

Chrysalis Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Lee Kirwin
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Chrysalis Care is an independent fostering agency that recruits, trains and supports foster carers in Kent, Essex, Luton and the London area. There is a children's services team that provides direct support and therapeutic intervention for children in placement. The agency provides both short and long term fostering arrangements for children who are unable for any reason to live with their birth family. The agency currently has 135 foster carers in 88 households and looks after 96 children.

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**

Foster carers provide stable placements for children; more than half of the children placed remain with their foster families for more than two years; some stay with their carers for more than ten years.

Children make exceptional progress in all areas from their starting points. They aim high in education and achieve excellent results. All children are in suitable, high-quality educational placements.

Children are safe. They are well matched with carers who meet their emotional and cultural needs. The agency has support services for children with more complex needs and provides one-to-one support to address risk-taking behaviour. Not all children who need it access this service. Sometimes risk management plans are overly restrictive when balancing the need to keep children safe, with the need to

allow them to take risks and develop independence skills.

A robust panel ensures that foster carers are properly vetted and regularly reviewed. Foster carers appreciate the support provided by the agency. The agency provides flexible support to ensure carers can engage with high quality training and supervision. There is a small number of foster carers who resist attending the training provided and not all have completed the Training Support and Development Standards.

The agency has a strong management team who lead an ethical, child centred culture within the organization. They are accessible to foster carers who appreciate the agency's 'family feel' and that they can always speak to someone who they know and who knows the children well.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure that foster carers can evidence that the Training Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)

Ensure that children understand how their views have been taken into account and where significant views or concerns have not been acted upon, they are helped to understand why. This has particular reference to the need to let children know how their views have contributed to foster carer reviews and service development. (NMS 1.2)

Ensure that the agency implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. In particular, risk assessments must be reviewed to ensure children learn from mistakes and interventions, such as not being left unsupervised in the home, are not unduly restrictive. (NMS 4.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children enjoy living with their foster families. They are made to feel welcome and take part in all aspects of family life including family holidays. They feel genuinely cared for and experience love and care from good foster parents.

Children are well-matched with carers. Each carer has a family book which describes the family, their interests and the expectations of the household. When children are anxious about coming into foster care, this helps them feel reassured that their foster families will make them feel welcome and provide care that is nurturing, supportive and encouraging of their hobbies and interests.

Many children live with their foster families beyond the age of 18 and some remain with their carers permanently. All children who stay long term achieve excellent results in education; they continue into higher education or employment after leaving school. Children make rapid progress in education from their starting points. They are given extra support when this is needed so they are helped to make exceptional progress in a short period. For example, one child who was well below average attainment levels in his school subjects, reached above-average levels within nine months of being placed with a foster family.

Children are supported to maintain contact with their birth families and remain placed with their brothers and sisters whenever this is possible. This helps them stay connected to their family history, identity and culture. It also ensures that people who they have important attachments with remain part of their lives.

Foster carers create a learning culture in their homes. They support children with homework and the agency arranges extra tuition to help them catch up and attain good results. The agency provides one-to-one support from their children's services team to support children to engage in positive activities and attend clubs in the community. A child comments that they love being in foster care because they 'get to do a lot of nice things' and another really enjoys going to the youth club regularly.

Children are healthy. Foster carers promote healthy lifestyles and support children to attend health appointments. With the support of supervising social workers, foster carers work well in partnership with other professionals. They use their experience and knowledge of children to contribute to education, health and care plans. They also ensure that these plans are carried out in detail. This means that children with complex health needs are supported to achieve and experience the best possible quality of life.

Children with complex emotional needs receive therapeutic support from the agency's children's services team. This can include direct counselling from qualified therapists or direct work from support staff who give children a safe space to talk.

This means that when children exhibit signs of depression or are unsafe, they are helped to make progress and thrive. The agency advocates strongly on behalf of children to ensure that they get expert help from mental health professionals when required.

