

Care 4 Children - Fostering Team

Care 4 Children Residential Services Limited
1 Stuart Road, Bredbury Park Industrial Estate, Bredbury, Stockport SK6 2SR
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency originally registered with Ofsted in 2012. Care 4 Children Residential Services Limited purchased this company in April 2015. This is the agency's first inspection under this company's registration.

The service operates predominantly in the north-west of England, with the exception of two fostering households in the Midlands. The agency offers a range of foster placements, including permanent, long-term, short-term, parent and child, emergency, and therapeutic foster care. At the time of this inspection, the agency has 24 fostering households, who are caring for 44 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 4 to 8 September 2017

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: This is the agency's first inspection since registration.

Enforcement action since registration: None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children feel safe and happy, and thrive in their foster families. They develop positive relationships with their foster families and a strong sense of belonging.
- Foster carers' proactive and effective care and support is helping children to progress in all areas.
- Foster carers and staff are alert to children's vulnerabilities and potential risks. They follow clear safeguarding procedures to promote children's safety.
- Foster carers, staff and children benefit from the agency's therapeutic support and guidance.
- A committed team supports foster carers extremely well. Consequently, carers feel valued and part of the agency.
- Many children benefit from living alongside their brothers and sisters. When this is not possible, foster carers support children to keep in touch with their family in a planned and safe way.
- The agency benefits from strong leadership. Managers know the children and foster carers extremely well. Furthermore, they demonstrate a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- Risk assessments and safer caring plans do not reflect the children's wishes and views.
- Matching documents do not detail the potential impact children may have on existing household members.
- Foster carers' training does not sufficiently cover e-safety.
- Some foster carers' supervision records were missing from their files.
- The monitoring of children's progress can improve to enable the manager to have a better overview of all children's progress, particularly as the agency grows.
- The quality assurance of agency records is inconsistent, and at times lacks rigour.
- Not all local authorities receive regular updates on children's progress.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. (National Minimum Standards 1.3) In particular, seek to include children's views in their individual safer caring documents and risk assessments.
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to make sure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. (National Minimum Standards 15.1) In particular, ensure that matching documents detail the potential impact on existing household members.
- Ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. (National Minimum Standards 20.8) In particular, provide e-safety training to foster carers.
- Ensure that foster carers' files include records of all supervisory meetings. (National Minimum Standards 21.8)
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. (National Minimum Standards 25.1) In particular, ensure that the agency has a clear overview of children's progress in all areas.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by the monitoring. (National Minimum Standards 25.2)
- Ensure that the fostering service and foster carer contribute effectively to each child's placement plan and statutory review of the child's care plan. (National Minimum Standards 31.7) In particular, ensure that the agency provides progress reports to the placing authority.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children enjoy positive relationships with their foster families and the agency's staff. The children's comments clearly reflect this: 'My foster carer is happy, excited and friendly. She's my mum.' 'It doesn't feel like it's foster care, it feels like my home.' 'Care 4 Children are like a family to me. I have known most of the team for over eight years.'

The agency has successfully recruited foster carers who can provide sibling groups with long-term placements. Consequently, many children benefit from living alongside their brothers and sisters. Furthermore, the agency has supported children to remain living with their parents by providing good-quality parent and child placements. All of which helps children to maintain a strong family identity.

The agency is committed to promoting stability and permanency whenever possible. Several children benefit from long-term placements and some continue to live with their foster carers post 18 years of age. Children's needs and future are clearly the agency's priority.

Generally, matching is effective. The number of long-term placements reflect this. Staff know the carers and their household members extremely well and use their in-depth knowledge to inform matching decisions. However, matching documents do not reflect this because they omit the potential impact a new child may have on existing household members. This is clearly an administrative shortfall and managers have already identified ways of improving the template for the matching document so that it details all matching considerations.

Children benefit from improved health. Foster carers work closely with specialist teams, such as speech and language therapists, children and adolescent mental health teams and the in-house therapists. This expert advice and guidance supports foster carers to provide children with stability and improved emotional health. However, on one occasion, the agency's clinical team failed to provide progress reports to the placing authority, as agreed. This prevented the placing authority from evaluating the effectiveness of the therapy provided.

Children benefit from being in full-time education or training and make noticeable progress from their starting points. When barriers to education arise, the agency supports foster carers to arrange alternative provision that accommodates the child's individual needs. This includes working collaboratively with schools, colleges and virtual schools to secure individualised education packages, such as home tuition or additional support.

Children enjoy an active life. They experience a wide range of activities, such as playing musical instruments, attending local clubs, and going on holiday with their foster families. As a result, children benefit from opportunities to discover and broaden their talents and interests, which in turn enhances their confidence.

In addition, the agency hosts a monthly Saturday club for children, carers and birth children. These valued sessions enable staff, carers, birth children and foster children to come together and share their views, experiences and ideas. Furthermore, it is helping the agency to promote a 'family' ethos where everyone feels listened to, appreciated and respected.

Foster carers understand how important it is for children to continue relationships with significant people, such as parents, relatives and friends. Carers support children to keep in touch with important people in a safe and planned way.

