

Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering

Sandwell Children's Trust

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council, PO Box 2374, Oldbury B69 3DE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Sandwell Children's Trust Fostering was registered on 7 March 2018. The agency was formerly part of the Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services and then became part of Sandwell Children's Trust in April 2018.

The agency offers a variety of foster care placements for children, including short- and long-term, emergency and placements with connected persons. At the time of this inspection, there were 118 children living in 79 approved connected carer households and 108 children living in 86 approved mainstream carer households.

The last manager was registered with Ofsted on 11 July 2024. She left the post 30 August 2024.

A new interim service manager was appointed on 2 September 2024. She submitted her application to become registered as manager with Ofsted on 08 October 2024.

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 October 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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

Date of last inspection: 2 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

Foster carers and staff are strong advocates and have high aspirations for the children they care for. As a result, children make good progress from their starting points. They are encouraged and helped to develop and grow as individuals. Foster carers and staff are proud of children's achievements. As a result, children experience enjoyable childhoods and develop emotional resilience that helps to prepare them for adulthood.

Children moving in with mainstream foster carers receive child-friendly profiles of the carers before moving in whenever possible. This provides them with reassurance and helps them to settle. Children also receive age-appropriate welcome boxes with written information about the agency, as well as carefully chosen toys and gifts.

Foster carers demonstrate commitment and dedication to the children that they care for. Children are encouraged to do well at school. Foster carers and staff are aspirational for children to make progress in their learning. Foster carers attend parents' evenings and ensure that they keep close communication with schools.

Children form positive relationships with their foster carers and are valued members of their foster family. They enjoy a range of individual and family activities and are included in significant family events such as holidays. Foster carers support children to maintain links with those people and communities who are important to them. Foster carers are sensitive to children's separation and loss. They support family time and cultural and religious identity.

Children develop age-appropriate independence skills in a safe and planned way. For example, they travel on their own to school and college and learn to use public transport. Foster carers and staff carefully balance encouraging independence and confidence-building while ensuring that the child feels safe.

Foster carers and staff recognise the importance of care planning to support children to feel secure in their placements now and in the future. Some children continue to live with their foster carers after their 18th birthday. They receive encouragement from their foster carers while they are studying or training. They also learn the skills they need to be more independent. This supports children to prepare for adulthood.

The agency is proactive in supporting foster carers and connected carers to apply for special guardianship orders. Managers and staff work in partnership with the wider trust organisation to ensure that the right decisions are made in line with the children's needs. Furthermore, the close partnership working has reduced drift and delay for children. Positively, once the order has been granted continued, support is provided, and special guardians can continue to access all training as and when needed.

Managers and staff provide opportunities for children and foster carers to meet socially. Staff consult with children for foster carer annual reviews and during regular visits to foster carers' homes. Managers provide children with an additional opportunity to express their views through attendance at the Voices of Sandwell, a social group facilitated by the agency. These forums also inform managers how children view their experiences within their foster family.

Foster carers say that they feel welcomed by staff from the agency. Assessments of potential foster carers are thorough and analytical. Preparation training and ongoing training support both potential mainstream carers and connected persons to understand the fostering role and meet the needs of their child. They receive regular reflective support and supervision from their supervising social worker. Furthermore, managers have ensured that connected carers receive the same financial arrangements as their foster carer counterparts.

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

Safeguarding is a high priority in this agency. Managers have an operational overview of all issues that affect the safety and well-being of children, and they monitor actions taken and progress made. They understand the circumstances of individual children and the risks identified, ensuring that there are strong and effective responses.

Managers, staff and foster carers understand each other's roles and responsibilities and the remits of safeguarding agencies. Managers make sure that children are protected during any investigation and provide foster carers with access to independent support in recognition of the emotional impact that this has on them.

Managers take robust action when there are concerns about foster carers' practice. Post-allegation reviews are conducted, and foster carers return 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.

Foster carers and staff have access to a wide range of training and development opportunities. This helps them to meet the needs of children and understand the challenges that children face. Foster carers and staff attend child protection training and a range of additional safeguarding courses. They also receive training about the agency and the wider trust's partnership practice model of care. This focuses on trauma-informed practice, relationship-based practice and strengths-based practice. It supports foster carers and staff to understand the impact of children's experiences and how to help them develop strengths and build emotional resilience moving forwards. It also encourages foster carers and staff to reflect on their own responses to their emotions.

Foster carers and staff promote the well-being and safety of children. Foster carers discuss their concerns, when necessary, with their supervising social worker and the child's social worker. Managers and staff respond promptly to identified risks for

children and where appropriate, engage partner agencies that provide individualised packages of support. For example, children rarely go missing from their foster homes, and the number of incidents is low. When children have gone missing, foster carers have taken quick actions, working in partnership with other agencies to ensure the children's safe return. Where appropriate, the agency refers children to specialist services that provide additional long-term support. These actions help to promote and maintain children's welfare.

