

Children Always First Limited

Children Always First Limited

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

This agency is operated by a private company. It provides a full range of fostering services, including long-term fostering, short-term fostering, parent and child, sibling groups and short-break fostering.

The agency works to several therapeutic models and provides children, foster carers and team members with therapeutic support and training.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing placements for 29 children living in 19 households.

The previous registered manager left the agency on 31 December 2024. A new manager started in post on 27 January 2025. At the time of this inspection, they were in the process of submitting their application to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 3 to 7 February 2025

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: 29 November 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

Staff are dedicated to their role in finding the right foster family for the children. They work closely with foster carers to ensure that they have an up-to-date understanding of their skills, experience and training as well as their family make up. They use this information to find the right foster family for the children. The matching process identifies the strengths of any potential family as well as any training or support needed to ensure that they can meet the children's needs.

Children are welcomed into their foster family and the agency. A key strength of this agency is the work carried out by the youth support team. For example, all children have the choice of having a youth worker to spend one-to-one time with them on a regular basis. Children describe using this time in a range of ways and clearly value the relationships they form.

Foster carers support children to take part in a wide range of hobbies, activities and after-school clubs. This is enhanced by activities organised by the youth support team. Youth workers run regular weekday and weekend youth groups, which are well attended and received. They also organise children's activities and family events throughout the year. Children, foster carers and staff all praised a Christmas trip they took part in last year and are already looking forward to the annual summer camping event.

Foster carers and staff support the children to make good, and in some cases, outstanding progress in areas of their lives. For example, all children who are of school age attend education. Foster carers and staff promote the importance of education and celebrate achievements. Supervising social workers and youth workers attend all education meetings, and they advocate alongside foster carers on behalf of the children. Children lead healthy lifestyles. Foster carers work in partnership with health professionals to ensure that children's specific health needs are met.

Children feel listened to and consulted with by their foster carers, youth workers and other staff in the agency. They are supported to successfully move on from their foster family and on into adulthood. Foster carers, staff and the youth support team promote the importance of developing age-appropriate independence with the help of additional activities and enjoyable challenges.

Some young adults remain living with their foster family through 'staying put' arrangements. The agency continues to provide support to those foster families and young adults. For example, the youth support team runs a quarterly support group that promotes ongoing relationships. The agency also pays for the young adults to have a year's membership with a specialist service that provides counselling services, legal and financial advice, and general advice and information. The aim of this initiative is to support the young adults to stay safe and healthy, maintain connections and relationships, and become empowered.

All foster carers are allocated a supervising social worker who provides them with a minimum of monthly supervision. Foster carers can also attend monthly group sessions facilitated by a therapist employed by the agency. An effective out-of-hours service means that foster carers can speak to a supervising social worker at any time of the day, should this be needed. Children and foster carers have positive, professional relationships with all staff employed by the agency.

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

Children feel valued, safe and respected. The positive relationships that they have with their foster families and the agency's staff team are a strong protective factor in reducing future risks.

The management team understands its safeguarding responsibilities. There are systems in place that enable managers to provide strong oversight. This ensures that any emerging concerns are quickly identified and reported to statutory agencies. When there is a shortfall in practice by a foster carer, it is quickly and thoroughly investigated. Foster carers are supported following allegations about practice and during investigations. Where appropriate, a post-allegation review is carried out, and a report is made to the panel and the agency decision-maker. This practice prioritises children's safety and ensures that the ongoing approval status of the foster carers is suitable.

Children, foster families and partnership agencies benefit from professional and supportive relationships with the agency's staff team and therapist. A whole-team approach means that any new or emerging risks for the children are flagged early, and joined-up meetings and planning ensure that the children's safety and well-being are prioritised. The management team and staff team monitor any unplanned endings and reflect on the lessons that can be learned after any breakdown. Placement breakdowns are rare, and the number of breakdowns has continued to reduce since the last inspection.

Staff and foster carers are skilled at supporting children who are struggling emotionally, and this may result in behaviours such as self-harm or going missing from home. Incidents are rare. When action is required, the management team, staff and foster carers take appropriate and effective steps to keep the children safe. They then ensure that plans are put in place to support the children moving forward.

The management team continually monitors and reviews practice. Internal audits are carried out, which are informed by national research and data. Findings are shared with the staff team and used to develop and strengthen practice.

Managers ensure that foster carers, panel members and staff who come to work for the agency, either as permanent staff or as contracted staff, are safely recruited. This helps to ensure that children are not placed at risk through contact with unsuitable adults.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is a new management team in place. Managers have a clear overview of the status of retention, recruitment, assessment, approval and continuing approval of foster carers and the impact this has on the availability of foster homes for children.

Priority is being given to the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Since 2022, there have been no new foster carer approvals, and the year-on-year de-registration of foster carers has not decreased. The management team recognises the recruitment challenges that exist nationally and regionally. A new recruitment and retention strategy has been produced, and there are new initiatives in place moving forward. This includes the direct responsibility for recruitment and assessment of foster carers being carried out in-house by the agency's staff team. These new initiatives are resulting in a gradual increase in enquiries, and new prospective foster carer assessments are underway.

The management team and staff team track concerns, incidents, referrals, foster carer approvals and children's progress. Systems are effective in identifying when the children or foster families require additional support, as well as celebrating when there are achievements and successes.

The staff team and foster carers employ a combination of therapeutic and trauma-informed approaches. The involvement of a qualified clinician in the facilitation of these approaches has recently been reviewed, and a new therapist has been employed. The clinician works directly with all foster carers and the whole staff team through group meetings and focused work. The clinician also attends meetings with external professionals, including teachers and placing social workers. Professionals value these meetings and the insight they give them into the children's needs.

This agency has a skilled and stable team of staff who provide considered, tailored support to the foster carers and children. Foster carers value the support, commitment and dedication of the supervising social workers and youth support team. Managers provide the staff with regular reflective supervision, meetings and appraisals. Staff, panel members and foster carers have access to regular specialised training. This all supports continued professional development.

The panel chair and independent reviewing officers are experienced and ensure that they and panel members provide the agency with professional challenge and independence. The agency decision-maker makes well-informed and clearly evidenced final decisions. Currently, there is not a formal opportunity for these remits to meet with the agency's management team to review and evaluate practice. The fostering independent reviewing officers do not receive feedback from people attending annual approval reviews to inform their future practice. Minutes of panel meetings can be vague and lack the detail of a specific event or practice concern. The new management team acknowledges that gathering feedback from the professionals in these roles will help to further develop the service. A decision has been made that these processes will be the focus of the agency's next internal audit.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the retention and recruitment of foster carers strategy continues to increase the number of approved foster carers. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that fostering independent reviewing officers, panel members and the agency decision-maker are clear about their roles, responsibilities and function in the operation of the agency. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues considered in making a recommendation. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 30, paragraph 14.7)

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

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Inspector

Dawn Bennett, Social Care Inspector

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