Professionals provide positive feedback on the agency. A social worker said: 'The foster carers are very caring and make (name of child) feel part of the family. The supervising social worker is very good and attends all looked after reviews.' However, the agency does not provide regular progress reports to placing authorities. Furthermore, the agency has not consistently provided reports to children's looked after review meetings. This potentially hinders the placing authority's monitoring of children's progress.

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

Children are safe and feel safe. Staff and foster carers know how to identify and tackle risk. Foster carers follow detailed safer caring plans and risk assessments that include strategies for preventing or reducing risk. Including the children's wishes and views in these documents would further strengthen the agency's risk assessments and safer caring plans.

Very few children go missing in this agency. When they do, the agency responds particularly well. Foster carers follow clear reporting and recording procedures and work in partnership with all relevant safeguarding professionals. The agency plays a key role in all multi-agency strategy meetings, where it jointly confront concerns that are more serious, such as child sexual exploitation. Leaders have a strong safeguarding focus and have developed their own internal 'risk register', which enhances the managers' monitoring of children deemed at risk of significant harm.

Agency staff, including therapists and support workers, play a key role in helping children to understand risk and learn how to keep themselves safe. In particular, young people are taught about appropriate relationships to minimise the risk of sexual or criminal exploitation. This expert support and guidance is helping children to recognise their vulnerabilities and learn how to avoid danger.

Relationships between carers and children are extremely positive. Carers build strong bonds with children and are clear about their boundaries and expectations. Foster carers nurture positive behaviour through praise, incentives and reward schemes. Through ongoing training, discussion and guidance, carers are equipped to de-escalate difficult situations. Although the agency has a no-restraint policy, it recognises that, at times, carers may need to intervene physically to protect a child from harm. The agency reports such incidents to the child's social worker, which enables independent scrutiny and enhances safeguarding practice.

The agency deals with allegations against foster carers well. It swiftly shares concerns with all relevant safeguarding professionals, which prompts a thorough response and independent investigation, when necessary. Following all investigations, the agency arranges an early foster carer review to identify any additional safeguards, such as a change in approval or training, and/or an increase in home visits.

The agency implements good systems for ensuring that foster carers provide safe and comfortable homes for children to live in. These include annual health and safety checks of the carers' home and car, and a minimum of two unannounced home visits a year.

Foster carers, panel members and agency staff are recruited safely. Furthermore, the agency decision-maker is extremely thorough when determining foster carer approval. However, the agency does not always keep a record of all the checks that it has undertaken. Examples include discrepancies in an applicant's employment dates, and references obtained from foster carers' ex-partners. Clearly, these shortfalls rest primarily in the recording and auditing of information, which also highlights gaps in the monitoring and quality assurance of agency records.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is a qualified social worker and has extensive experience in children's social care and fostering. She is currently studying for the required management qualification. As a co-founder of this service in 2012, she has been involved with the development of this agency from the start. She is totally committed to the future development of the service, foster carers, and children. Without a doubt, she is child centred, putting children's needs and welfare first. Children's progress and placement stability demonstrate this. Furthermore, children speak highly of her, describing her as, 'kind', 'understanding' and 'hands on'.

The responsible individual, who is also the agency decision-maker, provides regular and effective support to the registered manager. She too is extremely child centred and brings vast safeguarding experience to the agency. They work well as a team and lead by example. All staff felt well supported and had confidence in the management team. Information and learning is shared through monthly team meetings and organisational senior management meetings.

The managers are excellent advocates for children, and are not afraid to disagree with professionals when they fail to prioritise children's needs. Examples of this include securing staying-put arrangements for young people.

Staff benefit from regular professional supervision and annual appraisals. They said that there is always a manager at hand when they need support and guidance. Staff are suitably qualified and receive ongoing training. Often, they undertake training alongside the foster carers.

Likewise, foster carers feel well supported and valued by the agency. A carer said,

'I'm involved fully and have opportunities to express my views. I feel listened to.' Carers benefit from monthly supervision, regular carer support groups and monthly Saturday clubs. They also make good use of the out-of-hours support service, particularly when they have a concern about a child's safety. All of this is providing carers with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and identify any areas of learning. However, on occasion, the carers' supervising social worker had not uploaded the supervision document onto the agency's recording system. This potentially prevents other staff from accessing up-to-date information on all carers.

Carers describe training as a strength of the agency. They enjoy a varied training programme, which also provides them with further opportunities to meet up with other carers. Foster carers also benefit from specialist training in response to children's specific needs, for example diabetes.

Carers provide monthly progress reports to the agency on each child during supervision, which helps staff and managers to monitor children's progress. Systems are in place to help the manager monitor certain aspects of the agency's performance, for example how many children have a safer care plan or personal education plan on file. However, the manager does not yet have a system in place to obtain a general overview of all children's progress other than that recorded in foster carers' supervision records. The manager acknowledges that, at present, monitoring children's progress is dependent on staff's in-depth knowledge of children. She recognises that monitoring systems will have to develop as the agency grows, and she intends to look into this further.

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 differences 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 whom 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

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