The fostering agency's panel chair ensures that assessments of prospective foster carers include all the necessary checks and explore issues pertinent to fostering. 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.

Safe recruitment processes for staff, panel members and foster carers help to ensure the suitability of these people to work with or care for children.

Children are cared for in safe foster homes. Staff complete regular health and safety checks and undertake unannounced visits to the foster carer's home to maintain this.

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

There have been periods since the last inspection when this agency has operated without a permanent manager who is registered with Ofsted. There have also been changes to the interim managers appointed. The senior leadership team has continued to advertise for a permanent registered manager and taken action to promote stability. These interim arrangements and changes have resulted in a small number of foster carers and a minority of staff voicing concerns about the inconsistency of the manager role and the impact this has on the service.

Managers are successfully supporting many areas of improvement and development. These include the timely completion of foster carer annual reviews and supervision; diversity, stability and permanence within the staff teams and at team manager level; regular reflective staff supervisions and appraisals; and the continuing development of the partnership practice model of care and the staff leadership programme.

Managers and staff are not yet consistently ensuring that they provide the support required by some foster carers. For example, the trust's out-of-hours service operates on behalf of the fostering agency and do not always provide a consistent response to foster carer's out of hours. Managers acknowledge this and have plans in plans to strengthen the effectiveness of the out of hours service. A minority of children experience delays in receiving their passports, and this causes anxiety when they wish to join their foster family on family holidays. Some foster carers raised the

issue of access to financial allowances for children and foster carers is not always being sufficiently transparent or equitable.

Robust panel and foster carer annual review minutes identify areas of strength and recommend actions. However, these recommendations are not always being addressed by staff and managers in a timely manner. As a result, there are some delays in children registering with health professionals, attending health appointments and having up-to-date delegated responsibility agreements and some foster carers are delayed in completing training.

Staff are well supported through a range of systems, including regular supervision sessions, annual appraisals and team meetings. Staff feel valued by their manager and enjoy the training and development opportunities provided.

Managers, staff and foster carers work together with partners, including education and health providers, to ensure that children placed with the agency are safeguarded and have their individual needs met.

Over the last three years, the number of mainstream foster homes and places available to children has reduced. There is a new marketing strategy in place, which is using different approaches to attract mainstream foster carers. This has resulted in a gradual improvement in the recruitment of mainstream foster carers so far this year.

Panel members bring a range of experience of fostering, both personal and professional. The panel chair is suitably experienced, knowledgeable and diverse. The foster panel provides a robust quality assurance function while being sensitive to the applicants attending the panel. Panel members provide feedback to the agency on a regular basis on the quality of reports and the presentation of social workers. Managers keep panel members informed of developments in the agency, and panel members are appraised and attend regular training events. This helps to ensure that panel members keep up to date with changes in practice.

The agency has an experienced agency decision-maker who is social work qualified and provides a clear rationale when approving foster carers. This gives further assurance that foster carers who are recruited have the skills and resilience to care for children and keep them safe. Currently, annual foster carer reviews that do not return to panel are heard by an independent reviewing officer. The person in this role is also acting as an agency decision maker, however, an outcome letter is not being sent out to foster carers from the agency decision maker. Leaders took immediate action to rectify this during the inspection.

The quality assurance report shared with Ofsted did not sufficiently set out how the agency is improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. It also did not fully utilise information gained from consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing social workers to review the quality of the agency and inform actions moving forward.

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, The 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 provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p>the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and</p> <p>the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must take all necessary steps to ensure that there is a consistent and stable manager in post and that they are registered with Ofsted.</p>	31 March 2025
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(b) (3))</p>	30 April 2025
<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>	31 March 2025

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))

In particular, this relates to—

operating an out of hours service that meets the needs of the foster carers;

ensuring children receive their passports in a timely manner;

ensuring access to financial allowances for children and foster carers are transparent and equitable;

ensuring that any recommendations made through the use of monitoring tools are addressed in a timely manner.

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 29, paragraph 13.8).

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: 1267324

Registered provider: Sandwell Children's Trust

Registered provider address: Wellman Building, Dudley Road, Oldbury B69 3DE

Responsible individual: Kathryn Mullinder

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Email address: leighanne_jones@sandwellchildrenstrust.org

Inspectors

Dawn Bennett, Social Care Inspector

Lydia Isaac, Social Care Inspector

Stacie Sharpe, Social Care Inspector

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