

Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Date of last inspection	N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering Limited is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Dover, Kent. The service was first registered in August 2013 and this is its first inspection. During the past year five fostering households had been approved to provide nine placements. At the time of this inspection three children and young people were placed in two of these fostering households. Introductions for a fourth placement in another fostering household were at an advanced stage.

The service is part of a larger organisation in the area consisting of six children's homes and a separately registered school. The agency aims to provide short term, long term, emergency, respite and stepping stones or transition foster placements when children or young people move from the organisation's children's homes into a foster home.

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**.

Children and young people with complex needs benefit from placements with carers who provide them with the opportunity to experience stability in a family environment. This follows periods of change in their lives and children and young people respond positively to the consistency and continuity of care they receive.

Children and young people recognise genuine changes in themselves that result. They confidently say that they feel safe and valued by their foster carers. The views of children and young people are regularly sought and acted upon. This helps them to understand that their view is important to others and contributes to the ways decisions are made.

While recruitment of carers has been limited over the agency's first year leaders and managers strive to maintain high standards and expectations of foster carers. Assessments of new foster carers are thorough and well written by competent registered social workers. Good quality and frequent training opportunities provide carers with the knowledge and skills required to meet the individual needs of children and young people. Extensive support is provided by supervising social workers, therapists and an accessible management team. Foster carers also encourage and support each other both directly and indirectly. The contributions of foster carers are valued by other professionals working with each child and young person. This informs planning and promotes positive outcomes for children and young people.

Leaders and managers continue to build positive working relationships with placing authorities. Social workers and independent reviewing officers from these local authorities speak highly of the service and the demonstrable progress children and young people make. Leaders and managers have a sound understanding of areas where the agency needs to improve and make clear plans to address these.

Shortfalls against the Fostering Services (England) Regulations relate to the need to appoint someone to stand in for the chair of the fostering panel if necessary and to forward copies of any amendments to the agency's statement of purpose to Ofsted promptly. These have limited direct impact upon children and young people.

Some children and young people make genuine progress in their education. However, the educational development of others is impacted by full time and appropriate learning opportunities not being identified promptly following placement. A recommendation is made to ensure all children and young people are able to attend appropriate education facilities regularly. A further recommendation is made for leaders and managers to confirm any differences in the protocols to be followed if children or young people go missing. Leaders and managers acknowledge that they have not yet been able to contact each authority that places children in the agency and to communicate any different expectations clearly to foster carers.

A statistical comparison of this service with national trends is not included in this section. The newness of the agency and the limited number of placements made during its first year of operation results in a limited evidence base. Consequently any evaluation would be unreliable.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
4 (2011)	notify Ofsted of any revision of the statement of purpose or children's guide within 28 days of any such revision (Regulation 4(b))	21/11/2014
23 (2011)	appoint one or two persons who may act as chair if the person appointed to chair the panel is absent or that office is vacant ('the vice chairs') from the persons on the central list. (Regulation 23(4)(ii))	21/11/2014

Recommendations

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

- follow the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol and comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child's care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care (NMS 5.7)
- ensure children are supported to attend school, or alternative provision regularly. (NMS 8.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The quality of written guides ensures that children and young people are provided with valuable information at the outset of their placements. These documents are produced in different formats to promote the engagement of children and young people of different ages and levels of understanding. An audible version is also available in a digital format to assist those with visual impairments or for children and young people who have difficulty reading. Profiles of individual fostering households are shared in advance of placements whenever possible. All children and young people receive a bag complete with contents designed to help them feel welcomed at the outset of their placements. The considered steps taken by the agency help children to settle into their placements well.

Whenever possible, phased introductions take place prior to the placement of any child or young person. Children and young people confirm that they contribute to these plans which are carried out at their pace. Placing social workers say that the

agency is flexible when responding to the requests of children and young people in relation to introductions to placements. When placements are made in more urgent circumstances children and young people benefit from child-centred considerations that strive to help them feel at ease. Plans for care are known and understood. Children and young people confidently communicate that they know that they are in long term placements. One emphasised their intention to stay long into their adulthood.

Children and young people grasp the opportunity to engage in a wide range of activities with their foster carers and in the wider community. They grow in confidence and self-esteem through taking part in dance, drama and performing arts. They learn to take additional responsibilities through undertaking work experience prior to starting college courses. They experience different cultures through going on holidays with their foster carers. They learn new skills through joining clubs and organisations or simply make friends while playing in the local park with their foster carers. Young people are encouraged to take age appropriate steps to develop their independence to prepare them for their adult lives. This is done in conjunction with the young people themselves and only at a pace they feel comfortable with.

