

# Birmingham Children's Trust Fostering Agency

Birmingham Children's Trust Community Interest Company

1 Lancaster Circus, Birmingham, West Midlands B4 7DJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## **Information about this independent fostering agency**

The agency was registered on 19 March 2018. The agency was formerly part of Birmingham City Council and since April 2018 has been part of Birmingham Children's Trust.

The agency offers short- and long-term mainstream placements as well as connected carer placements. A small number of foster carers provide emergency duty team placements. The agency has developed two new services since the last inspection. Children are supported by early permanency planning through foster to adopt. In addition, children move from residential care into 'Step Up' enhanced foster care.

There are 498 approved fostering households, of which 361 are mainstream foster carers, 122 are connected carers, four offer an emergency duty service, eight provide 'Step up' placements and three offer foster to adopt placements.

There are 728 children placed with the agency.

A permanent assistant director of commissioning and corporate parenting has been appointed. She was confirmed by Ofsted as the responsible individual for the fostering service on 1 August 2019.

A permanent registered manager was registered by Ofsted on 8 July 2021.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

**Inspection dates: 16 to 20 August 2021**

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

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

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

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of last inspection:** 21 January 2019

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** requires improvement to be good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are making good progress because of the care they receive from foster carers. Children live with foster carers who they have trusting relationships with. Foster carers invest in children and are committed to developing relationships with them. They support children who are moving into foster care from hospital or from living in a children's home. This serves as a protective factor and helps children to get to know their foster carers and settle quickly.

When children move on from a placement, foster carers are supported to develop lifelong links with children. One child, whose placement has recently broken down, met with his previous foster carers. This has been important to help the child and foster carers repair and maintain their relationship.

Foster carers understand children's physical and mental health needs. Children attend medicals annually. Foster carers are proactive in supporting children who have additional health needs. One foster carer has learned how to communicate through baby signing. Foster carers advocate for children and challenge to ensure additional help is available if needed. Children, their foster carers and supervising social workers benefit from the availability of a therapeutic emotional support service. As a result of accessing health and therapeutic support, children are stable in placement, maintain good health and their emotional resilience is improving.

Children make good progress in education. Foster carers are proactive and show determination to help children succeed. This has helped children to move back into mainstream schools. Children who attend university are encouraged to return home during holiday times, through staying put arrangements.

Foster carers help children to maintain relationships with their families and friends. Children engage in a variety of activities, either with their foster carers or independently in the community. This helps children to develop new skills and confidence. A baby placed for early permanence attends swimming lessons and baby groups with his carers. As well as developing attachments, the foster carers use photos from the sessions to create memories for the child's life story.

Children do not always receive as much information as they would like before they move into a foster placement. Some children could not recall receiving a copy of the children's guide. Although children see foster carer profiles before they move in, one child described other children already living in the home knowing more about her than she did about them. As a result of this lack of information about the fostering household, this child felt disadvantaged.

Children know how to complain and their complaints are investigated in a timely way. Children receive letters giving the outcome of their complaint. However, they are written without using age-appropriate language. This has an impact on children's understanding of decisions made.

In a similar way, children are asked by their foster carers to complete consultation forms before the foster carer's annual review. The consultation forms are not presented in a format that all children can complete independently. Some children are reluctant to complete consultation forms and therefore their voice is not heard within the foster carer's annual review. Not all supervising social workers consistently see children when visiting their foster carers. This is a missed opportunity and further affects the child's ability to express their wishes and feelings.

Children are encouraged to have aspiration for their future. Two adults who recently left foster care are now working as apprentices with Birmingham Children's Trust. However, not all children are supported as well as they should be for their transition to adulthood. Children are unclear about how to apply for passports and not all children have bank accounts. This does not help children to develop life skills while in foster care to support their move to living independently.

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

Incidents of children placing themselves at risk of exploitation are low within this independent fostering agency. The designated officer delivers contextual safeguarding training. Supervising social workers state this has been beneficial in the early identification of risk from changes in patterns of children's behaviour.

