

The Together Trust Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

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

The fostering service offers a range of placements including: emergency; short and long term; and: specific placements for children and young people with physical disabilities and learning difficulties; parent and child placements; and, respite for parents and carers.

Currently there are 83 fostered children and young people of all ages, including those on continuing care beyond 18 years of age.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

This service is extremely effective in making and sustaining long term, sibling placements. This includes ensuring carers receive excellent training, supervision and support. An outstanding range of specialist services are also provided in a timely manner to meet highly complex needs. Consequently, given their starting points, children and young people are making exceptional progress in all aspects of their welfare and development. Significant examples include, increased life expectancy for children and young people with profound health needs and dramatically improved speech.

Children and young people are extremely happy, settled, feel safe in their current placements and enjoy a strong sense of belonging. They benefit from excellent relationships with all members of the fostering family and therefore experience a strong sense of belonging. This develops their positive self-view and significantly increases their emotional resilience.

This service is exceptionally well managed by an individual with a proven ability to

continually drive improvement. Moreover, children and young people, their carers and the fostering team's opinions are highly influential in this process.

There are robust and highly effective monitoring systems in place. Consequently, no breaches of regulation are identified and no recommendations made.

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

A large majority of children and young people benefit from exceptionally long term placements. Moreover, a quarter is enjoying the stability of the same placement for five to 11 years. Eighty eight per cent live with their siblings. Consequently, they feel very happy, settled and valued as an important member of the fostering family. In fact, a number of young people have chosen to change their surnames to that of their carers. Comments from children include: 'I like my carer and I feel safe here. He is a good cook. He takes me to different places and helps me to do well at school.', 'I like it here and I have lots of good toys.' 'The carers are nice and I like my bedroom', 'The family I live with are brilliant. We have lots of nice foods here. My favourite is pasta.' 'We did lots of activities in the school holidays.'

Children and young people really enjoy constructive contact with their family and friends in line with any legal directions and their own personal preferences. This enables them to gain a good understanding of their histories and maintain a positive identity.

Children and young people are actively involved in all aspects of their day-to-day lives and their futures. This includes highly complex decisions, such as future placement choice.

Children and young people enjoy very good physical health and emotional well-being. This includes children who were previously significantly malnourished, underweight and with an iron deficiency. One carer said, 'At the start of the placement, my fostered child had sleeping problems and health and hygiene issues. They have overcome them all growing in confidence. They have gained really good A-level results and now employed as a recruitment officer.'

There are currently no children and young people who commit offences or misuse drugs or alcohol. This is exceptional, especially given their life experiences.

School attendance is excellent and they are making exceptional progress, especially given their starting points. Fifty-two per cent of those eligible gained at least five GCSE's at grade C and above. This is markedly higher than the national average. One young person has progressed to top sets in all subjects from previously being academically below average. Other examples include young people who were behind academically gaining excellent GCSE results, achieving with advanced level subjects and being offered university places. Consequently, young people's self-esteem has dramatically increased and they have high aspirations for the future. Examples of

aspirations include, becoming an architect, chef, journalist and social worker. One young person said, 'This service has changed me for the better. I have had help and support in the last five years and now I am on my way to college.'

Children and young people enjoy an outstanding range of stimulating and challenging activities. Individual interests and talents are also actively encouraged and supported. Examples include, dancing, fishing, horse-riding, karate, motor cross, gardening and football. These opportunities demonstrably increase children and young people's confidence and competencies. Moreover, a number are involved in voluntary work and charitable events. This enables them to learn important social skills through team work and compassion for others. Recent examples include a soup kitchen, an orphanage in Morocco, an animal sanctuary and a charity shop. One young person said, 'This service has helped me an awful lot. I have got very far in life and now I help others.'

The free holiday provided by the service to every foster family is always thoroughly enjoyed and positive friendships are made and sustained. One young person said, 'The annual holiday is always really successful. It is a chance to take part in great and challenging activities, for example, a 22 mile bike ride, raft building, archery and orienteering. We learned about team work, gained confidence and made new friends. It was brilliant.'

All children and young people are actively enabled to develop age and ability-appropriate social and independent skills. These prepare them well for the future. Consequently, many have very good budgeting skills, can competently use public transport, plan meals, shop and cook, and do their own laundry and ironing. Some have also gained first aid and food hygiene qualifications.

Thirty three per cent of young people over 18 years have chosen to remain in their current placement until they feel fully prepared to live independently. The others have made the successful transition in full assurance of continued outstanding support from their carers and the wider fostering service. One 22 year old said, 'Everything they did for me was brilliant. I got a lot of support. I enjoyed nutritious meals, they helped with my school work, college and curriculum vitae's and to get in touch with my mum again when I felt ready. I was in the air cadets and the holidays the service provides are really good. I was helped to leave care and still get great support three years on.'

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

Children and young people, their parents when appropriate, and their carers, are actively involved in care planning. Carers are also particularly highly skilled at facilitating complex contact arrangements and building excellent working relationships with families. Moreover, they are strong and highly effective advocates for children and young people. This is especially in respect to ensuring they receive the most appropriate education to maximise their full potentials, thereby widening

their employment choices in the future.

