

Caritas Care

Caritas Care Limited

218 Tulketh Road, Ashton-on-Ribble, Preston PR2 1ES

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This fostering agency is run by a charity. It provides a range of placements to children and young people. It is responsible for the assessment, approval, training, supervision and support of foster carers.

The agency currently supports 18 children in 17 concurrent carer placements. It also supports 21 children in 16 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 22 to 29 May 2018

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| Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account | outstanding |
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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 | outstanding |
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The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 18 March 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident and ambitious for children. Their strong, caring ethos permeates the organisation and creates a culture of high aspirations in which the competent, stable staff team supports foster carers to deliver high-quality care to children.
- The agency plays a leading role, both locally and nationally. It is developing new ways of working so that, increasingly, more children are placed for early permanence in line with the government's agenda.
- Excellent professional practice and partnership working ensure that children receive exceptionally high-quality care and support.
- Children make exceedingly good progress. Their life chances are enhanced by the agency's timely, individually tailored and effective intervention.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- There are shortfalls in the recruitment processes relating to the selection of some staff and panel members. These have the potential to undermine the otherwise strong safeguarding practice.
- Although, for the most part, monitoring systems are extremely good and effective, further improvement is needed to ensure that the agency's records are consistently maintained to a high standard.

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

Recommendations

- 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 and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring.

In particular, ensure that child and foster carer files contain all necessary information that is signed and dated; that third party information is appropriately protected and records demonstrate that robust action is taken to obtain missing information. (NMS 25.2)

- Demonstrate, including from written records, that the agency consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks. Ensure that all personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in and understand and operate these good practices.

In particular, ensure that references and employment dates are verified. (NMS 19.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The quality of individualised care and support to children is excellent. Managers and social work staff know children and their needs very well, and provide extremely good support, advice and guidance to foster carers and concurrent carers. This helps carers to have the resilience and staying power required to see them through the many challenges that the children may present. Dedication and a steadfast commitment to children is evident throughout the agency's workforce and results in carers 'going the extra mile' to ensure that children have the best possible care and positive experiences.

The agency has a keen and successful focus on building strong bonds between carers and children. Children respond well to the emotional warmth and acceptance that they receive. They feel settled and cared for, and make good and excellent progress across all areas of their development. They grow in confidence and self-esteem, and they achieve a sense of belonging. Children benefit from the many life-enriching experiences that families provide.

Most children benefit from long-term placements, with some staying put after the age of 18 and building lifelong relationships. There are currently 21 children in mainstream foster families, 15 of whom have been in placement for more than two years. This demonstrates that most children live in stable placements. Two children's placements have ended prematurely in the last 12 months. The agency has reflected on the reasons and used the learning and feedback to improve future practice.

The agency places high numbers of babies in concurrent placements and provides outstanding support to their carers, who are also approved adopters. This ensures that children have the best start in life and are loved and cared for from an early age. The agency enables the development of strong attachments and achieves early permanence for many children. Since introducing concurrency placements in 2016, the agency has placed 78 children with concurrent carers, the vast majority of whom have gone onto early adoption. Currently, 18 children live with concurrent carers.

The agency actively supports contact with birth families and enables children to develop and maintain good relationships with their birth families. This includes children in concurrent placements. It sometimes involves carers travelling some distance to facilitate contact. However, the child's needs are paramount and the agency limits the distance that children are expected to travel. It takes this into account when making placements.

Where the decision is made for a child to return to their birth family, both the children and the carers are very well supported through this process, and each child's transition is managed with care, compassion and respect for all involved. This gives children the best support to transfer their attachments. Carers receive sensitive support from a trauma therapist, which helps them to come to terms with their loss as positively as possible.

To date, nine children have been rehabilitated to their birth families and since then, three have returned into care. In each case, the child has been placed with their original concurrent carers, who had already built a strong bond with them. This demonstrates a

strong focus on children's emotional well-being.

Successful and strong partnership working results in children accessing the specialist help that they need. The agency 'goes the extra mile' to ensure that children receive tailor-made support, advice and advocacy. Consequently, children receive excellent support with their health, emotional and psychological needs.

The agency's psychologist provides very good therapy and guidance to children and foster carers who need it. This helps to sustain placements and supports children to live healthy and enjoyable lives. One foster carer explained: 'I struggled when the young person made a disclosure – the support really helped me to cope.'

Children with highly complex and challenging needs have positive and enjoyable experiences with regular respite carers while their carers take a break. This assists in preventing the placement disruption which might otherwise occur through foster carer burn-out. These placements are very well planned. The agency ensures that children and respite carers know each other well and that the respite carers are fully informed about the child's needs prior to the placement.

Carers and placing social workers particularly value the outstanding level of support provided by the education liaison officer, both to themselves and to schools. They describe this as 'fantastic, very helpful and impressive', and they say that she 'works tirelessly' to secure for children the education that they need. It is clear that her intervention leads to very many children making exceptional progress in their education, often from a low starting point.

Children say that they are listened to and can influence their own lives. Their views are sought about their placements and the quality of care that they receive. Through the agency's Children in Care Council, young people learn to confidently express their views and influence developments. They contribute to national surveys and workshop discussions, including those with a focus on staying safe and equalities. This ensures that children's voices are heard both locally and in the national arena and that children are well informed about matters that affect young people.

Children of all ages have regular opportunities to mix with other children through enjoyable social events that meet their needs and interests. The agency holds events for children approximately every three months.

The quality of foster-carer assessments is a key strength. Both mainstream foster carers and concurrent carers are very well prepared for the fostering task. A concurrent carer explained: 'The assessment was very thorough. Right from the start, they told us about concurrency. We were under no illusions, but we saw the benefits for the children. They explored how we might deal with a rehabilitation as part of our assessment.'

