

Children Always First Limited

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Office 1, Ladybird Barn, Old Burcot Lane, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 1PH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A small private company operates this service. Ofsted registered it in 2013 and it provides a full range of fostering services. There are 78 children living in 46 households.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 March 2018

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: 14 November 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:

- Managers and staff apply a clear theoretical model, which supports children's needs.
- The majority of children make good or excellent progress in stable placements.
- Children learn how to keep themselves safe and the risks that children face fall substantially.
- Children gain in self-confidence and receive help to understand their backgrounds.
- The support for children's emotional recovery and development is outstanding.
- A significant proportion of children live with their brothers and sisters.
- Children benefit from excellent opportunities that enrich their lives.
- The agency invests substantial resources in helping teachers understand how to support traumatised children. This contributes to children making good progress with their learning.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Strengthen recruitment practice to ensure that managers verify the reasons why new staff have left their previous employments.
- Ensure that secondary carers participate in necessary training.
- Address health and safety shortfalls in some fostering households.
- Escalate concerns when placing authorities do not provide the agency with all the required documentation about individual children.
- Ensure that all monitoring activity is rigorous and provides effective oversight.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
<p>Ensure that the fostering service provides foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that secondary carers as well as main carers undertake relevant training consistently.</p>	09/07/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that foster carers are supported to make sure that their homes are free of avoidable hazards, in keeping with family life. ('The children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', paragraph 3.82)
- Ensure that all staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures. (Fostering Services National Minimum Standards 25.3)
In particular, ensure that monitoring exercises are effective.
- Ensure that the registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. (Fostering Services National Minimum Standards 25.8) In particular, escalate concerns promptly and effectively, when the practice of placing authority workers falls short of what is expected.
- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it follows consistently good recruitment practice. (Fostering Services National Minimum Standards, 19.2)

Specifically, that the fostering service strengthens recruitment practice by verifying reasons why applicants leave previous relevant employment.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Overall, most children make significant progress from their starting points. They enjoy stability in long-term placements and many children live with their brothers and sisters. Placing social workers describe the service as 'impressive'. All the children are from nearby authorities and maintain good communication with their families, where appropriate. The vast majority of children who need a different placement experience a planned transition. Some maintain contact with their carers after they have moved on, which emphasises the importance of these relationships.

Children feel that their views matter. They can identify a range of different adults to talk to if they have any worries. Children receive support to help them to understand their own circumstances and the agency provides opportunities for foster children to meet up with each other.

Managers put the needs of children first. For example, they do not accept long-term matches if they do not consider them to be completely suitable. Whenever possible, children live with carers who already have a good understanding of their cultural needs. This minimises the impact of language and religious barriers and helps children to integrate into their new communities. Additional children are placed only if there is little chance of unsettling other children. One carer said of the matching process, 'They did this so well; perfect.'

Managers have a clear idea about the qualities and characteristics required of their carers. With this in mind, they approach the assessment and recruitment of carers cautiously and carefully. Managers refuse applications that they consider to be unsuitable. Their specification includes recruiting from a limited geographical area. This helps to sustain the ethos of the service. The directors have set a maximum size for the agency in order for it to achieve their commercial objectives and still perform in the way that they wish.

Carers establish strong relationships with the foster children. A social worker said, '[My child] has a very open and honest relationship with his foster carers and he listens to them.' Children feel that they are part of the foster family. One said, 'My carers have always treated me as their birth child and [we] are treated exactly the same as their own children.'

Children's progress naturally fluctuates, which is a challenge for carers. Nevertheless, carers persevere and provide them with consistency, encouragement and guidance. They show initiative and advocate strongly for the children. For one child, this meant that his legal status became clear. This helped him to feel secure. For another, it meant ensuring that he had a bed that best met his physical needs.

Children enjoy an excellent and aspirational range of social and recreational experiences with their carers and the agency. This includes trips to other countries and some children recently visited Parliament. Older children recently attended a

young driver's event. Children find these opportunities stimulating and they acknowledge the excellent help that they receive from the youth support workers who work with them. A newly approved carer said, 'It is all very child-focused; it has been amazing.'

Foster carers and agency staff help children and young people to prepare well for independence in line with their age and development. One boy has progressed to managing all his own pocket money, which has improved his self-confidence. Intensive life-story work with another child helped him come to terms with his identity. As a result, he is now looking forward to his future and going to university.

Some children show remarkable improvements in their educational progress. Some have learned English as a second language and made excellent use of tutors and other services. The agency invests directly in schools by providing teachers with training about attachment and the effect of trauma on children. This outstanding resource helps to sustain and improve children's education placements. One boy increased his attendance by 90%, which helped him to progress socially and academically. Others have progressed to the point that they have made career plans.

Children make good progress with their physical health. Carers address issues promptly with the help of relevant professionals. For example, one child substantially improved her diet. Two others ceased needing inhalers. An exceptional feature of the service is the attention to children's emotional health with the involvement of a prominent clinical consultant and the employment of a therapist. They support staff and carers in a dynamic and engaging way to apply the model of care. This helps carers understand the best way of working with children. Delays in children receiving help are minimised. Consequently, as one social worker put it, '[Children's] self-regulation improves. [They] improve their reflective skills and identify the triggers for downturns in their emotional states.'

New carers integrate readily into the service and comment very favourably on their experiences so far.

