

Children First Fostering Agency

Children First Fostering Agency Limited 03894588

3 Lords Court, Cricketers Way, Basildon, Essex SS13 1SS

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Children First Fostering Agency provides support to 54 children in the Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and London areas. The agency has 38 foster households. The fostering agency is able to provide bridging, respite, short-term, long-term, permanent, and parent and child placements. The fostering agency has contracts with a range of local authorities.

This independent fostering agency is part of the National Fostering Group (NFG) group.

The suitably qualified and experienced manager registered in March 2018.

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: 21 to 24 February 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 8 January 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

This agency makes a significant positive difference for the children it looks after. Each child is meticulously matched with a foster family that can meet their particular needs. As a result, the number of children with unplanned endings is low. The vast majority of children are flourishing. They grow and develop as valued members of the fostering family with a sense of permanence and belonging. The children describe feeling nurtured, treasured and loved. One child said, 'My foster carer is like my mum, she is my actual family.'

Inclusivity is embedded in the agency's practice. Children with additional needs are very well supported by their foster carers. One foster family has designed a library of symbol books on topics such as wearing a mask, specifically to help their children understand the world around them, social behaviours and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.

All foster families have personalised welcome books which describe their family. Whenever possible, introductory meetings take place. Regular visits and video calls helped one foster carer to quickly establish trust with a young parent. This young parent said, 'The foster carer provides the best support that I've ever had.' The placing social worker said that this good-quality support has enabled the parent to demonstrate good parenting ability. As a result, the care plan has changed. The social worker said, 'This was something that we never thought would happen.'

The carers recognise the importance of, and creatively promote, the children's relationships with their families and friends. For example, one carer helps their child to make a weekly video for their birth parent. Another carer, who has looked after their children since they were babies, sensitively helps the children each Mother's Day to celebrate their deceased mother's life and mark her passing.

All school-age children are in education and have the help and support that they need. The agency encourages varied learning opportunities from an early age, with fun activities such as art and crafts, bingo card word search and joining in the national '500 Words' creative writing event. World Book Day continued despite the pandemic, with a virtual Mad Hatter's tea party dress-up event. The children progress well and many enjoy high levels of educational attainment. The foster carers encourage children to have goals and aspirations for their future. One placing authority worker said that their child's 'passion and drive for a better future, life achievements and ability to have such great articulation' came from their foster carer.

The agency provides an impressive education offer for children who are fostered and birth children. Foster families are provided with good-quality guidance on current education frameworks which helps them to navigate education pathways and challenges. All children have access to a variety of subscribed online resources.

During the pandemic, the agency provided links to helpful learning websites. Some of these resources are available in a variety of languages and formats, promoting greater accessibility for children with additional needs or whose first language is not English. The agency has provided training for carers on accessing these resources to ensure that no child misses out.

The children are encouraged to pursue their individual interests, such as hockey, scuba diving, music and football. They are supported to take up part-time jobs and develop entrepreneurial spirit. For example, one child set up a car cleaning business. The agency offers children opportunities to move outside their comfort zone and experience new things. The children are able to complete all levels of the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, funded by the agency. They have been enabled to join the British Explorers Society trips organised in partnership with National Geographic. The children are supported to present a personal statement and fundraise for the trip. These are skills which will stand them in good stead for job or university applications. Successful applicants from this agency have previously travelled to the Amazon, and the applicant this year is going to the Yukon.

The agency has excellent support systems for children and foster carers, including practical support and an impressive therapeutic offer for carers. Through training in therapeutic parenting, and the support and guidance of agency social workers, the secure base therapeutic model of care permeates the agency. The foster carers have a strong understanding of attachment and the importance for children of a sense of their life story and where they come from. One child said, 'She [the foster carer] helps me navigate my past and helps me plan my future. She knows me better than I know myself.'

The children and their carers described family bonding experiences between birth and foster children, such as becoming gym training partners and cooking together. The attachments developed between the children and their foster families means that in some households young people move seamlessly between university and home, replicating many non-fostering households throughout the country. Some children continue to receive support long after they have grown up and left home.

The children, staff and partner professionals hold the foster carers in high regard. They described carers who consistently show great passion, empathy and child-centred practice. The foster carers talk about the children with pride and love. One foster carer said, 'They [the children] are my family and will be part of my life forever.'

