

Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering

Sandwell Children's Trust

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, PO Box 2374, Oldbury B69 3DE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency was registered on 7 March 2018. The agency was formerly part of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council. Since April 2018, it has been part of Sandwell Children's Trust.

The agency offers mainstream, short- and long-term, emergency and connected persons placements.

There are 331 children placed with the agency.

Inspection dates: 25 February to 1 March 2019

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	inadequate
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	inadequate
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	inadequate
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There are serious and widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected and their welfare is not promoted.

Date of last inspection: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: this is this agency's first inspection.

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is inadequate because:

- Managers do not demonstrate that they have the required skills, knowledge or ability to oversee an effective fostering service.
- Managers and staff do not always follow safeguarding procedures.
- Some children are at risk because they are living with connected persons who have not been assessed and approved within timescales. Consequently, children are living in unregulated placements.
- Managers do not always ensure that written exemptions are in place when required.
- The quality and timeliness of assessments are poor and do not enable the fostering panel to make informed and timely recommendations.
- Foster carers do not receive the support and training that they need to ensure that they can meet the needs of children well.
- Foster carers' reviews do not take place annually.
- Managers and staff do not always record matching decisions clearly.
- Staff recruitment practices are poor.
- Staff sickness and the high use of agency and temporary staff result in inconsistent, poor quality support to foster carers and children.
- Staff do not receive the support, appraisal and training that they need to ensure that they can meet the needs of foster carers and children.
- Monitoring and review systems are ineffective.
- The agency does not have enough panel members and there have been occasions when panel has not been quorate.
- Panel members' recruitment, induction, training, supervisions and appraisals are poor.
- The agency decision-maker does not make qualifying determinations in a timely way.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Some foster carers are positive about the support that they receive from their supervising social worker.
- Foster carers work collaboratively with health and education professionals to promote positive outcomes for children.
- Some children are making good progress because they are living with experienced foster carers who know them well.

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
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the number and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b)) *	10/06/2019
A fostering service provider must, in deciding whether to approve X as a foster parent and as to the terms of any approval, take into account the recommendation of the fostering panel. (Regulation 27 (3)) This specifically relates to the timely approval of connected foster carers.	10/06/2019
Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a)) * In particular, ensure that the assessment, approval, training and support of connected persons is timely and robust, follows due process and is compliant with all relevant regulations, including The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010) requirements. Ensure that written exemptions are in place when required, to ensure that all children's needs can still be safely met.	10/06/2019
The responsible authority may extend the temporary approval of a connected person if it is likely to expire before the full assessment process is completed, or the connected person, having undergone the full assessment process, is not approved and seeks a review of the decision in accordance with regulations made under paragraph 12F(1)(b) of Schedule 2 to the 1989 Act (1). In a case falling within paragraph (1)(a), the responsible	10/06/2019

<p>authority may extend the temporary approval once for a further period of up to eight weeks.</p> <p>In a case falling within paragraph (1)(b), the responsible authority may extend the temporary approval until the outcome of the review is known.</p> <p>Before deciding whether to extend the temporary approval in the circumstances set out in paragraph (1), the responsible authority must first consider whether placement with the connected person is still the most appropriate placement available, seek the views of the fostering panel established by the fostering service provider in accordance with the 2002 Regulations, and inform the IRO.</p> <p>A decision to extend temporary approval must be approved by a nominated officer.</p> <p>If the period of temporary approval and of any extension to that period expires and the connected person has not been approved as a local authority foster parent in accordance with the 2002 regulations, the responsible authority must terminate the placement after first making other arrangements for the child/ren's accommodation. (Regulation 25 Expiry of temporary approval. The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010))</p>	
<p>Where a person applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decides to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 26 (1))</p> <p>Ensure that assessments are of good quality to enable panel to make informed recommendations.</p>	10/06/2019
<p>Provide 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 foster carers undertake all necessary training in a timely way.</p>	10/06/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 28 (1)(2))</p> <p>A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year.</p>	10/06/2019
<p>The fostering service must prepare and implement a written</p>	10/06/2019

policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b)) *	
A person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (3))	10/06/2019
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the number and needs of the children placed by it, and the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 19 (3)(a)(b)) This specifically relates to the recruitment of a permanent, stable management and staff team which can support staff and foster carers to meet the needs of children effectively.	10/06/2019
The registered person must give notice in writing to the Chief Inspector without delay where the registered provider is an organisation and there is to be any change in the identity of the responsible individual. (Regulation 39 (1)(e)(iii))	10/06/2019
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	10/06/2019
No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel: either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs. (Regulation 24 (1)(i))	10/06/2019
The fostering service must maintain a register (a 'register of foster parents') and enter in it the following particulars in relation to each foster parent: the name, address, date of birth and sex of each foster parent and, in the case of a local authority fostering service, of each person with whom it has placed a child under regulation 24 or regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations, the date of approval and of each review of approval (as the case may be), and the current terms of approval (if any). (Regulation 31 (a)(b)(c))	10/06/2019
The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1))	10/06/2019

* These requirements are subject to a compliance notice.

