

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 was registered by Ofsted on 2 July 2003 and became a partner agency in the National Fostering Group (NFG) in 2009. The premises are based in Basildon, Essex. The agency's foster carers are based across a large geographical area that includes London, Essex, Kent, Hertfordshire, Bedford and Norfolk. The current manager was registered with Ofsted in January 2023.

The agency offers a range of placements including emergency, parent and child, respite, bridging and short- and long-term/permanent placements for either individual children or sibling groups.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had 48 approved fostering households, and 49 children were living with its approved foster carers.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 January 2025

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: 21 February 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children are exceptionally well supported and cared for by their foster carers, and as a result, their life chances and outcomes are significantly improved. The foster carers offer care of a very high quality. One local authority social worker said, 'They are exceptional; the best foster parents I've met and a credit to Children First.' Another said, 'They have done more than most parents, let alone foster parents.'

Children become part of the foster carers' families and have positive and warm relationships that contribute to their sense of belonging. They go on family holidays and take part in family activities, and some children, by choice, call their carers 'mum and dad'. One carer said, 'I forget he is a foster child at times.' Children are extremely happy and settled in their foster homes, and one child said, 'It's bang on'.

The support available to improve children's educational outcomes is exceptional and ensures that children make as much progress as they can. A dedicated team within NFG tracks all the children and provides a variety of interventions to support foster carers and children with their education. Some children attend college and aspire to go to university, while others follow a more vocational or sports-led path. Foster carers are excellent advocates for children, and they, along with the supervising social worker, always attend meetings at school.

The NFG clinical team provides a prompt response to any referrals for therapeutic support, in addition to regular meetings with the social work team to discuss children's needs. This excellent resource is pivotal in improving children's emotional well-being as well as supporting foster carers.

Participation and consultation are areas of significant strength. In addition to the children and young people's council, all children are encouraged to complete a survey, which was developed with the input of children so that it is relevant to them. The results are closely analysed, and any concerns and suggestions are acted on.

There is a full calendar of events and activities for children that give them the opportunity to have fun but also meet up with other fostered children. Two innovative projects, The Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the British Exploring Society scheme, provide children with amazing opportunities to benefit from experiences they would not normally have, as well as having a highly positive impact on their self-esteem, confidence, life skills and emotional well-being.

There is a real focus on equality, diversity and inclusivity which permeates throughout the agency. Children are encouraged to embrace this by becoming involved through activities, cooking, competitions and by sharing their experiences and information about their culture, religion or other aspects of difference.

Matching is very well considered. The referral team makes every effort to get as much information as possible from local authorities, which is fully shared with foster carers. Carers do not feel pressured to take a child, and they are fully involved in the decision-making. Children are given welcome packs and welcome books so they know about the foster family before they move in, which helps them settle and feel wanted.

Placement stability is very good, and over 75% of children have lived with their foster carers for over a year, with many having stayed much longer. Five young people are currently living with foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements. When unplanned endings occur, this is usually when unknown and significant information about a child's needs comes to light rather than as a result of poor matching. This enables children to continue to feel safe and secure. Stability meetings are always held at an early stage if the placement appears to be at risk of disruption, to see what further support can be given to enable it to continue.

The agency plays a significant role in supporting foster carers to help children to achieve such positive outcomes. In addition to regular reflective supervisory visits, there are support groups in a number of locations and online, including a male carers' support group, training, newsletters, social events and direct work to support carers, either by supporting the children or directly supporting the carer.

Applicants feel welcomed when they contact the agency. Although assessments of carers are usually completed by the national assessment team, there is local involvement and accountability. The rigorous and timely preparation and assessment of foster carers ensures, as far as possible, that only people who have the capacity to meet children's needs well are approved. Post-approval information is clear, and the newly approved carers are welcomed to the agency with a bouquet, lunch and welcome pack to celebrate the start of their journey.

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

Safeguarding children from harm is given a high priority, and the agency demonstrates exceptionally strong practice in this regard. Children's vulnerabilities are known and understood very well, and this knowledge informs comprehensive risk assessments that are reviewed in line with emerging risks. These provide foster carers with detailed and clear guidance about how to keep the children as safe as possible. Children now have a child-friendly version of their safer care plan, which helps them have a better understanding of the worries and the actions that are being taken to protect them.

Foster carers are very clear about their safeguarding responsibilities and have access to robust policies and procedures that provide clear guidance about what to do if they are concerned. The comprehensive and accessible training programme includes all aspects of safeguarding and behaviour management. This, coupled with the excellent support they receive, ensures that carers develop the skills, knowledge and

confidence they need to manage risks and keep children safe from harm. In addition, carers have access to a responsive out-of-hours service for further support and guidance.