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

The agency staff and foster carers understand their pivotal roles in ensuring that children are kept safe. Foster carers undertake training in safeguarding children, including in the wider safeguarding agenda such as exploitation and preventing radicalisation. The foster carers are alert to and understand their important role in identifying and minimising any emerging risks.

The agency works well in partnership with other agencies to share information about risk to promote the children's safety and well-being. This has helped children's social workers and other agencies to better understand risks to particular children.

The foster carers recognise that elements of risk are essential for children to grow and develop. They support the children to take age and developmentally appropriate risks. Because of the support of their foster carers, the children make significant progress in understanding personal safety. One child said, 'My foster carers are amazing. I reckon if I did not go to live with them then I would be going off the rails.'

Most of the children live in settled fostering family homes and rarely go missing. The vast majority of incidents recorded as children going missing are older children testing boundaries through late return. However, when children have gone missing, foster carers take appropriate action and welcome the children home. One child said, 'I could not go missing again because she [the foster carer] was devastated and in tears when I came back. It made me feel like I was loved.'

The strong presence of the agency social workers and the positive relationships built with the children mean that the children feel able to raise any concerns. One distressed child contacted the agency for help when they felt that their placing authority was not listening to them. They said that contacting the agency 'was the first time I felt listened to'.

The agency provides a robust response to any concerns raised in respect of foster carers. Any safeguarding concerns are shared with safeguarding partner professionals. The agency undertakes internal standards of care reviews when potential concerns are identified. The agency returns all carers who have been subject to a concern, allegation or complaint to the fostering panel for a special review. This good use of panel provides further levels of transparent scrutiny. This has enabled the agency to better identify any patterns and trends with the potential to affect the longer-term suitability of foster carers. This ensures that there is clear documentation of the concerns should the carer apply to foster in the future. This promotes the safety of all children who are looked after.

Agency staff ensure that foster carers' houses are clean, safe and suitable for fostering. While there is no information to suggest that a child was placed at risk of harm, one pet risk assessment did not provide sufficient contextual consideration of potential risk.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

This is a well-managed agency with effective and purposeful leadership. The manager has successfully driven significant improvement and overseen an organisational culture change of increased monitoring, challenge and accountability.

The staff are passionate about what they do and ensure the foster carers and all the children feel respected and valued. Foster carers are well prepared for the initial fostering task through effective pre- and post-approval induction training. They are helped to develop greater understanding of children's emotional needs through good-quality training in therapeutic parenting. The agency social workers and therapists help foster carers integrate the therapeutic model into their care of the children.

The foster carers consistently hold the agency social workers in very high regard. One carer said, 'I don't know what I would have done without her [the agency social worker], she's been amazing.' The agency invests in the carers' well-being. The creativity of the agency staff means that this has not been unduly diluted during the pandemic. Carer support groups continued, with virtual yoga, pamper and well-being sessions. The agency celebrates a nominated carer of the month. Carer appreciation days were held, when staff personally delivered a box of chocolates to each carer, and the annual foster carer's consultation was held virtually, with pizzas delivered to the carers. On the occasions when carers have needed extra support, the agency has stepped up and provided tailored wraparound practical support, legal guidance and individual therapy sessions. Foster carers attribute their confidence and success to the agency, which they said in difficult times 'could not have done more'.

The agency has helped the carers to rise to the challenge of supporting the children through the pandemic. Regular newsletters, virtual activities and creative days out, such as to the socially distanced drive-in cinema, have ensured that carers do not feel isolated.

The agency advocates effectively for the children in its care and has requested independent advocates when appropriate. The trusted relationships that children have with agency workers mean that they are confident to approach the agency directly for support and guidance. In one case, this resulted in the children being reunited with the carer who had previously fostered them for eight years, and who they described as their mother.

The agency has a wide range of systems to consult with the children, including activity days, surveys, agency social work visits and the children's council. As a result, the children feel consulted and valued. One child, when asked about what the agency does best, said, 'They set your life out for the better. Since I came to the agency, my life is the best that it has ever been.'

The manager has high standards and expectations of staff and carers, and high aspirations for the children. There is an embedded culture of reflective practice and learning lessons from any incidents or standards of care investigations. As a result, action is taken to improve practice. However, the manager's supervision is business and target-focused. Therefore, some opportunities to reflect on agency practice and current research are potentially missed.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers have guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities, including that avoidable hazards are removed as is consistent with a family home. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 10.3)
- The registered person should ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional reflective supervision for the agency's registered manager. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.3)

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: SC034253

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