Foster carers help to keep children safe by putting boundaries in place or increasing supervision within the home. Children are also encouraged to take age-appropriate risks, including making their own way to school or activities in the community. Foster carers report children who do not return home on time as missing to the police and their social workers carry out return home interviews. One child has significantly reduced her number of incidents of going missing from home since she moved into her foster placement. This is because she feels more settled and her foster carers are keeping her safe.

The registered manager responds proactively if a child makes an allegation about their foster carer or if she has concerns about their practice. Post-allegation reviews are thorough and foster carers are deregistered if the agency decision-maker deems them unsuitable to foster. An independent reviewing officer conducts annual foster carer reviews. This provides an additional level of scrutiny to ensure foster carers are safeguarding the children in their care.

Prospective foster carers, including those transferring from other agencies, are assessed to ensure that they are suitable to foster. The panel process and agency decision-making are robust and child centred. Staff working in the independent fostering agency and panel members are safely recruited.

Foster carers receive appropriate training, including in safeguarding, safer care and first aid. This keeps children safe. One foster carer has received additional training to meet the specific health needs of the child she cares for. Supervising social workers

receive targeted training to improve their practice. As a result, supervising social workers are submitting improved quality referrals to the designated officer. This supports more effective multi-agency working to safeguard children.

Foster carers can sometimes be reactive if a child displays behaviours which they find hard to manage. The foster carers respond to keep the children safe. Supervising social workers do not always use professional curiosity to challenge foster carer's use of language or response when describing a child's behaviour. For example, a supervising social worker has accepted the removal of a child's mobile phone. The foster carer acted to prevent further risk to the child. The supervising social worker did not explore strategies with the foster carer to consider how the child can be supported to learn from this incident to ensure that she uses a phone safely in the future.

Supervising social workers complete safer care plans and risk assessments. They are not always individualised well enough to explore issues, including protecting children who display sexualised behaviour. One safer care plan referred to a carer restraining a child even though this is not in line with the agency's behaviour management policy. When inspectors raised this with the registered manager, she ensured that the safer care plan was amended to guide the carer's management of the child's behaviour. The registered manager also referred the carer for de-escalation training.

A supervising social worker has prepared a working agreement following concerns raised during the assessment of prospective connected carers. This has not been implemented in a timely way to give clear expectations to ensure that the child is safe in their care. Not all children going on holiday with their foster carers have risk assessments in place to describe care arrangements while they are away from home. Despite these shortfalls, there has been limited impact on children, who have remained safe.

Foster carers receive training so that they know how to appropriately store and administer medication. However, supervising social workers do not routinely quality assure to ensure that foster carers safely store, record and administer medication. Although there have been no reported medication errors, this does not provide additional scrutiny to confirm that foster carers are safeguarding the physical and mental health needs of the children in their care.

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

A new senior leadership team oversees the operation of this independent fostering agency. The responsible individual, registered manager and head of service for connected carers have all been appointed since the last inspection in 2019. They are suitably qualified and experienced.

The independent fostering agency has recently undergone a service redesign. The registered manager oversees the service development plan and leaders have a vision to improve the service further. The service redesign includes improved support for

children living with connected carers or under special guardianship orders. Leaders have responded to address shortfalls identified at both the last inspection and the assurance visit which was carried out in December 2020.

Some supervising social workers have moved teams following the service redesign. Some foster carers state there has been inconsistency with supervising social workers. Other foster carers report high levels of support from their supervising social workers. Supervising social workers who met with an inspector demonstrated child-focused practice and commitment to their foster carers. Although some agency workers are employed to cover post vacancies, they are embedded into the independent fostering agency and work as a team alongside their experienced colleagues. Supervising social workers state that they receive regular supervision and feel supported by their senior practitioners and managers.

Leaders work in partnership with children's social work teams to raise awareness about fostering processes and regulatory requirements. As a result of this, supervising social workers report improved working relationships with their social work colleagues.