Recommendations

- Ensure that financial and other support is provided to all foster carers according to objective criteria that do not discriminate against foster carers that have a pre-existing relationship with the child. Family and friends foster carers may require some services to be delivered in a different way, but there should be equity of provision and entitlement. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 30.10, page 59)
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to the 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 ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1, page 32)
- Ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, and a record of any action taken and the decisions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file. A copy is provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded. The information is retained on the confidential file, even after someone leaves the organisation, until the person reaches normal retirement age, or for ten years if this is longer. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 22.7, page 45)
- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This specifically relates to safer caring plans. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 4.5, page 14)
- Ensure that the fostering panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14, page 30)
- Ensure that each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 23.11, page 48)
- Ensure that the fostering service appoints either one or two vice chairs, being members of the fostering panel, who can act as chair if the regular chair is unable to chair a meeting or the office is vacant. (Children Act 1989: fostering services Vol 4 2011, 5.12, page 41)
- Ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. (Children Act 1989: fostering services Vol 4 2011, 5.15, page 41)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

This agency is inadequate because of serious and widespread failures. Managers have not ensured that basic requirements to assess, approve, train and support a significant cohort of foster carers are met. This leaves children unprotected and their welfare at risk.

Connected persons assessments are not completed in a timely way due to staff shortages and a lack of management oversight. Fifty per cent of connected persons assessments have not been completed within 24 weeks. As a result, some children are living in unregulated placements, and their plans for permanence are uncertain.

The quality and timeliness of foster carers' assessments is variable. Assessments are presented to panel without all of the required checks and references. Some significant issues have not been explored adequately. This means that panel members cannot make informed recommendations about an applicant's suitability, which leads to delays in approval and matching with children. Assessments lack clear analysis. Although managers recognise some weaknesses in the quality of internal and external assessments, they have yet to implement effective strategies to address this shortfall.

Supervision and support to foster carers and connected persons is inconsistent. Some foster carers are frustrated at the poor quality of supervision and describe it as a 'tick-box exercise'. Supervising social workers do not undertake supervision with foster carers or connected persons every six weeks as required by the agency's policy. Only 62% of foster carers had received a visit in the six weeks prior to the inspection.

There is a disparity between the level of pay and support provided to connected persons compared to foster carers. Only 54% of connected persons had received a visit in the six weeks prior to the inspection. Twenty-three connected persons had not received a supervision visit within the last three months. Consequently, these carers are not properly supported and the quality of the care that they are offering is not adequately assessed.

Supervising social workers do not always see and speak to children alone when they visit foster carers. This does not enable them to have a fully informed view about the quality of care provided to children or the impact on their welfare and progress.

Foster carers do not receive core training or training relevant to the terms of their approval. This means that some children are cared for by foster carers who do not have the relevant skills and knowledge to meet their needs.

Foster carers' reviews do not always take place annually as required by regulation. Twenty foster carers who have been approved for over 12 months have not yet had

a review, and two foster carers have not had a review for two years. As a result, managers and staff have not ensured that foster carers' suitability is evaluated and their performance appraised. This is a missed opportunity to consider the quality of care provided to children and the impact that this has on children's experiences and progress.

Managers and staff do not take account of foster carers' skills, competencies and experience when matching children with carers. They also do not consider the needs of children already living in the home. This has the potential to have a negative impact on children and the stability of their placements. Consequently, there was a high number of unplanned endings this year (19).

Children's positive experiences of day-to-day life are largely due to the characteristics of their foster carers, rather than the systems and structures of the agency. Children spoken to during the inspection and comments in foster carer reviews noted positive relationships. Foster carers work well with teachers and health professionals to promote educational achievement and healthy lifestyles. For example, they attend health appointments, school parents' evenings and training sessions run by staff from the virtual school team.

Children access a range of health services, educational opportunities and leisure activities. For example, some children are involved in schemes that mentor, support and steer them towards university. Some go on regular holidays abroad and others are active members of clubs. This enables them to develop confidence, and to have new experiences and positive aspirations.

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

The agency fails to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and carers. The service provided to connected carers and the children placed with them is particularly poor.

Some children live in unregulated households with connected people who have not been assessed within the required timescales. It is unclear if these carers have the skills to meet the children's needs. The agency has not completed the required checks to ensure that these carers do not present a risk to children. It is not clear what actions managers and staff take to safeguard children in these circumstances. There is no policy or process in place to ensure that these cases are tracked or monitored. Supervising social workers do not visit the children and carers in these unregulated households.

Managers and staff do not follow safeguarding procedures. This leaves children at significant risk of harm. A member of staff failed to follow up or refer an allegation made by a child against a foster carer. Managers have delayed referring child protection concerns to the local authority designated safeguarding lead. The registered manager does not review safeguarding concerns effectively to identify learning or retain evidence of what worked well. Supervising social workers do not use their professional curiosity to ensure the ongoing safety of children. For example, changes relating to foster carers' partners are not always explored. This

leaves children vulnerable and at risk.

