

# 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 Together Trust Fostering Service is part of a larger registered charity which also provides residential care, education services, community support and consultancy services.

The agency was registered with Ofsted on 3 November 2003. It has offices in Cheadle and Preston.

The registered manager has been registered with Ofsted since 7 May 2017.

At the time of this inspection, there were 51 children placed with the agency and 33 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:** 4 to 8 February 2019

**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 July 2015

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children live in stable placements and receive a high quality of care that improves their lives. Foster carers have the warmth, expertise and resilience to provide vulnerable children with safe and nurturing homes.
- Children enjoy very positive relationships with their foster carers and have a strong sense of belonging.
- Thorough and careful assessments match children with foster carers who have the right skills, personal qualities and experience to meet their individual needs. Targeted and effective support is available when children and foster carers are struggling.
- The agency and foster carers have high aspirations for every child in their care. They work tirelessly with partner agencies to make sure that children get the best possible support and achieve improved education and health outcomes.
- Children feel safe and are protected from harm. Their concerns are taken seriously. Foster carers have the skills to recognise any signs that could indicate that a child may be at risk of harm.
- The agency takes decisive action when it has concerns about children's safety. Social workers and foster carers ensure that their concerns are taken seriously, and that appropriate action is taken by safeguarding agencies to protect children.
- The leadership and management of the agency are inspirational, efficient and effective.
- Leaders and managers know the strengths of the agency well and make improvements. The development of a therapeutic practice model is improving foster carers' ability to help children with complex needs and is having a positive impact on children's experiences.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Foster carers complete the mandatory training and are trained in appropriate safer-care practice, including: skills to care for children who have been abused; dealing with the disclosure of abuse; understanding the risks of, and responding to, sexually harmful behaviour; understanding the risks of child sexual and criminal exploitation and county lines.
- The agency and foster carers take appropriate action to find children who are missing, including making sure that when there is a concern for the child's welfare, a risk management meeting is held with the responsible authority and safeguarding agencies to consider the reasons for the child going missing and what action should be taken to prevent them going missing in the future.
- Foster carers' supervision records and annual review reports show that any issues about foster carers' practice have been discussed and addressed.

- The agency develops information systems to provide it with a reliable overview of foster carers' training and children's progress and outcomes.
- The agency decision maker should list the materials considered in reaching their decision and identifies their reasons for their decision.

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

### Statutory requirement

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) 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 making sure that foster carers complete the mandatory training and are trained in appropriate safer-care practice, including: skills to care for children who have been abused; dealing with the disclosure of abuse; understanding the risks of, and responding to, sexually harmful behaviour; understanding the risks of child sexual and criminal exploitation and county lines.</p>	31/03/2019

### Recommendations

- Ensure that the fostering service and foster carers take appropriate action to find children who are missing, including working alongside the police where appropriate. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 5.5)
- Ensure that when children go missing the fostering service follows the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocols. The fostering service should also comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child's care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 5.7)

In particular, the fostering service makes sure that when there is a concern for the child's welfare, a risk management meeting is held with the responsible authority and safeguarding agencies to consider the reasons for the child going missing and what action should be taken to prevent them going missing in the future. Also, the fostering service makes sure that every child's plan sets out what foster carers should do when a child goes missing, what they are to do to encourage the child to return home, and how they are to welcome and check on the child's welfare when they come home.

- Ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow

the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 13.8)

In particular, ensure that any issues about the foster carers' practice are included and evaluated in the supervising social worker's review report, and that the reports accurately reflect the carers' training achievements.

- Ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)

This relates to making sure that records of foster carers' supervision identify any issues about foster carers' practice and clearly show how the issues have been addressed with the foster carers and evaluate improvements.

- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 25.1)

In particular, ensure that the fostering service develops information systems to provide it with a reliable overview of foster carers' training and 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.

- Ensure that the fostering service works with the responsible authority to ensure effective integration of information held in the agency's case files and those of the responsible authority. ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 26.8)

In particular, ensure that the fostering service obtains for each child an up-to-date delegated authority, a care and placement plan, a pathway plan, an education and healthcare plan and a personal education plan.

- Ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching their decision; identifies the key arguments; considers whether they agree with the process and approach of the panel and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel has properly addressed the arguments; makes it clear if they have had sight of any additional information; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. ('Volume 4: Fostering Services, statutory guidance', paragraph 5.40)

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children live in nurturing, safe and stimulating homes. They enjoy loving, reliable and trusting relationships with their foster carers. They develop a strong sense of belonging and very much feel part of the family. A child said, 'My foster carers have been amazing and given me the childhood I never had. They are kind, caring and treat me like their actual son, as part of their family.'