Leaders also work together with significant partners, including education and health providers, to ensure that children placed with the independent fostering agency are safeguarded and have their individual needs met. Not all supervising social workers are aware of resources available to them following the improved partnership working. For example, one foster carer has accessed her own resources and contacts to meet the cultural and religious needs of a child living with her. The manager did not direct the supervising social worker to resources made available by the diversity and equality manager. The new resources are not fully embedded into practice, which does not enhance the quality of support foster carers are receiving.

The registered manager monitors the fostering service with her management team. This has improved the timely submission of notifications following serious incidents and tracks timescales for assessments and annual reviews of foster carers. This prevents drift.

The monitoring does not, however, sufficiently scrutinise the quality of case records. Managers do not show enough professional curiosity to challenge supervising social workers. As a result, case records do not fully reflect the work undertaken with the foster carer.

Managers do not rigorously quality assure risk assessments and safer care plans. Managers failed to identify practice concerns around potential use of restraint and language used to describe a child's behaviour. Managers did not ensure that a working agreement was in place at the start of a child's placement with prospective connected carers. These oversights delay the timely allocation of additional training and support to evidence assurance that children are appropriately cared for.

Foster carer case records do not contain confirmation that applicants have been informed verbally of the agency decision-maker's decision. In addition, the written

confirmation is not always uploaded to case records to provide an audit of approval decision-making.

Where staff training needs are identified, leaders use learning opportunities to improve practice. Foster carers access a range of training which is available both in-house and through an external provider to help them meet the needs of the children they care for. For example, emergency duty team foster carers are trained to identify and support unaccompanied children and children at risk of gang membership and exploitation. The training officers promote training and monitor attendance to ensure that foster carers refresh mandatory courses such as safeguarding training when required. As a result, there has been an improvement in mandatory training completed in particular by connected 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 fostering service provider must provide a copy of the children's guide to the Chief Inspector, to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 3 (4))</p> <p>This is in relation to children receiving, and being supported to understand, the children's guide when they live in a foster placement.</p>	8 October 2021
<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 children having individualised safer care plans and risk assessments which provide up-to-date guidance for foster carers.</p>	8 October 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that—</p> <p>no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable, and</p> <p>restraint is used on a child only where it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or other persons, or serious damage to property. (Regulation 13 (2)(b)(c))</p> <p>This is in relation to supervising social workers and foster carers understanding, and responding in accordance with, the behaviour management policy.</p>	8 October 2021



<p>The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child—</p> <p>is provided with guidance, support and advice on health, personal care and health promotion issues appropriate to the child’s needs and wishes. (Regulation 15 (1) (2)(d))</p> <p>This is in relation to foster carers and supervising social workers having oversight of the safe storage and administration of medication.</p>	<p>8 October 2021</p>
<p>A fostering service provider must 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).</p> <p>The documents referred to in paragraph (1) are—</p> <p>the report prepared under regulation 26(3)(b) and any other reports submitted to the fostering panel, if any</p> <p>any recommendations made by the fostering panel,</p> <p>the notice of approval given under regulation 27(5)(a),</p> <p>any report of a review of approval prepared under regulation 28(4), and</p> <p>any notice given under regulation 28(12). (Regulation 30 (1) (2)(a)(b)(c)(e)(f))</p> <p>This is in relation to case records evidencing that the foster carer has been informed verbally and in writing of their approval status.</p>	<p>8 October 2021</p>
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with</p>	<p>8 October 2021</p>

a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.

The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority.  
(Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))

This is in relation to effective scrutiny of the content and quality of the agency's foster carer case records.

## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care. Children should be able to raise issues without fear of adverse consequences and the outcome of their complaints should be clearly explained. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 1.1 and 1.6)
- The registered person should ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. Wherever possible, children should be able to visit the foster carer's home and to talk with the foster carers in private prior to a placement decision being made. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 11.3)
- The registered person should ensure that children are supported to develop financial capability, knowledge and skills. The fostering service should ensure there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 12.1 and 12.3)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation of the agency to deliver the best possible care that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of their foster carers. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 17.5)
- The registered person should ensure that when additional developmental needs are identified for foster carers, they receive timely training and support to carry out their role effectively. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 20)

## 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:** 1273591

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