

Birmingham Children's Trust Fostering Agency

Birmingham Children's Trust Community Interest Company

1 Avenue Road, Aston, Birmingham B6 4DU

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 foster placements for children as well as kinship carer placements. A small number of foster carers provide emergency duty team placements. Increased numbers of children are supported by early permanency planning through Foster for Adopt. Children continue to move from residential care through the expanding 'step up' enhanced fostering scheme.

Since the last inspection, the agency has developed its support foster carer scheme, extended its special guardianship order support offer and therapeutic support offer to its foster carers.

The agency has expanded its number of fostering households. There are 594 approved fostering households, of which 253 are kinship carers and 341 are mainstream foster carers. Six mainstream foster carers offer an emergency duty service, and there are 11 step-up placements and five Foster for Adopt placements. There are 819 children placed with the agency.

The responsible individual for the fostering service has been in the role since 1 August 2019. The registered manager was registered by Ofsted on 8 July 2021.

Inspection dates: 28 October to 1 November 2024

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: 16 August 2021

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 experience good-quality care that is based on their individual needs. This helps them to make progress in many areas of their lives, including education, health and emotional well-being. Children benefit from living in stable foster homes where they are valued members of the family. Many children benefit from living with their brothers and sisters in foster homes.

Children's education is prioritised by foster carers and staff. Managers keep good oversight of the progress children make with their learning. Children's attendance and educational attainment are good. Achievements are recognised and celebrated.

Diversity, difference and identity are celebrated by foster carers and staff. Children for whom English is not their first language benefit from the support of interpreters and have access to English for speakers of other languages courses. Carers meet children's cultural needs and empower them to be proud of who they are. Children are helped to understand their past by dedicated and specially trained staff who support them to understand their life journeys.

Children feel listened to. They know how to make a complaint and are encouraged to participate. There have been no complaints made by children. The agency continues to organise participation events based on children's feedback and views. For example, there is a new participation event for children this December and there are plans for this to run four times a year in the future.

Children's views help to shape the care they receive. Foster carers and staff use a variety of approaches to understand children's needs, including an online app, surveys and a range of children's groups including a children's rights and participation group.

Most foster carers feel valued by staff and managers, and this is reflected in the number of carers who have been caring for children for a long time. Staff celebrate the achievements of children and foster carers in a range of different ways. For example, an annual celebration event is held and foster carers and wider family members, including birth children, can be nominated for awards.

A therapeutic model of care is used by the agency. Foster carers and staff receive training in therapeutic parenting approaches for the care of children. There are also a range of therapeutic services that provide clinical wraparound support for both foster carers and children.

Foster carers and staff support children to maintain and develop positive relationships with family members and friends. Despite high demands in some cases, foster carers work hard to meet family-time arrangements. They understand the importance of maintaining links for the children and the impact this has on their

ongoing development. Foster carers are also proactive in sharing pictures and updates about children with their birth families.

Foster carers and staff support children to develop age-appropriate independence skills to help them to move confidently towards adulthood, for example, managing finances, booking and attending health appointments and learning self-care. Additional guidance, signposting and support are offered to help children to continue to progress in these areas. Where appropriate, foster carers help children to stay in their foster home or maintain connections as they become adults. Additionally, the agency and wider trust provide opportunities for young adults, such as apprenticeships, social activities and a range of support groups to help them realise their aspirations.

New carers feel welcomed by the agency and are supported by existing, experienced carers. Kinship carers are quickly supported to understand the role and the assessment and supervision processes. Assessments are thorough and sensitively conducted, which ensures that foster carers feel held while exploring difficult subjects from their past. Training in skills to foster and other initial training courses help foster carers to better understand the complexities of the role.

The needs of children are carefully considered during the process of finding suitably skilled and experienced mainstream foster carers to meet their needs.

Managers, staff, panel members and agency decision-makers have a clear understanding of the complexity and unique nature of the role of kinship carers. They ensure they have realistic expectations of them, and this is recognised by additional support that has been developed to help them.

Children live in settled stable homes. There are few unplanned endings and services that promote and support early permanence and special guardianship orders have been and continue to be developed. This is resulting in an increase of special guardianship orders being granted for children.

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

Managers, staff and foster carers consistently promote the safety and well-being of children. Managers have a clear operational overview of safeguarding concerns. They monitor the circumstances of individual children and foster families and the risks identified and ensure that there are timely and effective responses.

All managers, staff and foster carers attend a range of safeguarding training. They understand internal safeguarding procedures and the roles and responsibilities of external safeguarding agencies. Managers ensure that the priority during any investigation is that children are kept safe. They also provide foster carers with increased support and access to independent services, in recognition of the emotional impact that child protection concerns can have on them and their wider families.

Managers take appropriate action when there are child protection or practice concerns about foster carers. Timely and thorough post-allegation reviews take place. Foster carers' updated assessments are returned to panel and the agency decision-maker to review their approval status. This independent oversight ensures that foster carers remain suitable to provide care for children and receive any additional support needed to develop their practice.

There are systems in place that ensure that all stage one checks for foster carers are completed. Where needed, further checks and exploration are evidenced. There are established procedures that ensure that all safer recruitment checks take place prior to a member of staff starting in post. However, verifications by phone of agency workers' references are not recorded. A recommendation has been made to address this.

Safety of children is under constant review. Safer care documents are live and expected to be revisited at every supervision. Plans are individualised and where appropriate, they are completed together with children to help them take ownership of their own safety. There is management oversight of safer care plans that ensures that when there is drift, action is taken to update them.