There is a prompt and effective response to all situations of harm. The agency communicates swiftly with the relevant local authority and cooperates fully with multi-agency meetings. One local authority social worker commented, in relation to a recent incident, 'I could not have wished for a better response.' Carers and children are well supported, and this can include direct support from the clinical team.

Children said they feel safe and that they would talk to their foster carers about any worries. Regular contact with the supervising social worker and the team support worker ensures that they develop positive and trusting relationships with additional avenues of support.

The monitoring and oversight of safeguarding incidents are exceptionally strong. This includes the head of quality and safeguarding for the NFG, the agency decision-maker and the registered manager. Weekly safeguarding and placement meetings in the agency, high-risk surgeries and regular reporting to the NFG safeguarding board provide additional layers of scrutiny as well as support, opportunities for reflection and additional strategies to safely manage situations of risk.

Staff and foster carers are recruited safely, and all the appropriate checks are undertaken. Two thorough and well-documented unannounced visits are undertaken each year to foster carers' homes, and the health and safety assessments have been updated to ensure that the home environment is safe for children.

Any allegations or complaints against carers are investigated thoroughly in consultation with the local authority designated officer. Foster carers are supported if allegations are made against them, and the managing allegations policy has been thoroughly reviewed and amended in response to foster carers' concerns about the process.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The agency is very well led and managed by an experienced registered manager who has very high standards and is passionate about providing the best possible outcomes for children. She is very well supported by the responsible individual, who is readily available and has a good understanding of the agency as well as the wider group. Despite the agency receiving an outstanding judgement at the last inspection, the manager has continued to drive improvement, develop staff and improve compliance.

Staff are very positive about working for the agency and share the manager's enthusiasm and passion to provide the best service possible. They feel very well supported by their colleagues and by both the team manager and registered manager, who are always available to give advice and guidance. The administrative team is very much a part of the agency, and staff in that team are described as very

helpful and responsive. Everyone is said to work together well and help each other out when needed, which contributes to the 'family feel'.

Staff receive regular reflective supervision as well as access to practice surgeries and good and extensive training opportunities. Training in the agency is reported by staff to be 'second to none'. Staff say that they are a strong and cohesive team, and this is reinforced through regular team meetings, weekly safeguarding and practice meetings as well as other opportunities.

Arrangements for monitoring are excellent. The registered manager has systems for tracking all significant incidents, as well as children's progress and outcomes. These tracking mechanisms feed into very detailed, informative reports. The manager knows the children, the foster carers and the service extremely well and uses her management information systems as well as feedback from foster carers and children to enable improvement and develop the service further.

Partnership working is highly effective, and local authorities speak very positively about the agency. Examples of comments from partners include, 'the agency is very child-focused and also offers an extremely high level of support to the carers,' and 'the registered manager is exceptional'.

The agency is keen to recruit more foster carers in order to meet the needs of children requiring a foster placement. The locally based carer recruitment officer is extremely passionate about her role and very committed to increasing the number of foster carers while recognising that retention of current foster carers is also vital. Carer engagement is excellent, with many opportunities to socialise and take part in activities such as pamper sessions and wreath making. This helps carers feel valued for the important and demanding role they have.

Foster carer training is excellent. One carer commented, 'The high calibre training is often bespoke to meet the needs of the child we have placed. The choice of training available "drives" us to want to educate ourselves more.'

Foster carers receive regular supervisory visits that are of a good standard and well recorded. These consider the children's as well as the foster carers' developmental needs. The visits are supportive but also appropriately challenging and are enhanced by regular 'catch-up' phone calls.

Foster carers are extremely positive about this agency. Comments include, 'our supervising social worker is amazing, incredibly supportive,' and 'to have the incredible support from this agency has made our experience fulfilling, reassuring, rewarding and it has a wonderful family feel to it'.

Foster carers are reviewed annually, and there are strong and effective systems that ensure these reviews are always in time. Reviews are carried out by a reviewing social worker independent of the agency. Every three years, or sooner if necessary, reviews are presented to the fostering panel. This provides an additional layer of

oversight and is a further protection to ensure that the ongoing suitability of carers is rigorously considered.

The fostering panel comprises members with a variety of personal and professional experience of fostering and relevant skills and knowledge that enable it to ask relevant questions and make appropriate recommendations about foster carers' suitability and ongoing approval. It is chaired very effectively by an experienced panel chair who maintains an independent yet supportive relationship with the agency. The panel administration is excellent, and timely good-quality minutes enable the agency decision-maker to make an informed and timely decision. Agency decision-making is a real strength. The very detailed, thoughtful and documented decisions make it very clear that the role is taken extremely seriously.

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

Registered provider: Children First Fostering Agency Limited 03894588

Registered provider address: Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: Neil McCarthy

Registered manager: Joanne Conlon

Telephone number: 01268 567330

Email address: children-first@cffa.co.uk

Inspector

Rosemary Chapman, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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