

# Three Circles Fostering Limited

Three Circles Fostering Limited

Dean Row Court, Sommerfields Village Centre, Dean Row Road, Wilmslow, Cheshire  
SK9 2TB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned. It currently provides foster placements for 105 children in 67 fostering households. The agency provides the following foster placements:

- Long term
- Short term
- Parent and child
- Emergency
- Bridging
- Respite

**Inspection dates:** 24 to 28 April 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>good</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of last inspection:** 11 February 2014

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection**

None

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because

- Children's safety is held paramount. Children said that the agency keeps them safe and responds well to any concerns that they raise. Risks to their safety reduce as they decrease their dangerous behaviour.
- Children make good and very good progress across all areas of their development.
- Leaders and managers have high expectations and ambitious vision, which permeates throughout the organisation. The service is rooted in a strong sense of ethics. Their passion to provide the best possible service to children and their carers is evident in all that they do.
- Staff, carers and children thrive on the provider's welcoming, friendly ethos and feel respected and valued by the agency. Carers reported that they are central to care planning and decision-making.
- Education is extremely well promoted and results in very high attendance levels and successful education outcomes. This improves and enhances children's life chances.
- Listening to children and carers is a key strength. Their views are taken seriously and inform the development of the service provided.
- Children and carers reported that this is a very good agency because of the high levels of care, concern and support shown by managers and staff. Many carers have approached Three Circles to transfer from other agencies.
- Children enjoy stable placements, and their emotional well-being is nurtured by carers who are well trained, supervised and supported.
- Children have a sense of belonging and said that they are included in family life and very well cared for.
- The agency provides a range of social and leisure opportunities which children and their foster families enjoy. These help children to strengthen their bonds with carers, form relationships with their peers and develop new skills, confidence and self-esteem.
- Good-quality preparation and assessment results in the approval of foster carers who have a good understanding of their role and provide nurturing care. This helps children to have improved life experiences.
- Foster carers feel very well supported and report positively on the quality of support, supervision and training that they receive. This helps foster carers to

develop their knowledge, skills, understanding and resilience.

#### The independent fostering agency's areas for development

- Ensure that the agency notifies Ofsted of any serious incidents that meet the threshold for notification so that Ofsted can monitor the agency's response.
- Ensure that the agency does not approve a person who has been approved as a foster parent by another service provider until that approval has been terminated.
- Ensure robust and proportionate assessment of risks by drawing up and implementing clear, individualised risk management plans that inform safe care practice. Keep these under regular review by reflecting on them as part of foster carers' monthly supervision.
- Ensure that, in reaching a decision or making a determination, the agency decision maker identifies and lists the key arguments, considers whether they agree with the process and approach of the panel and is satisfied with its fairness. Ensure also that the agency decision maker considers any additional information available, shows how that has impacted on their decision and identifies the reasons for their decision.
- Improve procedures for monitoring the activities of the service to enable good strategic oversight of the operation of the service and children's experiences and outcomes. To this end, improve the quality of management information and ensure that records accurately reflect the quality of the agency's work. In particular, ensure robust oversight of carer supervision records and restraint records; and collate information about children's progress and outcomes to identify trends and inform service development.
- Set up suitable arrangements for the professional supervision of the registered manager.

## 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
A fostering service provider must not approve a person who has been approved as a foster parent by another service provider where that approval has not been terminated. (Regulation 27 (1))	31/05/2017
Ensure that if any of the events listed in Column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))	31/05/2017

### Recommendations

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. In particular, ensure robust assessment of risks and that clear, individualised risk management plans are implemented, kept under review and inform safe care practice. (NMS 4.5)
- Ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of the agency's registered manager. (NMS 24.3)
- 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 (including restraints) and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised in this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- Ensure that, in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the agency decision-maker demonstrates that they have made a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendations of the fostering panel and any other information that has come to light following the panel. In particular, demonstrate that the matters listed in The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulation Volume 4: Fostering Services, page 48, paragraph 5.40 have been taken into account. (NMS 14.9)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good**

Each child receives good-quality, individualised care and support that meets their needs. Foster carers receive good information, advice and guidance in how to meet children's specific needs. This helps children make progress in all areas of their development. A child explained: 'They are a brilliant agency – I think they're outstanding. I've had a lot of foster families so I've got a lot of experience. Three Circles are supportive with our carers. They help carers to learn stuff and that helps them look after us better. I would recommend Three Circles.'