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

All children feel safe in their foster homes. Staff understand the risks that children face and work with the foster carers and relevant agencies to keep these under review. This process directly contributes to the support that children receive. For example, a child that was at high risk of sexual exploitation received coordinated support from health workers, the police and safeguarding professionals. This served to reduce the severity and range of risks that she faced. Another child received help with his education and stopped running away from school. This did not resolve all his difficulties but kept him safe. Furthermore, he made progress academically and socially, which boosted his self-esteem. His carer said, 'He's getting cheeky now!'

Supervising social workers monitor the standard of health and safety in carers' homes. However, the standard of this work is variable. Managers are aware of the issue and it is referenced as an action within the agency's development plan. A

recommendation is raised to ensure that improvements are implemented and maintained to ensure the safety of physical environments for children and young people.

The whole agency uses the same therapeutic approach to addressing children's challenging behaviour. When combined with the support of schools, this provides a high level of consistency between the adults working alongside each child. The use of physical intervention is extremely rare. Staff collaborate exceptionally well with carers, colleagues and other professionals, which leads to children receiving consistent messages. Commissioners in local authorities who place children with the agency are extremely positive about it. Difficulties are addressed as promptly as possible, which reduces the likelihood of them escalating. This has practical benefits for children. One social worker said, 'The carers have established a relationship where the child will follow guidance and boundaries... this has resulted in him attending school and he is now completing his examinations.'

The agency is adept at reducing the likelihood of children going missing. These, and other risks, such as radicalisation, occur rarely. Children who arrive with high risk levels, such as being trafficked or subjected to modern-day slavery, become substantially safer. No children are subject to radicalisation.

The recruitment processes for new staff are not completely satisfactory and do not benefit from adequate monitoring. For example, it is not always clear that managers have verified the reasons why applicants have left previous employments. This increases the risk of unsuitable people working with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Managers passionately apply a strong ethical position to their leadership of the service, which reflects their statement of purpose and puts children first. This translates valuably into the use of a specific theoretical model in all aspects of the service, including carer recruitment, matching children with carers, clinical support and training. One new member of staff said, 'The whole ethos and aims of the company are what I came for.' Similarly, carer representatives are on the agency's steering group, which shows a substantial commitment to involving carers meaningfully. The directors share their model with other professionals, for example at conferences and by organising training events.

The registered manager is one of two directors and they have been in post since they started the agency in 2013. Both have ambitious plans for the consolidation of the service. The registered manager has appropriate qualifications in management and social work. The last inspection raised one recommendation about matching. This was a technical error that had no impact on children. A new administrative system helps to prevent a reoccurrence.

The monitoring of the service requires improvement. Shortfalls identified on this inspection identify the need for more rigorous oversight to ensure that the agency complies with the National Minimum Standards and Regulations. Furthermore, the quality of care review report lacks evaluation and does not clearly set out areas for

development.

Staffing levels are generous and the teams continue to grow. There has been some turnover of staff as the directors strive to develop a team that addresses their aims and objectives. While some carers find this turnover disappointing, the high standard of communication between team members lessens the impact of these changes. One carer said, 'Staff show commitment, energy and passion.'

Staff feel valued by the company. One said, 'I feel invested in – they want me to grow.' The supervising social workers have modest caseloads, which means they know their carers well. Their own supervision meetings include regular input from the clinical consultant, which is highly valued.

In most regards, the agency achieves high standards of training for its carers. The directors ensure that staff and carers understand children's needs, both general and specific. For example, a recent conference addressed the needs of children who are transgender. This knowledge gives staff and carers confidence in their own practice, which helps children to feel secure. All carers undertake thorough training about attachment. The agency only continues with new applications if prospective carers commit to this demanding programme. Carer training is based on a clear theoretical model and often involves main carers attending events nearly every month. Carers clearly implement the training in their care of children. Where households have two carers, supervising social workers provide a range of training opportunities to second carers. However, there is significant variation in second carers' success in achieving the minimum requirements. Supervising social worker and management monitoring of this issue requires improvement. Furthermore, the agency decision maker is not sufficiently clear about the minimum training requirements for secondary carers. This has the potential to undermine her decision making about carers continued suitability.

Carers are enthusiastic about the agency. They receive excellent support from supervising social workers, including outside office hours. Supervising social workers understand their carers well and help them to develop their skills. For example, one carer is learning how to align her religious observances with the expectations of the agency. Another benefits from attending the male support group and is becoming more reflective about his childcare. Carers and staff who are involved in particularly challenging work receive additional support. Some recently enjoyed going on a retreat. This helps carers maintain high standards of care. One said, 'There is no division; we are like a family.'

An effective tracking system allows carers, staff, managers and children to clearly see children's progress in all areas. Carers submit information electronically every day, which supervising social workers and other staff read promptly. This attention to detail means that staff address carers' and children's needs quickly. However, the effect of this is reduced somewhat by delays in obtaining relevant information and documents from placing authorities.

The fostering panel and associated decision-making processes are well organised. Panel members have the benefit of excellent forward planning. The manager

compiles a programme of events a year in advance, including the annual reviews of carers. This means that preparation, panel membership and reports occur in a timely way. This benefits applicants, staff and panel members.

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

Unique reference number: SC466934

Registered provider: Children Always First Limited

Registered provider address: Unit 61, Basepoint Business Centre, Bromsgrove Technology Centre, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 3ET

Responsible individual: Julie Elliott

Registered manager: Jan Blazak

Telephone number: 01527 917888

Email address: info@childrenalwaysfirst.co.uk

Inspectors

David Morgan, social care inspector

Lisa O'Donovan, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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