

Birmingham Children's Trust Fostering Agency

1 Lancaster Circus, Birmingham, West Midlands B4 7DJ

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency was registered on 19 March 2018. The agency was formerly part of the Birmingham City Council and since April 2018 is part of Birmingham Children's Trust. The agency offers mainstream and connected carer placements.

There are currently 351 mainstream foster carers with 502 children placed, and 133 connected carers with 134 children placed.

Due to the size of the agency, three inspectors completed this assurance visit.

As the inspectors conducted the assurance visit remotely, they were unable to review a Regulation 30 requirement and a recommendation from 'Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', page 38, paragraph 19.2 which will be considered at the next inspection.

The inspectors reviewed progress made against all other previously identified areas of shortfall.

Visit dates: 15 to 16 December 2020

Previous inspection date: 21 January 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

Foster carers build positive and nurturing relationships with children and consider them as part of the family. Consequently, children feel safe and secure.

Foster carers and supervising social workers actively seek children's views. They consult with children when they make important decisions and respond to requests from them. As a result, children feel valued and respected.

Foster carers understand the importance of children staying in touch with their families. They use technology to help children to maintain contact when face-to-face visits have been unable to take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Foster carers prioritise children's education. Children who previously had poor attendance are now engaging and, when children haven't been able to attend school due to COVID-19 restrictions, foster carers have supported home learning. This means that children have continued to progress academically.

Foster carers know the children well and seek medical advice promptly when children are unwell. Foster carers also encourage children who misuse substances to engage with preventative health services. Not all foster carers have received specific training, advice and guidance relevant to the child they are caring for. This does not provide a proactive approach to maintaining the wellbeing for a child who has a pre-existing health condition such as asthma or considering whether, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they have an increased health risk.

Foster carers have been creative in keeping children occupied when COVID-19 restrictions mean that they are not able to participate in their usual activities. Children are enjoying cooking with the vegetables that they have grown with their foster carers. Children enjoy visiting local parks and riding their bikes. Children attend church and youth groups virtually. As a result, children continue to enjoy spending time with their foster families and friends. This helps children to develop and maintain positive relationships.

The safety of children

Foster carers have the appropriate integrity, skills, and homes to safeguard children.

The approval of foster carers is robust. The fostering panel continues to meet regularly although meetings are currently conducted virtually in line with COVID-19 guidelines to reduce risk of virus transmission. The fostering panel chair ensures that the applicant's voice is heard even when the assessment has highlighted concerns about their suitability to foster. This ensures that the fostering panel makes a recommendation to the agency based on all information available.

Foster carers keep children safe because they are diligent and know the children in their care. On occasions, supervising social workers have not regularly reviewed children's safe care plans or updated them following incidents. Consequently, foster carers may not have all the guidance that they need to keep children safe.

Foster carers are proactive in searching and reporting when a child is missing from home. Children receive return home interviews which helps those caring for the child to understand the reasons why they went missing and provide additional support.

Foster carers raise their concerns promptly with others when they feel children are at risk. For example, when an unknown male approached a child online, the foster carer reported this to the agency and the police. The foster carer's prompt action kept the child safe. The child is now receiving help from a specialist agency. However, the foster carer has not received the training which the supervising social worker identified as an action following the incident.

Some foster carers report that they are aware of omissions in the referral information that they receive about children. They have declined placements and highlighted that the additional information they provide to the agency must be available to foster carers. However, the inaccuracies in referral information have on occasion impacted on the success of matching children with foster carers. Not all foster carers are making informed decisions and there have been compromises to children's placement stability and their safety and welfare.

Leaders and managers

The registered manager is developing the agency. She has addressed a shortfall identified at the last inspection by implementing an assessment toolkit for children sharing a bedroom. Supervising social workers now have improved practice guidance in all areas of their role. This promotes a standard and consistent approach across the service.

The registered manager encourages implementation of the practice guidance across the Trust. Supervising social workers, however, have not yet fully embedded the guidance into their practice. Some social workers have not reported serious incidents quickly enough to the registered manager. The registered manager does not routinely inform Ofsted of the outcome of a child protection enquiry. This shortfall,

along with late notification of a serious incident, delays the inspector's monitoring of the agency's response to safeguarding children.

The responsible individual reviews applications for foster carers to go above their approval numbers. Her considerations and timescales are robust to ensure that children are appropriately placed.

Foster carers now receive regular supervision. Supervising social workers review how children and their foster carers are making progress. The registered manager accepts that there is an oversight within the practice guidance of the agency's expectations for the second carer to attend supervision. Supervising social workers do not, therefore, have clear guidance to ensure that there is adequate review of all foster carers.

Foster carers now have their approval reviewed annually and placing social workers provide feedback about the quality of care and progress children are making. Children, including birth children, contribute to the review. This gives children a voice to help the agency understand their experience within foster care.

The registered manager uses consultation to include children's and foster carers' feedback into the review of quality of care reports and the continuing development of the agency.

Foster carers speak very positively about the training they receive. They discuss their development within their annual reviews, which helps to identify additional skills they need in order to meet the needs of children they care for. The registered manager has been creative in exploring new and safe ways to deliver training during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, there has been an increase in carers attending training.

The registered manager has developed tracking systems to oversee the performance of the agency. Some aspects of monitoring and quality assurance are not as effective as they could be. Social workers have matched children living in one fostering household to meet their need for permanency. However, the supervising social worker has not assessed the foster carers' skills and ability to provide long-term care for the children or presented the foster carers to the fostering panel for their recommendation. The registered manager acknowledges that on one occasion there was this lack of oversight.

Foster carers report different experiences in terms of support provided by supervising social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. One foster carer reported 'the support has been exemplary...working as a team, providing relevant training in these unprecedented times has been top notch.' However, leaders were unaware that some foster carers have struggled to contact social workers by phone and email to receive the advice that they need in their role caring for children. In addition, some foster carers do not understand why children have not been placed with them. The registered manager has not therefore reviewed effectively how foster carers feel

that the agency is managed to meet the individual communication and support needs of some of its carers.

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>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>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 is in relation to referral information available for foster carers and matching of children</p>	26 February 2021
<p>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.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (1)(3))</p> <p>This is in relation to carers receiving relevant training and updated safe care plans after a serious incident.</p>	26 February 2021
<p>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))</p> <p>This is in relation to reassessment and presenting carers seeking change of approval to panel.</p>	26 February 2021

Maintain a case record for each foster parent approved by them which must include copies of the documents specified in paragraph (2) and the information specified in paragraph (3). (Regulation 30 (1)(2) (a-f))	26 February 2021
<p>Ensure that 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))</p> <p>This is in relation to delay from serious incident to reporting and updating of the outcome of child protection enquiries.</p>	26 February 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 35 paragraph 17.5)
- The registered person demonstrates, 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. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 38, paragraph 19.2)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 1273591

Registered provider: Birmingham Children's Trust Community Interest Company

Registered provider address: Third Floor Zone 16, 1 Lancaster Circus, Birmingham, B4 7DJ

Responsible individual: Lisa Omar

Registered manager: Diane Brady

Inspectors

Joanna Warburton, Social Care Inspector
Debbie Bond, Social Care Inspector
Ann-Marie Jones, Social Care Inspector

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