A key strength is the agency's welcoming, relationship-based ethos which results in children, carers and staff feeling valued, listened to and respected. Of the children supported, 100% rate their care as good or outstanding. Comments from children included, 'It's just like a family. You know everybody.' Equally, carers feel very welcome and cared for and described the agency as 'like one big, happy family'. They said that they are respected and listened to and that they know that they are central to discussions and decisions about children's lives. One explained: 'It's like a family, and we are treated like professionals.' Leaders and managers are very visible, and children and carers know them well.

The agency promotes school attendance as a normal part of every child's life and carefully monitors children's educational experience and progress. It goes above and beyond to promote children's educational achievements and aspirations. It works in close partnership with an established and successful education provider, the National Teaching and Advisory Service (NTAS), facilitating educational support to every child in the agency, in accordance with their individual needs. As a result, attendance and attainment levels overall are extremely good. It is clear that children who have missed significant amounts of education in the past successfully re-engage with education and most make extremely good educational progress. For example, 35% of children in Year 11 achieved five or more GCSE grades A\* to C in 2016, which is well above the national average of 14% for children in care.

Children with special educational needs have appropriate packages of support. Working collaboratively with respective local authority virtual headteachers and the NTAS, the agency ensures that every child has an education placement that suits their needs. The agency chases up education, health and care plans where there are delays in completing the associated assessments and, in the meantime, ensures that the NTAS provides children with additional resources and support that addresses their specific needs. For those few children who are excluded from school, the agency facilitates individual tuition at its head office. Children's confidence improves in line with their attendance and achievement levels. One child explained: 'My life has changed in a good way. I've settled down in school. My attendance and grades have gone up.'

Children's life chances are enhanced as a result of the many and varied enjoyable opportunities that they receive. Fun activities are held frequently and are well

attended, being popular with children and foster families. There is good evidence of children growing in confidence and developing new skills and friendships through these events. As their siblings, carers, and carers' children are welcome to attend, the events are a good platform for children to build trust with the people who play an important part in their lives.

Equalities are well promoted. For example, the agency has worked with specialist organisations to develop information packages for carers and children who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT). This has proved extremely valuable in providing effective support to carers and children; and together with direct support and training, has enabled children to feel safe and at ease expressing their identity. For example, one child said: 'This is the first time I have been able to be myself.' This is in part due to the helpful workshop that the agency has undertaken with a group of children around acceptance, tolerance and identity.

The inclusive approach of the agency ensures that children who have disabilities are included in the activities offered and are encouraged to stretch themselves in a safe and supportive environment. For example, a child who is a wheelchair user thoroughly enjoyed a day at the climbing wall, where he had the same opportunity to scale the wall.

Children's health and emotional well-being are well supported and regularly monitored. Foster carers know what is expected of them and take action to address children's health needs promptly. A range of training programmes focus on understanding and supporting children's physical, emotional and psychological well-being, and carers confirmed that they are helped to understand children's needs. Consequently, children receive the treatment that they need, including access to mental health professionals and counselling. One explained: 'I get help from CAMHS [child and adolescent mental health services]. It's nice because I can trust them and they've helped me.'

Using media and technology, children develop new skills, share their views and contribute to the development of the agency. For example, 16 children are engaged in the Prince's Trust workshops and have established the Kicup youth zone, which has its own dedicated website providing advocacy and support for children. Through being actively involved in developing the website, children's guide and advisory short films, children have grown in confidence, knowledge and skills. The children's guide has been updated and is available in a range of formats to meet the needs of different children, including those who have communication difficulties.

Listening to children is a key strength. A child explained: 'I feel like I'm listened to. If I had concerns, I know they would do something about it – everyone. Carers and staff at Three Circles have got your back.' Each child receives a six-monthly visit from an independent worker whom they know well from his involvement in the youth zone. The visitor encourages children to comment on the quality of their care and any matters of concern. A child explained: '[Name] comes out to the house. He talks to me about what it's like living here. I can be honest with him. I'm very happy here. They treat me like a real family and are there for me.'

The agency achieves very high rates of return on their consultations because it uses technology that children enjoy using. The vast majority of children reported favourably on their home life, with many saying that it is excellent. This is an additional safeguarding layer, introduced because the agency recognises that children who are unhappy may be unwilling to speak openly to the supervising social worker, whom they see interacting positively with their carer. In addition, the agency helps to raise children's awareness of what good-quality care looks like, through its youth zone workshops.