Children receive help to prepare them for independence. In addition to support from foster carers, they receive one-to-one sessions with staff from the agency's children's services team. This helps them learn how to use transport, budget, and shop for food and gain employment or training. One child says he would not be working now if it wasn't for the help he received from their support worker.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency strives to make continuous improvement to the quality of care to children. They have recently appointed a new manager and a new panel chair. This has had a positive impact, particularly on the function and performance of the fostering panel.

The fostering panel is made up of a range of suitably qualified personnel who provide a range of perspectives to inform decision making. The panel ensures that foster carers undergo a rigorous assessment before they are approved. The experience and qualities of each family are fully considered before deciding the range and number of children they are approved to care for. The panel maintains sufficient distance and independence from the agency. This enables it to provide challenge when information is incomplete or of insufficient quality to make an informed recommendation. In these circumstances, decisions are deferred or conditions are applied to registration to ensure foster carers are able to meet children's needs.

Foster carer's reviews take place within statutory timescales. Supervising social workers provide detailed reports and assessments which outline foster carers strengths and areas for development. Children are supported to contribute to the foster carer review by the children's services team, who meet with them to get feedback about their experiences in the foster family home. On occasion, when this feedback raises issues that children are unhappy about, but does not necessarily reflect concerns about the foster carers' performance, the agency does not always ensure that these issues are addressed. Therefore, the agency misses opportunities to let children know that their views carry weight and are acted upon.

The agency recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of a wide range of children, including those with complex health and emotional needs. They provide carers who are able to achieve positive outcomes for teenagers who have not previously been looked after or who have suffered several previous placement breakdowns. When

children arrive in England unaccompanied, the agency is able to provide carers at short notice, who are suitably matched in terms of language and culture. This means that children placed in these circumstances do well and make positive progress.

A dedicated placement officer has in-depth knowledge of the carers, their qualities and the family dynamics. She works closely with supervising social workers and managers to ensure that children are well matched at the point of referral. The agency takes into account the needs of other children in placement, including birth children, when matching. As a result, children are placed into stable family homes that have the capacity to meet the needs of all children living there.

Foster carers are very happy with the support they receive from the agency. Several carers comment that the agency supervising social workers 'go the extra mile' to offer support when they need it. They appreciate the out-of-hours support and feel reassured that there is always someone they know at the end of the phone who they can speak to. One foster carer with many years' experience with a number of agencies says she chose Chrysalis Care because they 'were the most family orientated'.

Feedback from placing local authorities is positive; they describe the agency as being responsive and able to make placements at short notice. One local authority commissioner appreciates that the agency works effectively in partnership and engages in 'honest dialogue when there are difficulties'. Another commissioner comments that the agency will provide extra support when needed, often at no extra cost, and will meet her half way when negotiating any extra resources needed.

Children receive the support they need without delay. The agency makes ethical decisions when placing children and when providing on-going support. They will only place children when they have carers available who have the necessary skills and qualities to meet their needs. The agency acts quickly and often use their own resources when children require extra support to keep them safe, to maintain contact with their families or to promote their emotional well-being.

Foster carers receive regular, high-quality supervision from their supervising social workers. They have time to reflect on the emotional impact of the role and strategies for helping children. They are prompted to ensure that tasks relating to relevant plans are completed. This enables carers to balance meeting their own needs and those of their birth children with the needs of children placed with them to ensure they are fully included in family life.

Foster carers are supported and encouraged to attend training. The agency provides a flexible service to ensure that carers can attend, which includes offering training at weekends and sometimes in the foster carers' home. Despite this, not all foster carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval.

Children are sometimes looked after by back-up carers when this is necessary and in their best interests. These carers are properly assessed and checked to make sure they are suitable. They are often part of the foster carers' extended family and

friends, which means that children are always looked after by people that they know well.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children experience sensitive care which provides clear boundaries, but is also mindful of their previous experiences. Carers understand that they need to make adjustments to meet children's individual needs. This helps children settle quickly into the rhythm and structure of family life. They are well behaved and seldom go missing. Children behave responsibly in the community and seldom come into contact with the police due to anti-social or criminal behaviour.