This service is extremely child focussed. Consequently, children and young people have an exceptionally strong and positive affiliation to this organisation. They know their opinions are genuinely central to its continued development. One young person said, 'What they do for young people is absolutely brilliant to make sure we always have our say.' This includes, actively contributing to the recruitment, preparation and reviews of carers. The well-established young people's forums have been involved in an impressive array of activities this year, not least government consultations. The organisers wrote, 'A big thank you. I feel really lucky to be working with people who are going above and beyond to involve young people in this process. Your passion shines through.' A young person wrote of her experiences in the organisation's newsletter saying, 'The trip to London was "fan dabby dozy". I really enjoyed the care enquiry in London. It was a chance to meet lots more young people in care and share our experiences. I have made new friends.'

Other opportunities for ensuring the child's voice includes: ascertaining their views for their own statutory reviews; at carers' annual reviews; during supervisory home visits; and to inform the manager's annual appraisal. Recently the forum met the panel and asked highly-pertinent questions. One young person said, 'I now feel confident that they are competent and it makes me feel safe.' Birth children's views are an integral part of the assessment process and they are invited to all social events.

An on-going and targeted recruitment strategy is in place to ensure an excellent range of foster carers to meet children's unique and highly complex needs. The service has also significantly strengthened its gatekeeping of initial enquiries. This ensures only appropriate applicants are taken forward for assessment. Preparation training is constantly reviewed and revised in the light of carers' feedback.

Excellent panel processes are in place to ensure a rigorous oversight of carers' approval and review. Comprehensive minutes clearly demonstrate full participation in the discussions and that panel exercises its quality assurance function. Panel members confirm significant improvement in the quality of assessment reports presented. They are now much more thorough, reflective and analytical. One member said, 'The quality of assessments are excellent and any comments from panel are always acted upon.' The panel is very well constituted, providing a diversity of relevant skills and experiences. The panel also benefits from an excellent Chair with extensive expertise in safeguarding children and young people.

Carers are very positive about the efficiency and thoroughness of the assessment process, the professionalism of staff and the accuracy of reports. Comments include, 'They were excellent at answering any questions I had. They were honest, supportive and reliable,' and, 'They helped us through every stage, both practically and emotionally. Nothing was too much trouble.' Applicants were also highly satisfied with the panel. One applicant wrote, 'All the members were very well informed and appropriate questions were asked. They understood we were nervous and made us feel welcome. It was professionally handled in a friendly manner.'

This service ensures exceptionally well-matched placements. Another notable strength is the excellent range of specialist services in place to address any initial perceived gaps in skills and knowledge. Examples include a dedicated cultural advisor and a clinical psychologist. Consequently, stability rates are outstanding.

This service provides highly skilled and dedicated support workers who enable children and young people to try out their choice of an excellent range of fun and educational activities, which is continually improving their self-esteem and confidence.

Carers enjoy excellent relationships with the wider fostering team. They also benefit from highly relevant and on-going training to best meet the unique and complex needs of the children and young people they care for. A significant development is the timely receipt of a full annual training programme. This enables carers to take more responsibility for, and better plan, their individual training needs. Carers also confirm high satisfaction with the support provided. Comments include, 'We get loads of support. We cannot fault them at all,' and, 'The support is invaluable and the training is second to none,' and, 'This service should be praised. The support is always forthcoming and is worth its weight in gold.'

Placing authorities are exceptionally complimentary about the quality of service provision. Comments include, 'This agency is brilliant and goes above and beyond to meet children's needs,' 'Thank you for all the love care and support you have provided. This young person was frightened and damaged and is now confident and going to college. This is due to your immense concern and attention to his every need,' and, 'Your dedication, hard work and persistence, high level of care and commitment to these siblings is commendable. Consequently they are now successfully living independently.'

A judge took the trouble to write to this fostering service, being so impressed with the exceptional care provided to a young mother and her baby. She wrote, 'These carers should be congratulated on their care and commitment. They are rare, truly like gold dust.' The young mother said, 'My carers provided me with a role model of how to be a good parent.'

Of the 54 fostering households, 48 carers have successfully completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's certificate in Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (CWDC). A significant number have also secured a recognised National Vocational Qualification or Diploma. Consequently, the service, and ultimately the children and young people, benefit from a high proportion of very experienced and highly competent carers. The dedication to their roles and responsibilities and genuine passion to improving children's and young people's lives is very evident.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling

safe.

Children and young people feel exceptionally happy, safe and secure in their current placements. Consequently, there are currently no incidents of children going missing. This is outstanding given some previous behaviours of young people.

Children and young people have an excellent understanding of countering bullying having been actively involved in publishing leaflets for the fostering service and organising an event. They wrote and performed a drama and poems to poignantly demonstrate the effects of bullying. One young person said, 'We did activities about bullying so it was not boring but a very interesting day. We also had an inspirational and fun day about fire safety and the work of the police.'

Children and young people know how to complain and are actively encouraged and supported to exercise this right. This has included successfully challenging Local Authorities who intended to return young people to in-house provision against their wishes.

