

Children Always First Limited

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Office 1, Ladybird Barn, Old Burcot Lane, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 1PH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A small private company operates this service. Ofsted registered it in 2013 and it provides a full range of fostering services to include long-term fostering, short-term fostering, parent and child, sibling groups and short-break fostering. There are 88 children living in 47 households.

The manager has submitted an application to register with Ofsted. Subsequent to this inspection the manager was registered on 15 December 2021.

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: 29 November to 3 December 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: 12 March 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make good progress in all aspects of their development because of the good-quality care they receive. Foster carers show resilience, devotion and commitment to the children they care for. Children enjoy positive relationships with their foster families and have strong emotional connections to the foster carer's wider family members. They benefit from long-term stability, with many children living with their foster carers for several years. This positive and sustained nurturing ethos sets the foundation for children to make good progress. One independent reviewing officer (IRO) told the inspectors, '[Child] is placed with siblings and all are doing well. They are very happy and settled, thriving with their carers.' They would like to stay with their carers, and for it to be their forever home, the IRO added.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, children have been encouraged and supported to do well at school. Foster carers have high expectations for children making progress in their learning and education achievements. They support children by attending parents' evenings and statutory meetings, and keep in close communication with teachers. As a result, some children make exceptional academic progress. One child's school report stated, '[Child] is making exceptional progress. He has been with us for just under a year and is completing GCSEs.'

Children say they feel part of the foster carer's family. They enjoy a range of individual, group and family activities and are included in significant family events such as holidays. Foster carers provide a safe and nurturing environment for children. Children have positive memorable experiences. These are captured through memory boxes and photo albums that record these positive experiences for children. This comprehensive care promotes children's emotional well-being and enables them to build positive childhood memories for their adulthood.

Foster carers have found it difficult to allow children to participate in a range of leisure and recreational activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Despite this, the agency has continued to encourage and support children to be active. For example, the youth workers have been creative in engaging children in various activities via social media. During the periods of restrictions, children have enjoyed baking activities, story times and arts and crafts sessions. These events provide children with the opportunities to develop new skills while forming friendships. For example, some children enjoy a weekly youth club. In addition, staff organised special annual events such as 'Big Day Out' Christmas and Easter activities. These enjoyable experiences give children a sense of togetherness and joy.

Children's health needs are consistently met to a good standard. Staff ensure that individual health assessments are in place. Children attend regular appointments at the dentist, general practitioner and optician and specialist services. As a result, children's physical and emotional health are promoted well.

Foster carers support children well to maintain links with people who are important to them. They are sensitive to children's experience of separation and loss. This is supported by the agency, with training for foster carers to understand the conflict that children experience on sensitive days in the calendar such as Mother's Day or Christmas. This enables children to maintain their sense of identity with birth families, while celebrating their foster family experience.

The agency provides opportunities for children and foster carers to give feedback about the agency. Supervising social workers consult with children through foster carer reviews and regular visits to foster carers' homes. Children's participation has been identified by managers as an area for further development to ensure that children's views are obtained on each visit. Despite this shortfall, children do have other forums to share their views and experiences. For example, one child told the inspector that they felt listened to by the supervising social worker when they requested family time. The child told the inspector, 'I finally got time with my family and it made me happy.'

Children are cared for in a way that celebrates and recognises their identity. However, managers and staff do not always promote equality and diversity well. For example, some children do not have English as their first language, which has excluded them from several of the agency's wider activities. Despite receiving training, managers and staff do not understand this issue fully. For instance, they have not translated information into the children's native language to make it easier for them to read and understand. This is a missed opportunity to help children to develop their understanding of culture and diversity. The impact of this shortfall was lessened because the child has been in school for one year and is able to speak some English.

Foster carers work very hard to settle children when they first move into their homes. They provide high levels of nurture and embed consistent boundaries and routines. Also, foster carers and staff are informed by the agency's therapeutic model. The agency has knowledgeable and highly skilled therapists, who support foster carers with trauma-based strategies to help children to manage difficult feelings and emotions. As a result, children make good progress in a range of areas, including emotional regulation, education, sense of belonging, resilience and building positive relationships. The agency has high expectations for their foster carers, staff and the care children receive. This means that children have made good progress emotionally, socially and physically.

Children are matched with the appropriate foster carers capable of meeting their individual needs. Referrals and applications are scrutinised by the manager and staff and discussed with external professionals. Children feel welcomed and feel that they are treated and valued as a member of the foster family. However, it is not always clear to see how some decisions are made in the agency's assessment process. For example, not all documents contain the relevant information about children's cultural and health needs. This has the potential to compromise the quality of care children receive and their emotional well-being.

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

Recruitment of staff and panel members is thorough. The agency completes appropriate checks as part of initial applications, including on any gaps in employment history. Appropriate references are obtained and verified, and criminal records checks undertaken. Equally, foster carers' recruitment is robust. All required checks are completed prior to the application being presented to the fostering panel. This means that children are kept safe.

Foster carers do not give up on children when they display challenging behaviours. They persevere and use professional expertise and guidance to help children and reduce risks. When necessary, staff provide foster carers and children with additional activities and support to help manage periods of crisis. This child-centred approach is a crucial element in stabilising the children's placement. Foster carers told the inspectors, 'There is always someone to talk to. We can always call; someone is always there to pick up the phone. We can talk to anyone and have the advice when we need it, even if it's a small issue.' This support has proved to be invaluable to foster carers in helping them to care for and protect children.

Staff support and encourage children to take age-appropriate risks. For example, staff support children to enjoy safe and healthy relationships when children have sleepovers with friends. Staff and foster carers act, as a good parent would, by getting to know the children's friends and their families. This approach helps children to build key independence skills in a safe and controlled environment.