Children feel safe in their homes and with their foster carers. When children are at risk of harm or require emotional support, there is careful consideration to ensure that foster carers and children receive timely help. The agency has access to partner services and makes referrals appropriately. The agency also has access to an in-house service that focuses on the safety of children, especially in relation to contextual safeguarding, such as going missing from home, child criminal and sexual exploitation, county lines and gang culture. This supports foster carers to better understand the risks that children face and give them the tools and resources needed to reduce harm.

Staff and foster carers help children to take age- and development-appropriate risks. This supports children to take part in events in the community and participation opportunities in the wider trust, which results in them building resilient relationships and friendships that they maintain into adulthood. Ongoing consideration is given to the different ages and stages of childhood and young adulthood, especially when thinking about adolescence and the teenage brain. There is additional training and support in place to help equip foster carers and families with special guardianship orders with the knowledge and tools to help children and identify indicators of risk.

Foster carers are trained in de-escalation techniques in response to children's changing behaviours. The agency does not tolerate physical intervention and there have been no recorded incidents.

The fostering agency's panel chairs ensure that assessments of prospective foster carers include all necessary checks and explore relevant issues. Panel members prepare for panel by identifying areas of vulnerability to explore with the assessor and prospective foster carers. This provides robust consideration and recommendation of the prospective foster carer's suitability to foster.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is an established and long-standing leadership and management team. They are skilled, experienced and appropriately qualified. They work collaboratively and effectively in the fostering agency and across the wider trust. They have effective oversight through established monitoring and review systems. As a result, they have a clear understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for development and have clear plans for continued progress.

The registered manager is passionate about all aspects of her role and leads by example. She has high expectations that she role models effectively to staff, foster carers and partners. As a result, staff, foster carers and external professionals speak highly of her practice, drive and vision for the agency.

When monitoring systems identify areas for development in the agency, leaders and managers are quick to take action. They are also proactively involved in specific projects in the wider trust and with local and national partner agencies. When necessary, the registered manager and the leadership team formally escalate concerns and make appropriate challenge to internal and external partners when practice affects the progress of foster carers or outcomes for children.

As a result of developments in the agency and partnership initiatives, there have been improvements in areas such as the recruitment of mainstream foster carers, timeliness of mainstream foster carers' and kinship carers' assessments and an increase in the number of special guardianship orders and early permanence placements.

Many foster carers spoke positively about the support they have and continue to receive from managers and staff. They say assessing and supervising social workers are professional, understanding, knowledgeable, child-centred and responsive. It is clear they provide valuable guidance. They also show professional curiosity and, when necessary, are not afraid to challenge, but in a supportive way that develops practice and skills. All foster carers have access to a range of training, online and face to face. There are mechanisms in place that track attendance and support those carers who are struggling to meet training targets. Supervision of foster carers takes place on a regular basis. There are a range of support groups and foster carers have membership of associations including Birmingham Foster Carer Association (BFCA).

One of the agency's strengths has been their involvement in sharing good practice work and being involved in piloting projects with national organisations. For example, they have trialled and fed back on a new assessment form for kinship carers and shared practice and success in the recruitment of mainstream foster carers.

Staff feel supported by managers and leaders, who are available and approachable. Staff say they feel valued. One member of staff said, 'We are continuing to grow and

develop as a service, and all make great contributions to the service.' Staff support each other and long-standing staff members share their knowledge and expertise with new staff, who feel welcomed and have detailed and well-planned inductions.

Staff receive a wide range of training and courses specific to their roles. There are clear pathways for staff development and progression. Staff receive regular supervisions with a focus on well-being. Appraisals are held annually, timely. Staff meetings are held on a regular basis and there are opportunities for the whole agency workforce to meet to reflect on and develop practice.

The staff team and foster carers reflect the diverse community they serve. This helps children to better understand and develop their identity.

Overall, foster carers feel positive about the support they receive from the agency. Managers have developed an escalation policy. This is helping to build good relational work, with the aim of listening to foster carers' experiences and resolving concerns quickly as they arise. For example, one foster carer spoke about the registered manager visiting their home to apologise for the concerns they raised.

Fostering panel meetings are held regularly and decision-making is robust. Panel provides a quality assurance function that ensures there is shared oversight of the quality of assessments. Clear reasons are given by the panel chairs for the recommendations made. The agency has a central list that demonstrates that independent members reflect diversity in their skills, gender and cultural backgrounds. Foster carers' annual reviews are chaired by two annual reviewing officers. This ensures continued oversight of the experience and ongoing approval of foster carers.

Agency decision-makers make clear, timely and well-reasoned decisions, demonstrating a detailed level of reflection and consideration of all elements of the application and approval process.

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

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess their suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries should be made to each referee to verify the written references. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 38, paragraph 19.1)

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: 1273591

Registered provider: Birmingham Children's Trust Community Interest Company

Registered provider address: 1 Avenue Road, Aston, Birmingham B6 4DU

Responsible individual: Lisa Omar

Registered manager: Tracy Collins

Telephone number: 0121 303 7575

Email address: David.Stringfellow@birminghamchildrenstrust.co.uk

Inspectors

Dawn Bennett, Social Care Inspector

Stacie Sharpe, Social Care Inspector

Nurul Kabir, Social Care Inspector

The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children’s social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children’s services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2024