Children and young people are able to express the positive changes they see in themselves. Some say that they are able to talk about their feelings more easily. Others identify improvements in their behaviour as a key difference adding that they argue less and do not do 'silly things' anymore. Some acknowledge that where they have lived previously their behaviours have occasionally led to them being restrained. They highlight that this does not happen anymore, indicating that they feel they are taking more responsibility for their own actions.

Children and young people clearly communicate that they feel part of the family. Good opportunities are provided to them in ways that help them express their views and opinions about their day to day care. At the same time they are helped to understand their foster carers' points of view. One young person said that their carers 'speak to me about things; they explain things.' As a result children and young people invest in their placements in ways that they may not have done previously. Placing authorities comment positively on what they see as the 'huge progress' children and young people make in this regard. One said that they were amazed at how well a particular child had settled, considering the experiences of breakdowns in previous placements.

Contact is supported appropriately and safely, enabling children and young people to stay in touch with their brothers, sisters and other family members. The emotional and psychological health needs of children and young people are addressed well through the broad ranging services available to them within the organisation. Physical health needs are effectively and promptly identified and addressed through registration and follow up appointments with core health services.

Children and young people who are in education make genuine progress that is celebrated by their foster families and the agency as a whole. Some children and young people benefit from committed foster carers who transport them long

distances to ensure continuity of education. This supports planned transitions to new schools when the time is right. However, not all children and young people are consistently registered with schools or alternative provision following placement. Foster carers support additional or extra-curricular learning and work with placing authorities to help identify suitable provision. However, significant delays are experienced in some cases. While some home tutoring is supplied this does not reach the statutory entitlement of 25 hours each week.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are consistently positive about their foster placements. Comments include, 'I love it here; it's nice' and 'it's a pleasure having [my foster carers] and having a big family.' Their sense of belonging helps to stabilise individual placements.

The newness of the agency and the limited recruitment undertaken within its first year of operation does result in limited diversity of fostering households. While leaders and managers actively seek to expand the range of carers available, currently all foster carers are from a white British background. This is fully considered when proposing potential matches in response to referral information. The agency responds positively to meet the individual needs of children and young people with complex and challenging behaviours. Considerable effort is made to identify the particular requirements of each child from the outset. For example, the service undertakes a therapeutic needs assessment and commissions an educational psychology assessment for each child or young person. In cooperation with placing authorities, services are identified and delivered to enhance the opportunities for children and young people. Placing social workers identify that children and young people do exceptionally well following placement and settle quickly. For some this results in improved performance and behaviour at school.

Foster carers provide positive feedback on the quality of their preparation and assessment. Introductory courses include contributions from young people who are looked after. Foster carers highlight this as significant and influential in helping them understand their role and inform their preferences for offering placements. The development of foster carers is improved through access to an extensive training programme. This is provided across the organisation and foster carers say that they benefit from learning alongside colleagues from the residential and education services. At the same time specific training is provided to foster carers through regular support meetings. This leads to a sound understanding of their role in helping to meet the individual needs of children and young people. At the time of this inspection no foster carers had been approved for a full year, but progress was being made to attain the training, support and development standards within this timescale.

Foster carers receive regular and frequent support from an allocated supervising social worker. This is enhanced by access to therapeutic services within the agency

which are provided to children, young people and foster carers. These services are well received by foster carers who use them constructively to help understand the behaviours of children and young people and adapt their responses accordingly. This leads to the stability of placements resulting from continuity and consistency for children and young people, borne out by the positive feedback of placing authorities.

Foster carers describe positive relationships with the agency. They are supported to feel part of the wider team around each child or young person. They know and understand their responsibilities. They work well with extended family members of children and young people in placement and communicate effectively with placing authorities. Foster carers say that they feel part of a community. They describe the agency as, 'Supportive, approachable and like a family.' Due to the size of the agency at this time, foster carers get to know each other well. They are open and honest about their own strengths and areas for development and provide practical support to each other to simply help out or to develop skills. The agency promotes this sense of togetherness by arranging events and outings for all children, young people, foster carers, their extended families and staff.

The quality of assessments of prospective foster carers is good. Documents are well-written making the comprehensive information accessible to the reader. Contributions from applicants are used effectively to give a sense of the individual applying. Difference and diversity is explored through reflections upon their own identity and considered further through exploration of issues relating to fostering. There is sound evaluation at the end of each section. This includes well evidenced conclusions that are made and qualified by the assessing social worker.

