back to using COVID-19 risk assessments.

Supervising social workers develop excellent relationships with their carers, children and associated professionals in the team around the child. Twice yearly unannounced visits take place in the family home. This process is robust and covers all aspects of safe care. Staff also see the children at least every two months to assess their well-being and listen to their views. This supports overall safer care and ensures that the child's voice is heard.

The agency goes above and beyond to ensure that its carers are equipped to care for their foster children well. Carers receive extensive training and support to help them understand and respond to the children's behaviour. This can be particularly challenging for carers while they are waiting for therapeutic services that are often unavoidably delayed. As a result, the agency often funds these services privately.

The agency also provides reading material on therapeutic parenting, which helps to improve the carers' understanding. A carer said: 'It is a great team.' They went on to add that they have never felt so supported as they do by the team around the child and the therapy provided by the agency.

Children rarely go missing from their foster homes. Carers are aware of the safeguarding procedures, which they follow. The agency's safeguarding policies are accessible, and an out-of-hours service ensures that the carers are always supported.

The foster care independent review process is extremely thorough and professional. The standard of recording and any subsequent investigations is comprehensive, analytical and evaluative in reaching decisions. This includes allegations made against carers, which the agency ensures are reported to the designated officers and placing authorities immediately. This helps to ensure that the children are protected well.

The recruitment, assessment and approval of those who apply to foster are exceptional. The systems are detailed and effective, which ensures that unsuitable candidates are not selected. New carers spoke positively about the process and the preparation that their assessing social worker provided. A carer said:

The training provided during the assessment gave us a much better understanding of a child's potential background alongside the potential physical and mental trauma they may have encountered. It also helped us to identify any risks this could involve, but also to understand methods we could use to help cope with this.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The acting manager is experienced, but not yet registered with Ofsted. She was the principle social worker so is knowledgeable and brings continuity to the service. The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be met by the agency's well-organised and proactive support of children and their foster families. The leadership and management of the agency ensure that the foster families are supported through good supervision, communication and a positive approach to family participation. A carer said: 'I came here as it is for life, the agency supports the children throughout their life journey.'

The agency has appointed a compliance officer. Their detailed knowledge of the service has helped them to make improvements to the recording and reporting systems, which have been reviewed and updated. All the electronic documentation now has a simple walk-through process which is explained to the user. This ensures that consistency is maintained across the regions that the service covers. In addition, this system also enables the manager and office administrators to monitor the service and conduct a thorough and professional audit of the service delivery. As a result, the manager and staff can clearly see the exceptional progress that the children make on a day-to-day basis.

The appropriate use of technology has ensured that regular supervision and accessible support has been maintained throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The manager and staff introduced a 'Friday catch-up' meeting earlier in the pandemic. This meeting has continued since the COVID-19 government restrictions were lifted. This enables the manager to have further oversight of the agency's practice and the support that is provided for the foster families and the children. In addition, this forum has also helped the new staff to embed the ethos of the service into their practice during a challenging time.

The manager uses staff supervision to reflect on the effectiveness of the care that is provided for the children and their carers. A carer said: 'Staff are an extended family member, if my supervising social worker is not available, there is not one of them who would not know my children.'

A comprehensive training programme is accessed by the staff and the foster carers. The training, support and development standards required for the carers are consistently met in the required timescales. The agency funds additional training for the staff and the carers at their request, to ensure that the children's needs can be met well.

Professionals reported that they have no concerns about the operation of the agency. They confirmed that communication is always good, and information is shared in a timely manner. A professional said: 'They are supportive of their foster carers, but at the same time they do not lose focus on the children.'

The members of the fostering panel are very experienced. The minutes of the meetings, considered by the panel members, provide a clear written record of the proceedings and the recommendations made. This enables the agency decision-maker to fulfil their role. The panel has maintained its business throughout the COVID-19 pandemic using technology and virtual meetings. However, this has not led to the panel meeting informally, sharing knowledge and experiences, and developing as a team. In addition, the panel lacks the social and ethnic diversity of society. The leaders and managers recognise this as a shortfall.

The leadership team has not informed Ofsted of a change in its manager, in line with the regulations. This limits Ofsted's ability to monitor the management arrangements of the service. As a result, this needs to be addressed immediately.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered person must give notice in writing to the Chief Inspector without delay if any of the following events take place or is proposed to take place—</p> <p>a person other than the registered person carries on or manages the fostering agency;</p> <p>a person ceases to carry on or manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 39 (1)(a)(b))</p>	26 November 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel reflect the diversity and ethnicity of society. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.1)
- The registered person should ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of meeting together as a panel group to discuss practice and panel development on at least an annual basis. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 23.10)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the 'Social care common inspection framework'. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC402365

Registered provider: The Children's Family Trust

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

Responsible individual: Marina Mulholland

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Inspector

Michael Dack, Social Care Inspector

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