

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 the Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services and since April 2018 is part of Sandwell Children's Trust.

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

There are 221 approved fostering households, of which 115 are mainstream foster carers, 106 are 'connected persons' (or 'family and friends').

There are 298 children placed with the agency.

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 November 2019

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

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 25 February 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection:

Three compliance notices were issued at the last full inspection on 25 February 2019. These notices related to safeguarding; leadership and management; and the timely approval of connected persons.

A monitoring visit on 12 June 2019 focused on the progress made to address the shortfalls outlined in these notices. This visit found that the two compliance notices relating to safeguarding and leadership and management had been met. The notice relating to the timely approval of connected persons was not met and was re-issued.

The other requirements and recommendations made at the inspection on 25 February 2019 were not fully scrutinised during the monitoring visit and were assessed at this full inspection.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Support to foster carers during assessment (and once approved) is gradually improving. This work needs to continue to embed this newly implemented practice. All prospective and approved foster carers now have an allocated supervising social worker and the majority are receiving supervisions in line with the agency's policy. Work is now starting to strengthen the quality and consistency of this support to foster carers. As a result, foster carers are increasingly positive about the support that they receive.

The quality and timeliness of assessments of connected persons and foster carers has improved but is still variable. Better arrangements for joint visits between children's social workers and fostering social workers have reduced the delay in initiating connected person's assessments. There was a dip in the timeliness of these assessments over the summer because of managerial turnover. However, since September 2019, new managers have focused on identifying and monitoring the impact of drift and delay in assessments that have exceeded the usual legal limits. Data about the timeliness of mainstream foster carer assessments is not yet fully reliable, as new systems are not yet sufficiently embedded.

Foster carers are not consistently able to read and comment on their reports prior to panel or their annual reviews. The panel chair and independent reviewing officers are aware of this shortfall and are working with managers to address it. Consequently, foster carers do not have the ability to respond, especially when assessments are not in their favour.

Managers have developed a new programme of core training (and training relevant to the terms of foster carers' approval). Foster carers who are not yet trained are gradually accessing this training or are scheduled to attend. Bespoke Skills to Foster training is now being run specifically for connected persons. This means that children and young people are cared for by a growing number of foster carers who have received the training that they need to meet the children and young people's needs. The majority of foster carers' annual reviews are taking place within the 12-month timescale. These are also used to monitor foster carers' attendance at training.

Children and young people are well matched to their foster carers. There is now a written record of matching considerations. As a result, placement stability is good and unplanned endings are reducing.

Children and young people have good experiences of living with their foster carers. Children spoken to during the inspection, and comments in foster carers' reviews, show positive, sustained relationships between children and young people and their carers. Foster carers work closely in partnership with other agencies to ensure that children access a range of health services, educational opportunities and leisure

activities.

The virtual schools team has a strategic overview of children's educational progress and also keeps a detailed eye on individual children. Children are achieving and attaining in their education. Next year, their progress is likely to exceed the national average for other children looked after. The number of children not in education, employment or training has reduced by half, to 12%, and achievement at GCSE stage increases.

Better cooperation between the agency and child health services is ensuring that children and young people are referred early for health assessments. The number of children with up-to-date medicals now exceeds the national average, at 89% (up from 85% at the last inspection).

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Managers' oversight of children and young people's safety and well-being has recently improved. However, during the summer, two children were placed with connected carers. It was three months before managers took any action to support them. Consequently, the assessment of the carers was not progressed in a timely way and staff did not visit the placement or the children. In other cases, connected carer households under assessment were not visited (or the children seen by staff) for six months. Sixteen-week extensions were not obtained, and assessments were not allocated for two months.

However, since September 2019, new managers have implemented a new monitoring system and can now confidently confirm that all children living in unregulated connected persons placements are safe. The number of children placed with connected carers in placements that are not yet approved has decreased since June 2019. There are now seven children living in five unregulated placements with connected carers. In all cases managers ensure, through weekly monitoring, that the case is allocated, children and connected carers are visited and that there is a plan to progress decisions.

Managers do not always have a complete oversight of the children and young people's experience of living in foster care. This has improved since the last inspection. For example, there is now an expectation that supervising social workers see and talk to children during supervision visits to foster carers. This is happening, and is clearly recorded in some cases, but is not yet consistent practice. Consequently, managers and staff do not have a fully informed view of the quality of care provided to children and young people or the impact on their welfare and progress.

Managers and staff follow safeguarding procedures. This ensures that children and young people are protected. When a child or young person is at risk, or a foster carer is subject to an allegation, the agency ensures that appropriate child protection referrals are made. However, in some cases, Ofsted has not been notified of these incidents. In other cases, notifications to Ofsted have been delayed. Managers and

staff do not always ensure that foster carers are adequately informed of the actions resulting from referrals or that they are supported during an investigation. This leaves foster carers feeling unsupported, ill-informed and vulnerable.