The agency's professional practice makes sure that foster carers receive the support and guidance that they need to make a difference in children's lives. Foster carers have the skills, knowledge, expertise, resilience, personal qualities, self-awareness and dedication to provide care for vulnerable children.

Children receive a high standard of care and support that is tailored to meet their personal needs and circumstances. Each child is seen and treated as an individual. Foster carers recognise the different and competing needs of brothers and/or sisters and make sure that each child has the help that they need.

Children, including those with complex and challenging needs, make significant progress in every aspect of their lives. A social worker said that her child is 'extremely happy in placement, feels very much part of the family, has all she needs and more, is supported with education, friendships and contact with her family. She is excelling in school, has positive contact with family and is emotionally well.'

The agency matches children successfully with foster carers who can meet the child's assessed needs. Decisions are made collectively by foster carers and supervising social workers. The agency always makes sure that it obtains as much information as possible about children from local authorities before making the decision for a child to move to live with a foster carer.

The agency makes sure that children get as much information as possible about their new fostering family. Usually, children have the chance to get to know their foster carers, visit their home several times and stay overnight before they move in. This helps children to settle and eases any concerns or worries that they may have. A social worker said, 'Through their experience, care, warmth, empathy and understanding, the foster carers ensured what could have been a very traumatic experience for a very vulnerable young man was significantly reduced. They had him laughing and smiling after it had looked like his world had ended only 30 minutes previously.'

Children live in stable and permanent placements: 85% of children have lived with their carers for over a year, with 74% of those children having been in placement for over two years, and a further 46% for over five years.

The agency identifies quickly when foster carers and children are struggling. It acts quickly to support the children and the foster carers, therefore reducing the risk of the placement ending in an unplanned way. The agency uses respite placements, support workers and therapists in a targeted way to deal with challenging situations and make decisions in the best interests of children. This invaluable support has developed foster carers' understanding of children's needs, how best to support individual children when they are in crisis, and build positive relationships, and has enabled brothers and/or sisters to continue to live together.

The agency and foster carers encourage and support children to express their views and to influence the decisions affecting their lives. Children feel valued and know that their views count. Foster carers are strong advocates for children and help them to have their say. This includes recognising when children show their wishes and feelings non-verbally or through their behaviour. Supervising social workers and support workers see children regularly to find out about their placement. This gives children the chance to have a say about what is important to them in their day-to-day lives or if they have any worries. Children contribute to foster carers' annual reviews and the performance reviews of supervising social workers.

The agency and foster carers have very high aspirations for the children in their care. They work tirelessly to encourage and improve children's learning and development. They work effectively with teachers and social workers to support children's education.

Children have opportunities to build their social skills, their confidence and to develop their talents and interests. Foster carers make sure that children enjoy a wide range of fun social, educational and leisure activities in the local community.

The agency and foster carers work exceedingly hard to prepare children for adult life. They make sure that children continue to receive the best support possible to maximise their opportunities to succeed when they leave school. For example, foster carers make every effort to make sure that children have the practical life skills, resilience and support that they need for the future. A social worker said, 'The child's confidence and independence skills have improved to a level that he can go out and uses public transport; he can now go shopping independently and visit his brother. He is moving to an adult placement when he turns 18, and his levels of independence have been significantly enhanced.'

Children enjoy much improved health and emotional well-being outcomes. They have access to primary and specialist healthcare services that meet their individual health needs. Collaborative work with health colleagues means that children can access the necessary services with as little disruption to their lives as is possible. This includes the agency's therapist working directly with children to help them make sense of their lives and recover from trauma and negative experiences.

Foster carers understand how important it is for children to continue relationships with significant people, such as parents, relatives and friends. Foster carers support children to keep in touch with important people in a safe and planned way.



The agency's arrangements for recruiting, preparing and assessing prospective foster carers are thorough and carried out in a timely way. Foster carers are extremely well supported by the agency. The quality of the support provided is the reason given by foster carers for choosing the agency. Foster carers greatly value the practical and emotional support that they receive from supervising social workers, including outside office hours. A foster carer said, 'No matter who you talk to, they know the child and what is happening in the family. They are always there if you are not sure. They follow things up and give you a call the next day to see how things are going.'

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

Children feel safe and have trusted adults who they can talk to about any worries. Adults listen to them, take their concerns seriously and act to keep them safe.

The agency makes sure that children live in safe and supportive homes. The professional practice and safeguarding arrangements protect children from harm. The agency's very careful recruitment and selection of foster carers, panel members and staff help to protect children from unsuitable adults. Foster carers have the skills to recognise any signs that may indicate that a child may be at risk of abuse, neglect or harm.