As part of six-monthly consultations, children are encouraged to reflect on and take pride their achievements, and these are recorded in their files. This encourages them to develop self-worth and pride in their achievements, which are wide and varied. For example, one child was proud of being accepted onto a local football team, and another was proud of achieving a skydiving certificate as well as a certificate for excellent behaviour and effort at school. A third child expressed pride in being chosen as reader of the month at school, while another child was proud of a picture he had drawn. Children's successes are recognised and celebrated. The agency frequently sends out congratulatory cards to children for their achievements, and staff receive feedback from foster carers about the positive impact that this has on the child concerned.

Over 48% children have been in the same foster family for more than 12 months, and they benefit from a sense of belonging and permanence. Children reported that they feel that they belong in their families and feel loved and cared for. Their day-to-day experiences are very positive, and they enjoy family life with carers who actively engage in fun activities with them. Comments from children included: 'They found me a good family. I've been here for two years. It's good because I'm not a stranger in a family,' and: 'I like it. We have a lot of fun.'

Social workers and commissioners reported a high level of satisfaction with the service and children's progress and development. They confirmed that children enjoy and benefit from stable placements. For example, one commissioner said that they were 'very impressed with the stick-ability of placements for some challenging young people' and noted that the service was very inclusive and forward-thinking in relation to LGBT and disabilities. A commissioner from another local authority said, 'Three Circles give kids a chance and support carers well.'

Transitions to foster families are well planned, and much is done to help children settle in quickly. Children confirmed that they are welcomed into the family. For example, one said: 'I've been welcomed very much into this family, and we all get on very well.'

Transitions to independence are equally well planned. For example, the agency advocated for a young mother and her baby to be allowed to stay close to the foster family, on moving to independence. This was in accordance with the young person's wishes. Consequently, she made a successful transition, felt safe and could seek advice and support from the foster family when she needed to. The option for children to stay put on reaching 18 is always explored, and some children have remained with their carers well beyond 18. Others have stayed until a suitable adult

placement has been identified, and young adults are then helped to make a smooth transition to a placement that can meet their needs.

The number of unplanned placement endings is below average. Effective reflective practice ensures that in the few cases where placements have ended because of inadequate levels of care, the agency addresses this with carers. In some cases, the agency has taken the decision to terminate a carer's approval in response to concerns raised by children. This demonstrates that children are at the heart of the agency's work.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

Children's safety and well-being underpins all of the agency's activities and is key to its work. There is a well-coordinated response to risk-taking behaviour. This includes children going missing and being at risk of child sexual exploitation. As they settle in placement, most children reduce their missing, dangerous and anti-social behaviour, and become safer. One child explained how he has made significant progress since moving to live with his foster family. He explained how his carers have helped him 'get on'. He said that he no longer spends time with peers who were a bad influence on him, has settled down and is making progress in college.

Carers demonstrate a sound understanding of safeguarding practice which clearly involves reporting serious incidents to the agency and seeking advice appropriately. However, this good practice is not well evidenced in records such as risk assessments. The manager has acknowledged this shortfall and has taken immediate steps to improve by introducing risk management plans that can clearly guide practice.

The agency strikes a good balance between protecting children and promoting independence through encouraging appropriate individual interests, hobbies and risk taking. The focus on developing strong bonds between carers and children helps to reduce children's unsafe behaviours. For example, a child who frequently went missing when first placed with a foster family, through guidance and support has become more resilient and confident. Although he is still late back and on occasion stays out overnight without permission, he understands the need to stay in touch with his carer and ensures that she knows that he is OK. The placing authority is extremely pleased with the progress that this child has made and recognises that he is now safer and has much brighter prospects. This is demonstrated by the social worker's comments: 'The progress he has made is brilliant. I was so worried about him at one point. I was getting daily calls about lots of missing and anti-social behaviour. He was associating with negative peers. Now, I never get calls that cause concern, it's a miracle! He has matured so much, he's happy, settled and recognises how to keep himself safe. He has told me that he doesn't want to go back to the way he was. He is very settled with his carers, and is enjoying being a teenager. The relationship is really positive. He has a sense of belonging.'

There is a very clear understanding and strong focus on relationships between carers and children as essential to good safeguarding. This helps to keep children



safe. For example, the in-depth training in supporting children's emotional needs, coupled with ongoing support and supervision, has enabled a carer to form a very strong bond with a child at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), such that the child feels loved by and safe with her carer.