Managers do not always maintain clear records of allegations, the actions taken as a result or the outcomes. These records are currently dispersed across the child's and foster carer's records. This does not give fostering managers clear oversight of referrals and makes it harder for them to ensure good-quality, consistent practice.

The number of times when children or young people go missing is low. When incidents do occur, carers and staff follow correct procedures. Supervising social workers (in partnership with children's social workers and specialist workers) undertake work with children and young people after these incidents to ensure their ongoing safety.

Managers have identified core safeguarding training for staff and foster carers. Some staff have attended 'train-the-trainers' courses. This enables them to run safeguarding training to small groups of foster carers who struggle to attend the main events.

Foster carers provide children with safe home environments. These are monitored by supervising social workers, who complete annual health and safety inspections and unannounced visits to the foster carer's home each year.

Managers do not have sufficient oversight of staff recruitment. For example, references are not always verified before staff start. Additionally, there are no photographs of panel members within their recruitment packs. Consequently, managers do not consistently have all the information required prior to an employee starting.

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

Since February 2019, the fostering workforce has increased with the provision of additional funding. Overall, the use of temporary staff on rolling three-month contracts has reduced. However, in key management posts the use of temporary staff has increased.

The turnover and temporary nature of managers and staff has had an impact on outcomes for children and young people and the support that foster carers receive. For example, over the summer the change of responsible individual and registered manager resulted in inconsistent managerial oversight of the assessments and approvals of connected carers. The new responsible individual and manager have identified and addressed these shortfalls. Monitoring systems have now been developed alongside the children's social work team. These inform weekly management discussions and ensure improved oversight.

However, both the responsible individual and manager are on temporary three-month contracts and will at some stage be replaced with permanent staff. The

management team understands the impact that historical management changes have had on this service. They are introducing and embedding systems and practice that can limit the impact of further changes and ensure that children, young people, staff and carers are better supported.

Since September 2019, the new managers have made significant headway. For example, all foster carers now have an allocated supervising social worker, supervision of foster carers is taking place within timescale and connected carers have access to a newly introduced Skills to Foster programme and core training.

New managers have introduced monitoring systems that have influenced some positive changes. For example, foster carer assessments are now being tracked and foster carer attendance at training is reviewed on a monthly basis. These improvements need to be further embedded to ensure that they have a positive impact on outcomes for children and young people, foster carers and staff.

All staff and professionals spoken to were very welcoming of the new managerial approach and high level of support. Staff are increasingly receiving the support, appraisal and training that they need to ensure that they can meet the needs of foster carers and children and young people. Bespoke training has been commissioned for staff to ensure that they have the skills to undertake robust assessments of foster carers. There is a commitment that from January 2020 all staff within the fostering agency will undertake mandatory training to promote participation from children and young people. Managers and staff have worked hard over the last three months to secure these improvements.

Managers are forming positive links with partner agencies. This is benefiting foster carers and children and young people. For example, cooperative early intervention between the fostering team and the children's care management team helps to make better child-focused decisions. Good-quality training by the virtual education team has been delivered to 40 foster carers and similar training is scheduled to be delivered by the children in care nursing team.

A participation strategy has been developed with children and young people. It is inspirational and making a real difference to the lives of children and those young people leaving care. Participation is becoming increasingly embedded into practice and children and young people are involved in service development. There is also an increase in the use of advocacy services for children.

A better trained and recruited panel has improved its gatekeeping function and makes a more confident assessment of foster carers' suitability.

There has not been a formal review of the quality of care since the service was registered in April 2018. This has an impact on the oversight that managers and the regulator have.

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 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 authority may extend the temporary approval once for a further period of up to eight weeks. In a case falling within paragraph (1)(b), the responsible authority may extend the temporary approval until the outcome of the review is known. 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. A decision to extend temporary approval must be approved by a nominated officer. 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))	31/03/2020
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))	31/03/2020
Specifically, ensure that assessments are of good quality to	

enable panel to make informed recommendations.	
<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> <p>Ensure that all foster parents receive the support and supervision they need.</p>	31/03/2020
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))	31/01/2020
<p>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))</p> <p>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.</p>	31/03/2020
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This specifically relates to maintaining a focus on children's experience of fostering family life.</p>	31/01/2020
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))	31/01/2020
Written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and the action taken in response. (Regulation 12 (3)(d))	31/01/2020
<p>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. The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for</p>	31/01/2020

consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b)(2)(3))	
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Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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

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Responsible individual: William Kidd

Registered manager:

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Email address:

Inspectors

Dawn Bennett, social care inspector
Annemarie Parker, social care inspector
Christy Wannop, social care inspector



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