Staff ensure that allegations are fully addressed through detailed and transparent investigations. They work in close partnership with other professionals, including the designated officer and social workers, to promote the safety and welfare of children. Following investigations, staff present a comprehensive report of the process to senior management for further scrutiny. This means that children are kept safe because of staff following safeguarding protocols.

Children rarely go missing from home. When they do, foster carers act quickly and liaise with social workers and the police to ensure that children are safely returned home. However, some records of these incidents do not always detail if the child has been spoken to when they return after an episode of going missing. This potentially limits the opportunities to learn why children go missing from home. However, to date, this has not had a direct impact on children's safety and well-being.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency has ensured that foster carers have had a wide range of training available for them to develop their skills and learning to support children's vulnerabilities. Foster carers receive training that reflects the needs of the children that they care for. For example, foster carers are trained to help children in relation to self-harming behaviours, depression and suicide, and in staying safe online. However, not all foster carers have received training in the agency's therapeutic approach to help children manage and regulate

their emotions. As a result, not all foster carers have an in-depth understanding of how to implement strategies to support children better.

Supervising social workers support foster carers to implement safe care plans and risk assessments when children are placed. These identify known risks for the child. However, supervising social workers do not always update and write individualised assessments, and some tend to be generic. For example, one child's risk assessment had not been updated after a child had self-harmed. This means that foster carers can be without clear strategies to enable them to respond to a child's risks.

Regular health and safety checks and unannounced visits are carried out by the supervising social workers. However, children are not always spoken to at these visits. This is a missed opportunity to obtain children's wishes and feelings about the quality of care they receive.

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

The manager has been in post since May 2021. When they were appointed, they quickly identified the strengths and weaknesses in the agency. The manager has started to implement positive changes to the operation of the agency. Overall, foster carers, staff and stakeholders feel supported by the manager and have positive relationships with the new staff team. However, the agency is not yet able to provide evidence of improvement over a sustained period in areas of weakness. An effective action plan is ongoing to address the shortfalls.

Foster carers feel well prepared for their role as a carer. They value the support that they receive from the agency. They receive regular supervision from qualified social workers. This is supplemented by support visits and peer support when required. However, supervising social workers do not always use supervision to enable foster carers to reflect on their practice. This is a missed opportunity for raising foster carers' ambition and learning.

New staff to the agency receive a clear induction that is specific to their role. Staff report that they are well supported by the managers, with regular supervision and appraisals. However, the managers do not always ensure that practice-related supervision is in line with the agency's statement of purpose. As a result, not all staff receive consistent opportunities to reflect on their learning and development from their practice.

Not all the supervising social workers have received the agency's therapeutic approach training to enhance good practice in supporting foster carers and children. This means that staff are without some of the skills required for their role. The manager has identified training to address this shortfall.

Most of the staff team have been recently recruited. Some staff have positive relationships with children and know them well. These staff have a good understanding of the children's complex behaviours and vulnerabilities. They show

patience and resilience, and this helps children to begin to develop trusting relationships. However, the agency has experienced a high turnover of staff. This change has had an impact on some decisions about children's care plans not being followed up. In addition, this has left some children struggling to build positive relationships with newer members of staff.

Restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on face-to-face training for foster carers. However, the agency has not ensured that foster carers continue to receive refresher training online in valuing diversity, skills to foster and managing allegations. This was a requirement raised at the last inspection. This omission has the potential to compromise foster carers' ability to update their knowledge and skills to support children better.

Managers and staff place a good emphasis on monitoring children's progress. Systems to monitor the quality of children's care are generally good. For example, the manager has a reflective support group and questionnaire to gather foster carers' views each month. The responsible individual scrutinises foster carers' feedback to identify learning. However, the manager does not always ensure that safer care plans are individualised for children and that policies and procedures are up to date.

Staff have been building positive working relationships with a range of external professionals. They are working towards building a consistent reputation with local authorities and other agencies. Feedback provided by professionals during the inspection was varied. Some gave positive feedback. However, local authorities told the inspector that there had been limited communication with the agency outside children's statutory or education meetings. Others reported, 'We are often not informed of changes to the supervising social workers or a new manager.' This has the potential to create a lack of confidence and hinder collaborative working relationships between the agency and external professionals.

It is evident that children are at the heart of the agency. The managers, staff and senior managers care about the children. This ethos is shared by the foster carers, who take great pride in children's achievements and progress, no matter how small these are. Foster carers have access to 24-hour inter-agency support. Effective support and guidance support foster carers to manage times of crisis. As a result, children benefit from stable and nurturing care.

The functioning of the panel is effective within the agency. The panel chair has extensive experience in fostering and is clear about the role of the panel. The panel central list shows there is a range of experienced and skilled individuals, which includes social workers, health professionals, and fostering and leaving care members. The panel undertakes transparent and appropriate analysis of the information that is presented to them. Foster carers' assessments are of good quality. The panel also carries out an effective quality assurance role to scrutinise the overall practice and performance of the agency.

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 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. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that foster carers undertake relevant training regularly.</p>	21 January 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that all staff promote children's identity and diversity in written communication. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 2.1)
- The registered person should ensure that all staff provide clear and comprehensive information in documents, including the support that will be available to the foster carer. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.2)
- The registered person should ensure that all staff offer support, advice and reflective supervision to the foster carer. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that all staff receive mandatory refresher training, so they are fully equipped with the knowledge and skills to support foster carers and children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.1)
- The registered person should ensure that all staff receive reflective supervision. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.4)
- The registered person should ensure that they regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, and take action to address any issues raised. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)

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: SC466934

Registered provider: Children Always First Limited

Registered provider address: Office 1, Ladybird Barn, Old Burcot Lane,
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Inspectors

Patrick McIntosh, Social Care Inspector

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