Children at risk of sexual exploitation are protected by effective partnership work with the police and safeguarding agencies. However, the agency has recognised that it needs to do more to ensure that carers respond robustly and swiftly to concerns that a child is being sexually exploited. This is because some carers who look after children at risk of CSE have not received specialist training in protecting children. This has impacted on their ability to understand and respond immediately to arising situations that place children at risk of harm. The agency is rolling out training, giving priority to carers of those children at most risk. It is also reviewing foster carer supervision to ensure a stronger and continuing focus on children's safety. The comprehensive training programme includes training on preventing radicalisation and extremism, and carers are encouraged to do this.

Positive behaviour is well promoted. The agency supports carers to understand triggers for children's challenging behaviour, to develop clear and consistent boundaries and to use nurturing behaviour management strategies. Consequently, restraint is extremely rare. When a restraint does occur, the agency ensures that the incident is recorded and explored with the carer. Records of restraints do not fully demonstrate how children are restrained, which reduces the manager's ability to monitor how safely the incident was managed. More positively, the agency has reviewed its practice and behaviour management policy and is moving away from using restraint with children. It has developed positive behaviour management strategies to equip carers with the skills to de-escalate challenging situations and thereby avert the need for restraint. A programme of training is being rolled out to all carers and staff.

The agency's response to allegations and concerns raised by children is good. It takes allegations seriously and acts on them quickly. Social workers and managers liaise effectively with partner agencies and challenge others to reduce delay in carrying out investigations. They reflect well on incidents and allegations and improve practice as a result.

Children who have moved placements in response to allegations that they have made reported that they feel listened to and cared for by the agency, and there is good evidence of them thriving in their new placements. A child said: 'I was really unhappy but I didn't tell anyone, even when they asked. But then I spoke up and they listened. It was dealt with in a couple of hours. I moved here and wanted to stay within a week. I've never had such a good carer. She loves me and I am happy.'

Where there are child protection concerns these are immediately notified to placing authorities, and the agency works effectively with other agencies to protect children. However, not all serious incidents are notified appropriately to Ofsted. This impacts on the regulator's ability to maintain effective oversight of the agency's response to safeguarding matters. A recommendation to ensure that notifications of serious

incidents are forwarded to Ofsted was made following the last inspection and has not been fully met. The manager has acknowledged the shortfalls and has undertaken to improve the arrangements for reporting notifiable incidents.

A recommendation to improve staff recruitment methods has been met. References are now verified with a phone call as part of the standard recruitment checks.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good**

Leaders and managers have high expectations and ambitious vision, which permeates throughout the organisation. Consequently, staff, carers and children have high aspirations and thrive on the encouragement and warmth that leaders and managers display. The service is rooted in a strong sense of ethics, and the desire to provide the best possible service to children and their carers is evident in all that it does.

The provider's integrity is strongly evidenced in the financial management of the service, which ensures that children's needs and the quality of their care is prioritised above all else. To achieve this, the agency supports, trains and pays its staff and carers fairly, and it funds a range of opportunities for children, in accordance with their needs and interests. It works in close collaboration with the national teaching and advisory service (NTAS), which the provider also runs. This is extremely effective in enabling children to achieve excellent educational progress and outcomes, which far surpass those achieved by the majority of children in care.

The provider contributes to research and works in partnership with a number of specialist agencies, sharing information freely with the wider social care sector. In addition, the provider delivers workshops and information to local authorities and others. Through this, the agency helps to raise awareness of difference and understanding of good practice, particularly in education and promoting equalities. It helps to improve the lives of many children, not just those looked after by the agency. So that children receive the most up-to-date and best possible support, the agency has a rolling programme of training and ensures that carers are well informed about how to look after children who have diverse and complex individual needs. This helps carers to deliver care that is informed by research and improves children's lives.

The statement of purpose, children's guide, foster carer handbook and agency policies are available on a user-friendly, interactive and informative website. Additional information about the service is shared through short films that are easily accessed, and demonstrate some of the excellent work that the agency is undertaking with children and with partner agencies.

Effective staff recruitment, supervision and training ensures that the staff team has a good mix of knowledge and skills. While the staff team continues to grow, there is a core of long-standing, stable staff who work collaboratively, and willingly share their expertise. Carers benefit from the good-quality advice, support and guidance

that they receive. This helps them to understand children's complex behaviour and provide nurturing care and support. A carer explained, 'Support and supervision is regular, and I know I could pick up the phone anytime and someone would listen. Little touches make a difference – like [staff member's name] texting us all on Mother's Day to wish us a happy Mother's Day.'