Foster carers are passionate and committed to providing loving, stable homes for children. One foster carer says he 'couldn't imagine doing anything else'. Another carer gave up her job to enable her to keep looking after a child who needs high levels of support. This helps children develop a sense of belonging in the family home and reduces the risk that they feel isolated and vulnerable to negative influences.

When children abscond or are missing from care, foster carers act quickly in partnership with other agencies, including the police, to ensure they are safe. Children who may be at risk of sexual exploitation receive support to help them understand the risks and address the underlying issues that can lead them to put themselves at risk. Foster carers receive specialist training in this area. Specialist training is also provided for children to help them raise their awareness of risks and to understand how to protect themselves, for example, from grooming.

Children feel safe in their foster homes and their local communities. If there are concerns that children are victims of bullying, foster carers take steps to ensure this is dealt with and that children are protected. Foster carers are trained to understand the potential risks presented by the internet. They help children understand these risks and take prompt action to address concerns.

Children have access to one-to-one support from children's services staff to give them a 'safe space' to talk. If they require further support, they are helped to access independent advocacy services. They know how to raise concerns outside of the agency if they are worried or feel their concerns are not being addressed.

Foster carers are vigilant and closely monitor those children who may be at risk of radicalisation. If concerns are identified, they intervene effectively to reduce risks.

Risk assessments are completed at the point of referral to identify any areas where children may be vulnerable. These identify clear plans for reducing risk of harm. They are regularly updated to reflect any new concerns, but not always reviewed to ensure that interventions to keep children safe are not unduly restrictive. This raises the risk that children are not always learning from mistakes in a way that promotes their independence.

The agency has a strong safeguarding culture and works well in partnership with other agencies to address any safeguarding concerns. The Local Authority Designated Officer says that any safeguarding allegations raised about foster carers are addressed promptly and thoroughly investigated in line with child protection procedures. All staff and carers are thoroughly vetted to ensure they do not pose any risk to children.

Supervising social workers regularly inspect the foster carers' homes to ensure that these are free from hazards. When hazards are identified, they take remedial action to make sure faults are addressed and any additional safety equipment is provided. They undertake regular unannounced visits to foster carers' home and speak to children on their own. This ensures that the quality of care is subject to robust scrutiny and that the agency understands how children experience being looked after.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A new manager was recently appointed. He is going through the registration process with Ofsted at the time of this inspection. He is a former senior Ofsted inspector bringing considerable practice experience to the role. He is a qualified social worker with experience of working in fostering and has held a number of senior management positions in the social care sector.

The manager has had a significant, positive impact since joining the agency, particularly in relation to the improvements to the fostering panel. This means that the panel recommendations are more robust, there are clear reasons recorded to support decisions and a more rigorous challenge to ensure that any shortfalls in performance are addressed.

The agency has a long and successful history of providing high quality care to children. The leadership team communicate and model strong child-centred values throughout the organization.

The staff team and foster carers experience a supportive environment and describe an 'intimate feel' in the working environment. They are highly motivated, well supported and committed to delivering the best outcomes for children. Children's experiences, progress and outcomes are outstanding. They enjoy being in their

foster families and have a fun, positive experience of childhood. This demonstrates that the leadership team are highly effective. They continue to recruit foster carers with exceptional qualities and help them to improve through effective training, review and supervision.

Supervising social workers feel that the leadership and management team listen to and consult them when looking at ways to develop the service. They meet regularly as a team without managers and value this opportunity to share best practice with colleagues in a reflective forum. They receive regular supervision from managers which acknowledges the emotional impact of the work and is mindful of staff well-being. Supervision also provides constructive direction and challenge when needed to ensure that children's well-being and progress is central to the work.

The responsible individual provides effective support and supervision to the manager. He has clear direction and guidance in terms of the aims, values and objectives of the service, while retaining sufficient autonomy to commit resources and lead on service development. The agency regularly consults with children on how they experience being looked after, but it is not clear how these views inform service development.

The manager has a calm and thoughtful approach to decision making and is able to balance conflicts when making complex decisions. This means that, when faced with dilemmas, he is able provide a proportionate response which promotes the best interests of children and effectively manages risk.

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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.