

## Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering

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

# Assurance visit

### 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 then became part of Sandwell Children's Trust in April 2018. The agency offers mainstream, short- and long-term, emergency and 'connected persons' placements.

There are 200 approved fostering households, of which 104 are mainstream foster carers and 96 are 'connected persons' (or 'family and friends'). There are 316 children placed with the agency.

The registered manager's post has been vacant since 4 August 2020. A new manager is in post and is in the process of applying to register.

**Visit dates:** 20 to 22 October 2020

**Previous inspection date:** 25 November 2019

**Previous inspection judgement:** Requires improvement to be good

### Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Findings from the visit**

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

### **The care of children**

Children feel safe and well cared for. They live in foster homes that are more stable because of the work that foster carers and supervising social workers do. The agency holds meetings when placements are under pressure, to support those placements. Recently, the trust's therapeutic team has been involved in providing additional advice and support for foster placements that are under pressure. This all helps to reduce the number of placement breakdowns and moves for children.

The agency has provided support for foster carers during the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly during the lockdown period. This has included a regular newsletter, risk-assessing visits to carers and the use of virtual visits when these have been the most appropriate option. This support for carers helps to keep children's placements stable.

The agency's use of risk assessments has helped children to continue seeing their families in the safest way. In one case, helping a child to understand the safe use of personal protection equipment made it possible for them to get physical and emotional support from their parent when a relative died.

The agency has worked with the virtual school to help make sure that children get the right education for them individually. This was particularly the case during the lockdown period, when some children continued to attend school and others were supported to engage in education at home.

Foster carers and supervising social workers advocate for children so that their voices can be heard. Supervising social workers are now more focused on seeing children and understanding what it is like for them to live in foster homes, which also makes the children's experience and voices more evident.

Following a serious incident, the agency has increased the consideration it gives to matching children with foster carers and their households. This helps to prevent avoidable breakdowns and poor outcomes for children.

### **The safety of children**

The agency makes Ofsted aware of serious incidents. This allows Ofsted, as the regulator, to have an overview of how the agency is responding to these incidents. However, there are sometimes delays in making these notifications, as some carers do not pass on the information to the agency in a timely way.

These carers have taken appropriate immediate action, such as notifying the police if a child is missing or involving health services after accidents. When the agency has become aware of these incidents, it has worked with the carers to help them understand what is expected of them. However, the failure to pass on the information in a timely manner means that any required action is not taken promptly.

Managers report safeguarding concerns appropriately. They work effectively with designated officers to respond to concerns and monitor ongoing safeguarding issues. This helps to make sure that children are protected.

The agency does not consistently use risk assessments to make sure that everyone is aware of how to protect children. The carers who were spoken with during the inspection were aware of children's individual risks and how to reduce them. However, not having a clear risk assessment may prevent supervising social workers from monitoring the children's placements effectively and ensuring that all identified actions are completed.

In other cases, the agency helps children to become safer. In one case, there was effective work done to help a child understand the risk of lighting fires. In addition to this, the fire officer helped to make sure that the foster home was as safe as it could be.

Following the transfer of carers from the local authority to the agency when it set up in 2018, not all carers have gone through a reapproval process. Managers are aware of this and have plans to complete the process to make sure that all carers are suitable to provide good-quality care for children. These carers were approved by the local authority before 2018 and have had annual foster carer reviews.

## **Leaders and managers**

The agency has had a change of manager and a change of responsible individual in the last year. Before this the agency had a temporary manager, but there is now a permanent manager in place and staff value his support and guidance.

Improved management oversight has enabled managers to identify and focus on important areas of development. This is leading to improvement, but there is still more work to do in some areas to get to a good enough level.

The number of permanent staff in the fostering agency has increased. The manager predicts that all staff and managers will be permanent by the end of the year. This is positive, as it helps to maintain consistency and enables the agency to develop its staff team.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency's office has been closed, and all staff have been working from home. The agency has provided improved technology for staff to help them to keep in touch and to support foster carers. This technology also enables the fostering panel to continue virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Foster carers' participation in online training has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and the number of carers completing and refreshing core training is improving. However, this is improvement from a very low starting point and not all carers have undertaken the training that is expected of them. For example, in the last three years only 46% of carers have received first aid training. While the continuing improvement is helping to make sure that carers have the knowledge and skills to look after children well, this is not yet at an appropriate level.

The agency makes suitable assessments in cases when carers exceed the usual fostering limit of three children. These assessments are sometimes signed off by the fostering manager, which does not allow for suitable independent scrutiny as an additional safeguard for children.

There has been a significant improvement in foster carer supervision rates, which are now at a high level.

There are sometimes communication gaps and differences of opinion, for example between agency managers and carers or the fostering panel chair. While there are other examples of good communication, the gaps have the potential to prevent managers from taking action to address issues of concern in some cases.

The agency is developing its recruitment strategy and is seeing an increase in people's interest in becoming foster carers. This will increase the choice of suitable placements for children.

## **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.

<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Due date</b>
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.	29/01/2021

(Regulation 17(1))	
<p>Within 16 weeks of the date on which the old agency ceases carrying out the functions of a fostering agency, the fostering service provider in relation to a new fostering service ("the new fostering service provider") must, unless it is not reasonably practicable to do so, carry out an assessment of any foster parent for whom it has assumed responsibility by virtue of regulation 33(2) or (3) (a "transferred foster parent") and decide whether to approve them as a foster parent, in accordance with the provisions of regulations 26 and 27, with the modification that regulation 27(1) does not apply.</p>	31/03/2021
<p>(Regulation 34(1))</p> <p>In particular, this relates to completing the process for all foster carers who transferred from the local authority when the agency was set up.</p>	

## Recommendations

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 4.5)
- Ensure 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)
- Ensure the registered person has a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 29.1)
- The local authority should nominate an officer with delegated powers to grant exemptions from the usual fostering limit, and ensure that fostering services and agencies operating within the area are aware of the procedures to be followed in requesting such exemptions. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, paragraph 5.51)

## Independent fostering agency details

**Unique reference number:** 1267324

**Registered provider:** Sandwell Children's Trust

**Responsible individual:** Shanti Eaves

**Registered manager:** Post vacant

## **Inspectors**

Clive Lucas, Social Care Inspector  
Jacqueline Malcolm, Social Care Inspector  
Angela Weston, Social Care Inspector

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