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

Children are very well protected and feel safe. Their safety needs are central to each visit by supervising social workers to foster families, and both social workers and foster carers

report regularly on children's safety needs. Robust risk assessments and safer caring plans form the basis of individualised safe care arrangements.

Children receive good supervision and care from carers who are very well informed and knowledgeable about their safety needs and very well trained in how to respond to a safeguarding concern, including a disclosure or allegation of abuse. Children rarely go missing but, when they do, foster carers and agency workers are proactive in securing their safe return through a well-coordinated and planned response.

Children at risk of exploitation, discrimination or bullying are kept as safe as possible by strong and effective partnership working. This includes working with other professionals to raise their awareness of how to best protect children, and occurs in advance of children entering new situations, such as a change of school.

The agency makes use of an ex-offender project which facilitates discussions between an ex-offender and children on the edge of criminality. This helps children to hear at first-hand about the negative impact of crime on someone's life.

Behaviour management policies are clear and form part of the foster care agreement so that foster carers are in no doubt about the strategies permissible for managing challenging behaviour. Foster carers have access to excellent training on behaviour management, based on providing positive environments where children learn to feel safe. This is based on dyadic developmental practice, which emphasises the value of play, acceptance, curiosity and empathy.

The number of notifiable serious incidents is small. In each case, the agency has taken swift and appropriate action which has protected children well. However, it has not always notified safeguarding professionals or Ofsted in good time. This prevents those responsible for safeguarding children from monitoring serious incidents and providing advice as required.

Careful recruitment and regular monitoring of carers prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children. Recruitment procedures for staff and panel members are less robust. For example, the verification of references is not always vigorous and shortfalls in application forms, such as the lack of clarity about employment dates, are not always pursued. Good-quality information that demonstrates the suitability of panel members is not always held on their personnel files. These shortfalls undermine the otherwise good recruitment processes.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers are highly competent and effective. They lead the agency with enthusiasm, confidence and, above all, a strong desire to enhance, enrich and repair the lives of disadvantaged children. Their ambitious vision creates a culture of high aspirations in which the passionate, stable staff team competently supports foster carers to deliver high-quality care to children. A foster carer said: 'The whole team is on the journey with you. Their (staff's) ideas are creative. They are incredible, supportive and respectful. They offer advice without being patronising.'

A strong, caring ethos permeates the organisation, creating a warm and friendly environment in which staff and carers feel relaxed and cared for. Staff and carers willingly and frequently 'go the extra mile' to ensure that children receive the best possible service and live in families where they feel loved and valued.

Staff are very well supervised, supported and trained, so their knowledge and skills remain fresh and up to date. Staff and carers attend supplementary training that is tailored to meet the specific needs of particular children. This ensures that they have a good understanding of children's needs and how best to meet them. They receive further support and guidance from the agency's therapists, which they report to be enormously helpful. Consequently, children's emotional well-being and safety are very well promoted.

The agency is a pioneer of good practice, both locally and nationally. It is developing new ways of working so that, increasingly, more children are placed for early permanence in line with the government's agenda. It has established strong links with many local authorities and with several regional adoption agencies, which recognise the expertise with which the service supports children and their carers.

The agency has extremely effective partnership working. It actively and successfully challenges fellow professionals whose services and responses are not effective. A partner professional captured the views of many, saying: 'I do feel that this is one of the best fostering agencies. They (staff) are very creative and proactive.'

Carers benefit from first-rate support, supervision and training which enable them to have a good understanding of how to meet children's needs and how best to support children who may have experienced neglect, abuse and early trauma. Carers provide regular, child-centred reports that demonstrate high-quality care and children's good progress. They feel valued by the agency and appreciate the attention to the whole family's needs and well-being. For example, one said: 'We have felt very well supported. The workers care about us all.' Another explained: 'The agency makes it so easy for me, they (staff) are so accessible.'

Reflective practice is a key strength that enables the agency to continuously learn, develop and improve. For example, following an allegation against a carer which had not been shared with the designated safeguarding officer in good time, the agency strengthened its practice to avoid this happening in future. In response to the incident, it provided restorative justice work for the child and the foster carer and some therapeutic support for the foster carer. This helped both child and carer to understand the reasons underlying the incident and enabled them to rebuild and strengthen their relationship.

The agency has a very strong focus on treating others with respect. This involves listening to and acting on the views of children, carers, staff and partners. It empowers children and other stakeholders, because they feel valued and appreciated. The agency does all that it can to help carers to meet children's diverse needs, whatever they may be. This helps to reduce children's anxieties, instils a sense of self-worth and enables them to achieve more. Children benefit from the many and varied opportunities to follow their dreams, and they enjoy their lives more because they are accepted as themselves.

Effective scrutiny by a diligent panel ensures that recommendations about approval are

based on a sound evaluation of evidence. The agency decision-makers are experienced, highly competent and knowledgeable social workers who know and follow regulations and procedures well. This ensures effective decision-making.

The agency has an ongoing recruitment campaign that involves attendance at many events and sharing information about fostering with the public. Despite this, the number of newly recruited mainstream carers has been low in recent years. This means that the agency is not able to offer placements to many of the children referred. The agency has redoubled its efforts recently through a targeted and vigorous campaign to increase awareness of the need for more foster families, with a view to approving more foster families.

Very good recording and monitoring systems ensure that managers maintain a close scrutiny of children's progress and continuously promote each child's best interests. However, shortfalls are not always addressed in good time, and some records are not signed and dated. In one instance, inspectors found confidential information relating to a brother or sister on a child's file. This does not ensure that confidential data is fully protected.

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 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: SC037797

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