Unforeseen circumstances have led to some inconsistency in the person chairing each of the three fostering panels held up to this point. However, leaders and managers have worked well to recruit a new independent chair. They instil confidence in other panel members through their approach and the extensive experience and knowledge they bring. The central list of panel members also brings a range of skills. Direct observations of the panel confirm that the input of panel members contributes to a sound quality assurance process that promotes the safety and welfare of children and young people. At this time no vice chair has been appointed from the central list. This regulatory shortfall has minimal impact upon children and young people or the quality of service they receive.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people consistently say that they feel safe in their foster placements. One said, 'Safe; definitely, all the way.' To explain why, they added 'If I had any worries or doubts I would always have [my carers] to turn to. I trust them all the way.' Foster carers encourage children and young people to express themselves by consistently communicating that they are interested in their views. Children and young people say that this helps them feel that their opinion counts and that they do not have to 'follow the crowd'. The sense of safety and security children

and young people have supports the effectiveness of any therapeutic interventions they receive.

Referral documentation from placing authorities along with formal care and placement plans inform risk assessments for all children and young people. These are prepared from the point of placement and are reviewed and updated regularly to ensure they remain up-to-date. Revised documents are produced for changes in circumstance, such as going on holiday. This ensures that foster carers remain aware of potential hazards and take steps to minimize the likelihood or impact of these. Consequently, specific vulnerabilities of children and young people are identified and steps are taken to keep them safe. For example clear safeguards are put in place to protect children and young people from being exploited when using the internet.

There have been no incidents of any child or young person going missing or being absent from their placement. While this has not occurred, the agency has ensured that its updated policy has been shared with local police. Agreement has been reached that the policy is consistent with local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocols. However, leaders and managers acknowledge that they have not yet been able to confirm whether information about the different placing authorities' protocols are known and shared with foster carers.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers has a strong emphasis on safeguarding. In addition foster carers receive good quality training to help them understand the needs of children and young people, including those resulting from abusive experiences in their early lives. Foster carers present as confident and assertive. They confirm that they are not afraid to speak up and share any concerns they may have.

Foster carers receive training in de-escalating potentially difficult situations and using specific restraint techniques as a last resort. When restraints are used appropriate information is recorded. These records demonstrate that restraints are only used in accordance with the regulatory framework and that foster carers undertaking restraints have been trained to do so. Managers continue to monitor the use of restraints to ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people is promoted.

Robust recruitment practices help to safeguard children and young people from coming into contact with inappropriate adults. This approach extends to the fostering panel as well as the staff team. Learning from inspections of other parts of the organisation is also used to drive up standards in the fostering service. For example, gaps in employment history are now effectively demonstrated in recruitment files as a result of previous feedback received.

Allegations are dealt with openly and efficiently. External agencies are consistently contacted to ensure appropriate procedures are followed. While carers acknowledge that they are impacted by allegations they are made to feel supported by the agency. The way in which allegations are managed enables placements of children and young people to remain stable and the opportunity for repeating patterns of behaviour to

be changed is made available. Managers and supervising social workers remain alert to the need for all foster carers to deliver a high quality service. They undertake unannounced visits to follow up any issues that arise and take clear steps to bring about improvement when necessary.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

As an established provider of services through other elements of the organisation, leaders and managers have quickly built positive relationships with placing authorities. Placing social workers see these relationships as positive and describe the quality of communication from the agency as good. This has proved to be productive, evidenced by the number of referrals received. While the original concept for the agency was for placements to enable positive transitions from residential to foster care it has actually been the case that the majority of placements made over the past year have been from outside the organisation. This demonstrates that leaders and managers are responsive to the needs of placing authorities.

This inspection found that there have been unplanned endings of some placements in the time the service has been operational. Leaders and managers undertook detailed reviews of the circumstances relating to these endings. Leaders and managers have pro-actively entered into communication with placing authorities to ensure that in all future cases, full and accurate information is provided at the point of referral.

Leaders and managers adequately monitor the service provided in line with regulatory expectations. However, it is recognised that the service continues to be at an early stage of development. Consequently for several months of the past year no children or young people were placed. Decisions are made to improve the service through honest self-evaluation. For example, agreement was quickly reached by senior managers that a manager with more up-to-date experience in fostering would be beneficial in driving the service forward. In addition the need for a designated therapist for the fostering service and an experienced supervising social worker were also identified. Direct action has been taken to fill all these posts, demonstrating the ambition of senior managers to provide a high quality service that delivers good outcomes for children and young people. All appointees are appropriately qualified and this is clearly evidenced through records of vetting checks and procedures.

The Registered Manager remains in post, but the newly appointed fostering manager is in the process of applying to take over the Registered Manager's position. This provides consistency and continuity in the management of the service at a time of change. This is reflected in the good quality of service found on this inspection.

Data is forwarded to Ofsted in prompt response to requests received. Notifications of significant events are made efficiently. However, the agency has updated its statement of purpose on more than one occasion since the service was originally registered. Notifications of these changes are not consistently forwarded to Ofsted,

or when this does happen documents not received in a timely manner. While this is an expectation set out in the Fostering Services Regulations it has negligible impact upon the children and young people using the service.

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.