Managers, social workers and foster carers act decisively when they have concerns about children's welfare and always follow the agency's safeguarding procedures. The agency has strong and effective relationships with local authorities, designated officers and other safeguarding agencies. A designated officer said, 'The agency understands and values the designated officer role. The manager reports concerns appropriately, and chases things up and contacts me for advice.'

The manager makes sure that concerns are taken seriously. When she has not been satisfied with the response from the local authority, she has escalated its concerns appropriately.

Investigations into allegations about foster carers are well coordinated and thorough. They are handled fairly, in line with the statutory guidance. The agency finds the right balance to safeguard children and not disrupt their placements unnecessarily. Foster carers are well supported and the findings from safeguarding concerns are used to improve practice.

The agency makes sure that foster carers have the expertise, skills, training and support to understand and help children with complex and challenging needs. Guidance from the agency's therapist is helping foster carers to work positively and confidently with children to find the best way possible to support them. For example, foster carers' use of a consistent, nurturing and research-based approach is helping children to make remarkable progress in managing their feelings. The children are now less likely to be aggressive. The foster carers are highly in tune with the children's needs. Foster carers understand and can anticipate when the children are likely to feel anxious or unsafe. Therefore, foster carers have created a reliable environment that has helped the children to feel secure and to build trusting

relationships with them. The children are happier, and their quality of life has improved.

The agency provides foster carers with an exceptionally good standard of support and scrutiny. Social workers provide foster carers with practice-related supervision at least once a month as well as undertaking unannounced visits. This makes sure that foster carers are working in the best interests of the children in their care and that they receive the right support, advice and guidance. However, foster carers' supervision records and annual review reports do not always show how any issues about foster carers' practice have been addressed.

Children have a strong sense of safety and rarely go missing from home. In the last year, there have only been six occasions when children have gone missing. However, foster carers have not always taken appropriate action to find and encourage children to return home. The agency has not always made sure that the local missing from home and care procedures have been followed. It has not made sure that a risk management meeting has been held with the safeguarding agencies to consider the reasons for the child going missing and what action should be taken to prevent them going missing in the future. Not all children's risk assessments and safety plans set out what foster carers should do when a child goes missing, or what they should do to encourage the child to return home, or how to welcome and check on the child's welfare when they do return.

Foster carers would benefit from further training in appropriate safe-care practices including: skills to care for children who have been abused; dealing with the disclosure of abuse; understanding the risks of, and responding to, sexually harmful behaviour; understanding the risks of child sexual and criminal exploitation and county lines.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The manager has the necessary vision, drive, experience and expertise for the role. Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident, forward-thinking and effective. They are dedicated to improving the lives of the children in their care. Their ambitions and high aspirations for every child are demonstrated in their professional practice and the positive experiences and improved outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers have created a warm and friendly environment. They value foster carers' expertise and professionalism and are open to new ideas and sharing best practice throughout the organisation. Supervising social workers, support workers, therapists and staff are knowledgeable, experienced, qualified, skilled and motivated. Everyone is focused on providing children with the best possible care and making a positive difference in their lives.

The agency has well-established and working relationships with social workers, commissioners, local authorities, education and health services. The agency uses these partnerships to plan children's care carefully and to make sure that children receive the best possible support.

Leaders and managers provide social workers and staff with excellent support, guidance and encouragement. Social workers and staff have regular opportunities through practice-related supervision, team meetings and training to reflect on children's progress, their performance and to share and develop their skills and knowledge.

Leaders and managers have an in-depth understanding of the agency's strengths and key priorities for development. The development of a therapeutic practice model and guidance from clinical psychologists and therapists is having a positive impact on children's experiences.

The fostering panel and agency decision maker make safe, timely, extremely thorough and careful decisions about people's suitability to foster children. The agency benefits from panel members with a wide range of skills and knowledge about meeting children's needs, including people from education, health and social work as well as foster carers. The fostering panel is thorough, brings professional curiosity and provides a high level of independent scrutiny of the agency.

However, the agency decision maker's record does not show the information she has used to inform her decision, neither does it clearly set out the reasons for her decision.

The agency does not have information systems to provide a reliable overview of foster carers' training and children's progress and outcomes, including in education, health and emotional well-being. This information will help the agency to monitor and evaluate the impact it is having on children's lives.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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

**Registered provider:** The Together Trust

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## **Inspectors**

Nick Veysey, social care inspector  
Marina Tully, social care inspector



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