The well established and robust recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision processes all have a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. These highly effective processes also ensure a very safe and competent workforce.

All carers and staff are trained in child protection to ensure they respond appropriately to any disclosures. The specific safeguarding course has been carefully scrutinised to ensure it covers all the competencies required by the CWDC standards. There is also an excellent range of more specialist post- approval courses on offer to enable carers to fully understand the impact of abuse and how to appropriately care for and support children and young people to stay safe.

Allegations are sensitively handled and the service ensures highly- effective protection for children and young people. This service is particularly pro-active and works co-operatively with all relevant agencies during investigations. Carers subject to allegations say they are, 'extremely well supported'.

Carers are well trained and competent to provide clear and consistent routines and boundaries. Good behaviour and effort is always positively reinforced, which is having an outstanding impact. For example, children who successfully returned home. Their parents were really impressed with the dramatic positive changes in their children's behaviours which were previously extremely challenging.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **outstanding**.

This service is very well resourced and extremely well supported by highly efficient administrators. Staff say, 'They are brilliant at quality assuring our work and at prompting to ensure we always meet required timescales.'

The comprehensive Statement of Purpose is regularly updated to ensure it always accurately reflects the current staffing structures, the policies and practices of this agency and the excellent range of services available to meet the unique needs of the children and young people and their carers.

A key strength of this service are the rigorous and highly effective monitoring systems in place. The timeliness and quality of assessments and the stability and quality of placements are fully evaluated and the consequent excellent outcomes for children and young people. These comprehensive documents clearly demonstrate continued significant progress in all aspects of their development.

Current research, lessons-learned from complaints and continual feedback from children, young people and their carers are used to inform all future developments.

This service clearly demonstrates an excellent capacity for continual improvement. This is based on its exceptional progress since the last inspection on 26 October 2010. The four requirements and nine recommendations arising from the last inspection have all been satisfactorily addressed. In short, key policies and procedures have been reviewed and revised as necessary and significantly more robust systems and processes have been introduced. This includes ensuring carers receive the information they need to appropriately care for each child prior to placement and that, they complete the required mandatory training in a timely manner. Improved documentation clearly demonstrates stringent matching processes and how any identified gaps can be met.

An effective system is also now in place to ensure all carers receive at least two unannounced visits a year. These are comprehensively reported on, and always include the views of children and young people in placement. Health and safety processes ensure carer's homes are safe and maintained to a high standard. Individualised and regularly updated safe caring policies are understood by all members of the household.

Every children's file is now thoroughly audited every six months so they are all now in excellent order. The children's guide and other key documentation have been produced in a wide range of formats to meet the needs of all the fostered children and young people. Moreover, the organisational structure has much improved. It now provides a career progression for staff and clear roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability. There is also clear evidence of timely and thorough induction programmes for new staff. This has resulted in a renewed enthusiasm, commitment and motivation amongst the team and particularly high morale.

The service has successfully recruited to the central list so it now appropriately reflects the diversity of the communities they serve. Panel files also demonstrate robust recruitment and selection processes ensuring a safe and competent workforce.

There has also been many other significant developments in the last 18 months,

exceptionally well led by a highly experienced and child focussed Registered Manager. Staff say, 'The manager has sensitively driven lots of improvements and demonstrates excellent leadership and vision,' and, 'There have been significant developments across the fostering service as a whole but they have been introduced gently and sensitively. There is a genuine willingness to change.'

The annual report is thorough and insightful and any perceived shortfalls are used to drive continuous improvement. Recent significant examples include: improved panel processes to always ensure timely, appropriate and child centred recommendations; a new appraisal format to clearly identify and fully explore both the needs of the panel and the individual members own personal development; the introduction of highly individualised outcome trackers for all fostered children; and, the establishment of a male support group and 'reflective practice support groups' for carers to explore effective strategies. A new format is also in place to ascertain the views of children and young people and their carers to inform the imminent annual staff appraisals.

Staff benefit from realistic workloads so carers are exceptionally well supported. Carers also know they are genuinely valued as an integral part of the wider fostering team, highly influential in care planning and in the continued development of the service. Consequently, motivation and commitment is high. Currently, they are actively involved in developing their own foster-carer charter.

All the staff are qualified social workers. They are very happy with the new management structure and feel extremely well supported and fully involved in service development. Staff are supported by monthly team meetings with open and honest debates; regular, high quality supervision; and, excellent on-going training opportunities which promote individual professional development. They also benefit from monthly case consultations with the clinical psychologist which is another significant new development. This ensures all the team are kept fully up -to -date with the needs of all the children and young people and their carers and can, therefore, offer appropriate and consistent advice and support, including out of hours when needed.

Comments from staff include, 'The management are open to developments. We feel heard and we are given more autonomy', 'The manager recognises our individual skills and interests and will put us forward for external courses. His door is always open to everybody' and, 'We never have to wait for advice. There is a clear rota in place for seniors to deputise in the manager's absence. It is a robust system'.

This service is exceptionally good at keeping relevant professionals informed of significant events. These show the service works very effectively with a wide range of relevant agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of fostered children and young people.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.