Allegations against foster carers are not dealt with effectively or swiftly. Foster carers are not adequately supported if an allegation is made about them, and post-allegation work is poor. For example, when a historical allegation made about a foster carer had been investigated and resolved, the supervising social worker failed to talk about the allegation with the foster carer to reflect on their practice. She also failed to talk to the foster children currently living in the home to assess their safety and well-being. In another case, the conclusion to an investigation has still not been shared with foster carers after an allegation was made in 2016. Managers do not ensure that foster carers' post-allegation reviews go quickly to panel. This means that managers do not find out what happened or establish whether any action is needed to rectify concerns.

Managers have failed to adequately vet staff who work for the service. Recruitment practices are weak. For example, references are not verified. This leaves children at risk of harm from potentially unsafe adults.

Despite a lack of support from the agency, many foster carers have a good understanding of the needs of their individual children and are proactive in reducing risks by working in partnership with other professionals. For example, there have been no incidents of restraint. The number of times that children go missing is low and these events are managed well. One foster carer was quick to identify, and report, concerns about child sexual exploitation and worked closely with the children's social workers to manage and reduce risks. However, safer caring plans are generic. They lack focus on children's specific needs and do not explain how foster carers will work to keep children safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Managers have failed to demonstrate the care, competence and skill required to operate a fostering agency.

Management and staffing arrangements are inadequate and do not ensure that staff, foster carers and children receive a good quality service. The staffing structure proposed at the point of registration in April 2018 has never been implemented. Since registration, there has been a high level of staff sickness. All newly appointed staff are agency workers on short-term, temporary contracts. This includes supervising social workers, team managers and the responsible individual. Managers have failed to notify Ofsted when the responsible individual has changed.

Throughout this period, the registered manager has been consistent. However, she has been required to cover the vacant decision-maker role and vacant manager posts. Staff changes, vacancies, sickness and temporary appointments have resulted in a lack of continuity and consistency for staff, foster carers and children.

Managers do not monitor the quality of the service effectively. This limits their understanding of the strengths and weaknesses. They do not have the knowledge and experience necessary to run the fostering agency. This does not help the

agency to progress. Managers have failed to ensure that staff are safely recruited. Staff are not adequately trained to assess, approve, train and review foster carers.

Areas of practice that managers had identified as strengths were found to be weaknesses during this inspection. For example, contrary to their positive assessment of the panel, Ofsted found weaknesses in panel arrangements and functions. For example, panel membership is limited and there is no educational expertise. There is no evidence that panel members are safely recruited. There is no evidence that they are appropriately trained or inducted. Only one training session has been run in the last twelve months and this was poorly attended. The central list does not identify any vice chairs. A person who had not been appointed to the fostering panel has chaired the panel. As a result, panel is not fully functional. Members do not have all of the skills required to make informed recommendations about carers' abilities to meet the complex needs of children.

The fostering panel does provide some challenge. For example, they have raised concerns about the quality of foster carer assessments. When supervising social workers present incomplete assessments to panel, the panel defers making a decision until it has enough information to proceed. Managers have been slow to act on the panel's concerns, and the quality of assessments continues to delay decisions about whether or not to approve foster carers. Further delay is also caused by the agency decision-maker not making decisions within timescales.

Processes for the temporary approval, assessment and subsequent approval of connected persons are unclear. For example, there is no process for deciding when connected persons' temporary approval (while being assessed) needs to be changed. The registered person does not make a decision or document any changes. Furthermore, managers do not work in partnership with the agency's fostering panel to ensure that these processes run smoothly. They also do not ensure that assessments are completed by the end of the 24-week additional assessment time. This demonstrates a lack of knowledge about the legality and viability of children's placements and leaves children at risk in unregulated placements.

Managers have not sought a written exemption to allow more than three unrelated children to live in the same foster home. This is in breach of regulation and has the potential to have a negative impact on the quality of care that children receive.

Managers have a poor understanding of the training that foster carers have attended. In part, this is due to chaotic training records. They do not know if all foster carers have achieved the required training, support and development standards in foster care, or if new foster carers have achieved it within one year of approval. Managers do not currently track information about the proportion of individual foster carers who have achieved core training. Managers are therefore not able to evaluate and report on the impact of training on practice.

Staff do not receive regular supervisions, appraisals or training. Since registration, only approximately half of staff supervisions have taken place monthly. Annual appraisals have not taken place. Training is not sufficiently focused on the skills that

staff need for their roles. For example, none of the newly formed assessment team have received training in undertaking assessments. Core training does not include awareness of radicalisation.

Managers are starting to identify some weaknesses. However, it is too early to see any real impact. The absence of a responsible individual has delayed the agency's progress. Staffing issues have meant that the registered manager has had to focus on the day-to-day operation of the service.

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: 1267324

Registered provider: Sandwell Children's Trust

Registered provider address: Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, PO Box 2374, Oldbury B69 3DE

Responsible individual: Sara Scholey

Registered manager: Menna Davies

Telephone number: 0121 569 4760

Inspectors

Dawn Bennett, social care inspector
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