

The Together Trust Fostering Service

The Together Trust

The Together Trust Centre, Schools Hill, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 1JE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is part of a larger registered charity which also provides residential care, education services, community support and consultancy services.

The agency registered with Ofsted on 3 November 2003.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2017.

At the time of this inspection, there were 44 children placed with the agency and 35 approved fostering households.

The agency provides short-term, long-term, permanent and respite placements. It can also provide short breaks for disabled children, and parent and child placements.

Inspection dates: 24 and 28 October 2022

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: 4 February 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Local authority social workers and commissioners speak highly about the agency and their foster carers. They say that they provide stable and nurturing homes for children. As a result, nearly 60% of children have been with their foster carers for over a year and over a third of children have been with the same carers for over three years. This provides children with stable home lives from which they make progress in all areas of their lives.

Children develop a sense of permanence with their foster carers. Many children choose to continue living with their carers after they turn 18. Alternatively, children who choose to live independently are fully supported to develop the skills that they will need to do successfully.

Overall, children develop positive and trusting relationships with their foster carers. When children are unable to remain living with their foster carers, the agency provides additional support to ensure that this does not result in a sudden move. One commissioner describes the lengths that the manager and supervising social worker have gone to as 'a breath of fresh air'.

Inspectors received overwhelmingly positive feedback from foster carers who feel valued and supported. Foster carers attribute the length of time that they have been fostering to the ethos of the agency, describing it as being 'like a family'.

Alongside the manager and supervising social workers, foster carers benefit from the support offered by the agency's therapist. This support encourages foster carers to reflect on the care that they have offered to children and make any identified adjustments.

Foster carers have the skills to quickly establish relationships with children. Detailed planning is carried out and thoughtful consideration is given to appropriately matching children's needs with the specific strengths of foster carers. As a result, children quickly settle into their new homes.

The agency provides and encourages participation in organised children's events and holidays. Equally, children are encouraged by their foster carers to develop individual hobbies and interests.

The manager has established strong working relationships with other agencies. They work effectively together to meet the needs of children. In addition, foster carers act as advocates for children. Foster carers value children's views and encourage them to access additional support.. However, foster carers do not have access to up-to-date health information for children, such as children's annual health assessments. As a result, a recommendation made at the last inspection has not been met.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of training that supports them in caring for children. However, some foster carers have not completed mandatory and/or refresher training. As a result, a requirement made at the last inspection has not been met.

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

Children's risks are understood well by foster carers and the agency. Foster carers provide children with the advice and support that the children need to make safer choices. Foster carers respond appropriately to any incidents of children going missing from home. As a result, a recommendation made at the last inspection has been met. However, not all risk assessments have been updated to reflect the current risks faced by children.

Children are provided with consistent and appropriate boundaries that help them to establish healthy routines and appropriate behaviours. Foster carers have helped some children to develop self-awareness of their emotional responses and apply the strategies that foster carers advise.

Foster carers have access to 24-hour support via the agency's out-of-hours service. They report that this service is consistently reliable and provided by supervising social workers who know and understand the children. This ensures that timely support and advice are given to children and their carers. Overall, foster carers make appropriate use of this service. However, there have been occasions when foster carers did not seek this support when a child returned under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol and they did not seek medical advice. This has the potential to leave a child at increased risk.

When concerns increase about children's safety, the manager ensures that they are shared with appropriate agencies and plans are drawn up to reduce those concerns.

Allegations made against foster carers are appropriately reported and investigated. There are strong links established with the local authority designated officers.

On occasions, foster carers have needed to physically restrain children. This is only done to protect children or others from harm and when strategies to de-escalate have not been effective. Foster carers appropriately inform the agency of any physical interventions, and they in turn notify the local authority.

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

The manager and supervising social workers have good insight and knowledge of children and their carers. The manager is supported in the role by an enthusiastic and committed staff team that provides a high level of support to the foster carers.

Staff morale is high, and they speak very positively about the manager and senior managers. Staff receive both formal and informal support from the manager and the senior manager. This level of support is very much valued by the staff.

There is strong and effective partnership working between the manager and other agencies. Commissioners speak highly of the agency, especially the manager, who takes a child-centred and collaborative approach to the placement of children. The commissioner said, 'The agency recognises the benefits of keeping children local and the stability this brings for children.'

The manager understands the plans for children. However, when placements are not successful, and children need to move from their foster carers, there is no written evaluation or analysis of significant factors contributing to placement breakdown. As a result, there are missed opportunities to prevent reoccurrence and improve placement stability.

The manager is aware that some foster carers have not completed mandatory and/or refresher training. She has generated some ideas of how this might be addressed, but there is no formal, effective and reviewable plan as to how this will be achieved.

Not all recommendations made at the last inspection have been met. For example, the agency is not yet in possession of all documents and plans relating to children's care, and the agency has not sought information pertaining to children's annual healthcare assessments. Also, managers have not yet established a means of recording children's progress.

Foster carers undergo regular reviews via a reviewing officer. Overall, these reviews note the areas that may need addressing in the forthcoming review period. However, recommendations lack clarity and timescales. For example, some reviews note that training needs to be completed by foster carers but they do not state whether this is mandatory or additional training and what the expected timescales are for completion.

Foster carers benefit from regular, formal supervision from supervising social workers. However, not all supervision records provide sufficient detail of expected timescales for foster carers to complete actions, such as mandatory training and attendance at support groups, as laid out in foster care agreements.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person 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>This relates to ensuring that foster carers complete the mandatory training.</p>	28 February 2023
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for— improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))</p> <p>This relates to developing a clear overview of training completed by foster carers. This must be an effective plan to ensure that foster carers complete necessary training and adhere to foster care agreements with regards to attending support groups.</p>	28 February 2023
<p>The fostering provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child—</p> <p>is provided with guidance, support and advice on health, personal care and health promotion issues as appropriate to the child’s needs and wishes. (Regulation 15 (1) (2)(d))</p> <p>This relates to the agency obtaining children’s healthcare information, disseminating this information to foster carers and acting on this information as necessary.</p>	31 December 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service develops information systems to provide them with a reliable overview of children's progress and outcomes, including in education, health and emotional well-being. This information will help the foster service to evaluate the impact it is having on children's lives. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The registered person should provide written analysis and evaluation of placement breakdowns to improve the service offered to children and prevent reoccurrence. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that reviews of foster carers' suitability address any identified shortfalls and that there are clear timescales set for improvements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.8)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' supervision sessions are clear with regards to timescales in meeting improvements identified. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service obtains an up-to-date delegated authority, a care and placement plan, a pathway plan, an education, health and care plan, and a personal education plan for each child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.8)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are provided with up-to-date written advice regarding children's safety and welfare and how any identified risks are to be responded to. The registered person should ensure that foster carers seek timely advice from the fostering agency should there be concerns regarding a child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.2)

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: SC031288

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Inspectors

Pauline Yates, Social Care Inspector
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