

# Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering

Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering Limited

Kearsney Manor, Alkham Road, Kearsney, Dover CT16 3EQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

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

Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering Limited is a privately owned independent fostering agency. The service is part of a larger organisation in the area consisting of children's homes and a separately registered school; it specialises in the therapeutic care of children. At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 36 carer households providing care for 44 children. The provider states in the agency's statement of purpose its aim to provide high-quality therapeutic foster care placements where each child will have the opportunity for stability, security and a warm, safe caring environment. The agency is registered to provide a range of fostering households for children, including short-term and long-term, assessment, solo and bridging.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since June 2020.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

### **Inspection dates: 15 to 19 November 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 **good**

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

**Date of last inspection:** 12 March 2018

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

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

The driving force of this agency is to provide children with a sense of permanence and belonging in a family environment. Many of the children have experienced multiple moves before joining the organisation's therapeutic community. Overall, the children make excellent progress, and their lives are enhanced by the care and nurture that the fostering families provide.

Children are well supported by their foster carers, and the agency. The foster carers provide the children with nurturing, high-quality care, structure, and routine. The staff, foster carers, and the children share a sense of belonging in a supportive community. As a result, the children build trusted and secure relationships with their foster carers, and other adults who know and understand them well.

While many activities in the community have been curbed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the foster carers continued to encourage the children to lead full and active lives. The children enjoy a wide range of activities, clubs, and hobbies. Children particularly take pleasure from the community events, such as the annual pumpkin picking and the firework night. Foster carers recognise that community and leisure opportunities increase the children's confidence and life skills.

Children benefit from the encouragement of their foster carers in helping them to build friendships and develop social skills, for one child, this involves him playing football outside his home with other children from the neighbourhood. This is something he would have been unable to manage before he joined his foster family.

During the most restrictive periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff implemented creative initiatives to provide support and keep in regular contact with the foster carers and the children. This included newsletters, regular updates, a virtual escape room game, and surprise deliveries of cakes during virtual meetings. These small gestures send a powerful message to the fostering families and the children that they are valued and that their well-being is important to the staff. Feedback received from the foster carers was consistently positive about the high levels of support that the agency provides.

Leaders, staff, and foster carers prioritise the educational needs of the children. Many of the children attend the organisation's school or nearby local schools. Daily feedback between the teaching staff and the foster carers means that the children's successes are shared without delay and problems are flagged up early. Weekly in-house meetings between the education, therapy, residential, and fostering managers help to integrate the services. This helps to ensure that a consistent therapeutic approach is provided to the children.

Foster carers support the children to maintain and develop their relationships with their families in line with their plans. Supervising social workers and foster carers

advocate on the children's behalf and ensure that their needs remain central to these arrangements.

Most of the children that join fostering families move across from residential children's homes within the organisation. Transitional planning is strong. Moves and changes are carefully planned and discussed with the children. Foster carers visit the children, spend time with them in the community, building up to tea visits and overnight stays before they move. There is strong therapeutic input and oversight from the therapy team to help match the children with the right foster carers with the right skills and experience. Consequently, the disruption and anxiety that the children experience as moves approach are reduced.

The innovative model developed by the directors in supporting children with complex needs to move to a foster care from a children's home is transformative for many of the children. However, for the minority of the children whose family living arrangements break down, the children experience high levels of uncertainty and distress. Supervising social workers and managers' complete placement ending reviews, as a means to identify areas of development to inform new learning and future planning, to reduce the number of unplanned placement endings.

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

Supervising social workers and foster carers are alert and curious about risks to children. Staff share child protection concerns quickly with relevant safeguarding agencies. There are proactive and effective working relationships between professionals to help support and protect the children.

Managers keep clear records of safeguarding incidents, including all contacts and follow-up actions taken. This means information is readily available for oversight of emerging risks and identification of any patterns that may arise over a period of time.

Children and foster carers have access to specialist help from the in-house therapeutic team. The team includes a psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, psychotherapists, systemic practitioners, and a speech and language therapist. Consequently, the children's mental health needs can be quickly identified, and holistic support provided. The range of different therapies and services available for the children means that their emotional health and well-being needs are extremely well met by the agency.

Supervising social workers provide monthly supervision visits to the foster carers to help them provide safe and trauma-informed parenting to the children. Visiting patterns and contact with the foster carers increase when additional support is required.