The agency regularly assesses its work and updates its development plan so that it is continually evolving. There is clear evidence of how children's views inform the development of the service and the opportunities available. For example, through consultation with children, the agency has developed a young people's games room and has facilitated enjoyable and educational experiences such as a children's rights workshop, first aid training, and confidence-building experiences such as a trip to a climbing wall.

While the agency does little to actively recruit new carers, there has been considerable growth since the last inspection. The service has more than doubled in size and now provides care for 105 children in 67 fostering households. This is because prospective carers, many of whom are approved by other agencies, approach this agency. Carers reported that this is because of its good reputation, which spreads through word of mouth. One carer expressed a commonly held view when she said: 'Compared to my previous agency, this one is outstanding. They always return my calls, and there is always someone there to give advice, no matter what time of day or night.'

The assessments and 'skills to foster' training prepare carers well for the role. Through children's workshops, the agency has gathered children's views on what makes good-quality foster carers, and this is shared with prospective carers in the 'skills to foster' programme. A session on supporting children who have diverse identity needs, including sexual identity needs, helps to identify at an early stage those applicants who display prejudice and who would be unlikely to meet the agency's high expectations of promoting equalities. Through this careful recruitment of carers, the agency ensures that those who are approved, in most cases, offer very high-quality care. The provider is aware that most of its carers are white British and is considering how to ensure that it has a range of carers from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds so that the agency can offer a more ethnically and culturally diverse service.

Foster carer assessments are undertaken by qualified social workers. They are sufficiently detailed to provide a good level of analysis and evidence of the carers' ability to meet children's diverse needs. Social work agencies comment positively on their usefulness in matching children. All involved with the agency speak highly of the good levels of communication between staff, carers, placing authorities and other professionals.

Foster carers and staff receive effective induction, training and ongoing support. They report that the training has improved over time, is of high quality, helpful and informative. It is adapted to meet the needs of the children and the experience of the carers. Where there are gaps in a foster carer's training, these are mitigated by their experience, competence and ability to form strong bonds with children, based

on the good-quality support that the agency provides.

Through regular foster carer supervision, the agency monitors children's development and progress and provides appropriate guidance and advice to carers. There is good evidence that demonstrates how individual children's progress is monitored and promoted. This shows that most children are making good and, in some cases, exceptionally good progress.

The fostering panel has a mix of appropriately experienced people, including those who have expertise in education, health, experience of being in care and providing foster care. This helps to ensure a good balance of expertise when reviewing assessments. The agency recognises that it needs to enhance the panel's skills to ensure robust evaluations in every case. It has arranged for panel members and social workers to receive further training aimed at improving the effectiveness of the panel.

There are some shortfalls in the process of decision-making following the panel's recommendations. The current systems are not robust and are not in line with regulations. Consequently, carers transferring from other agencies are approved before they have served notice with their former agency. This does not impact on children's safety and welfare, as the agency does not place children until the notice period has ended. The registered manager has acknowledged the shortfall and immediately taken some action to ensure future compliance with regulation.

The registered manager is suitably qualified in social work and management. He reports directly to the responsible individual, who demonstrates a keen interest in the operation of the agency and is a visible leader, as is the other director. While the responsible individual has a sound knowledge of the service and individual children, and shows good leadership skills, he is not a qualified social worker. As a result, the registered manager does not benefit from the support and supervision of a suitably experienced and qualified person who has a background in fostering.

This impacts on the manager's ability to maintain a strategic overview of the operation of the agency. He is unable to provide a clear, summative picture of children's progress from their starting points as he does not pull together and evaluate their progress and outcomes. This hinders the registered manager's ability to assess and evaluate the overall impact of the agency's services on children's lives. It does not assist him to make decisions about service development that are based on strong evidence of good practice and to identify which areas need improvement.

The agency benefits from the use of an electronic record-keeping system which foster carers access and contribute to. That said, the quality of some records is inconsistent and some, such as foster carer supervision sessions and unannounced visits, do not demonstrate that safeguarding matters are fully addressed and followed through. A recommendation about this was made at the last inspection but has not been met.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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:** SC443768

**Registered provider:** Three Circles Fostering Limited

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## **Inspector(s)**

Sharon Lloyd, social care regulatory inspector  
Ceri Evans, social care regulatory inspector



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