Supervising social workers regularly meet with the children separately from their foster carers. This is often out of the home, for example, a walk or a visit to a local café. Children enjoy good relationships with the supervising social workers. These

visits, along with unannounced visits ensure that the children have regular opportunities to speak to trusted adults about any worries they may have.

Prospective foster carers are provided with timely and relevant information following their initial enquiry. They are kept informed about the progress of any subsequent application for approval. One foster carer said that she appreciated being linked up with another experienced foster carer during her assessment. Panel members provide good scrutiny to ensure that prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to provide safe and caring homes for the children.

Safeguarding is central to the staff practice. Standards of care investigations are robust. These take place when concerns are expressed about the conduct, attitude, or practices of the foster carers. Staff listen to the children and any concerns raised are taken seriously and responded to.

Foster carers are trained in an accredited positive behaviour model. The model includes the use of low-level physical intervention to keep the children or others safe. Some children's positive behaviour plans contain previous information from when they lived in residential care. This has the potential to place the children and the foster carers at risk, for example, if they attempted to use a physical intervention, they are not trained in. This was addressed on the inspection.

In practice, the foster carers have a good understanding of providing safer caring to reduce harm and risk. However, the quality of safer caring plans is not consistent; some plans are detailed and individualised to the children, while others are generic or not in place. This means that some foster carers do not have access to readily available guidance to ensure the safety and well-being of all in the fostering family.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The agency is managed by a suitably qualified and experienced registered manager. She is well supported by the deputy manager, alongside the visible and accessible senior leadership team. Leaders and the staff are compassionate, curious, and committed to understanding the experiences of the children they work with, and in making a positive difference in their lives.

The agency is well staffed. Supervising social workers hold manageable caseloads to ensure high-quality support is provided to the children and the foster carers. The learning and relationship-based ethos of the organisation supports reflective practice and the staff's ongoing professional development.

The foster carer ambassadors group offers carers a direct line of communication to senior leaders. The forum provides an extra layer of communication about practice issues or ideas to help develop the agency from a foster carer's lens. Consequently, foster carers feel listened to and that their ideas and suggestions are acted upon.

There is a careful selection of the fostering households and the staff. Recruitment procedures and vetting practices ensure a high standard of safer recruitment. This reduces the risk of unsuitable people having access to the children.

The fostering panel promotes a safe culture and provides a good quality assurance role to the agency. Assessments on prospective foster carers' suitability set out all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker need to make objective approval decisions.

Leaders are invested in upholding and developing equality and inclusion practices throughout the community. The newly formed working group in response to increasing awareness of racism is a good example of this. The registered manager has identified the need for further training of all staff about gender identity and understanding LGBTQ issues. Leaders recognise that the agency is strengthened by actively embracing difference and diversity.

Foster carers have access to a broad training programme. However, the registered manager's system for monitoring the foster carer's training is overly complex. Records are not kept up to date and show that some foster carers have not completed the organisation's mandatory training within the expected timescales. This means that the registered manager cannot be confident that all the foster carers have the most up-to-date information and skills to meet the needs of the children.

Shortfalls were found in the quality assurance and oversight of the staff's record-keeping, for example, some supervising social workers' visits are not up to date, and some entries are not sufficiently specific to the foster carer's training needs. Moreover, several local authority placement plans and care plans are missing from the records. Consequently, some of the foster carers are not provided with important documents they need to inform the care of their children. These shortfalls were addressed on inspection, and in part were due to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The registered manager and the leader's commitment to maintaining a 'family feel' to the agency permeate through to the fostering families and the children. The agency has significantly increased its number of fostering households since the last inspection. This is a testament to the high-quality support provided to the children and the foster carers. There is strong evidence of ongoing research-informed practice and development to continually seek improved outcomes for the children.

## What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

### Recommendations

- The registered manager must ensure that the foster carers are given a copy of the children's placement plans as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service must seek to effectively follow this up with the responsible authority. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 31.2)
- The registered manager must ensure that the children's safety and welfare is promoted in the fostering households and that the foster carers have up-to-date and individualised safer care plans. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered manager must ensure that foster carers provide an environment that supports positive behaviour. In particular, information and guidance provided to the carers is appropriate for a family setting. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.1)
- The manager must regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about shortfalls in training requirements and specific incidents to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.1)

### 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:** SC463937

**Registered provider:** Channels and Choices Therapeutic Fostering Limited

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## Inspectors

Anne-Marie Davies, Social Care Inspector  
Jill Sephton-Wright, Social Care Inspector



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