

Together For Children Fostering - Sunderland

Together for Children Sunderland Limited

Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland SR3 4EN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Together For Children Fostering - Sunderland registered as an independent fostering agency in March 2017 under a trust arrangement. The service operates from an office in Sunderland.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including respite care, permanent, long-term and short-term placements and connected carers arrangements.

The staff team comprises of a responsible individual, the registered manager who registered with Ofsted in February 2020, an agency decision-maker, two assistant team managers, 13 supervising social workers, one panel advisor and a business manager who leads a team of several business support workers.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 209 fostering households that were caring for 275 children and young people.

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: 12 to 16 September 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	good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 24 September 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children enjoy trusted and stable relationships with their foster carers and connected carers, who know them well. These adults have a clear understanding of the children's needs. This helps the children to settle and feel part of family life. One carer said, 'It is tough at times, but love conquers all. We love him.' The children's positive experiences help them to make good progress. One child said, 'This is my family. I love living here. I'm doing really well, and they help me with everything.'

Children say that they feel listened to and their views are understood and taken into account. Children are offered independent advocacy, which improves the way that the children's views are considered. The agency also seeks the children's feedback to inform the foster carers' and connected carers' annual reviews. This ensures that the children's voices are heard and considered. Children are encouraged to join the Children in Care Council, and they have the opportunity to meet with the corporate parenting panel. The children are also involved in interviewing new staff and initiatives such as 'Language that cares'. The participation of children helps them to feel valued and respected.

Specialist support is available for foster carers, connected carers and children when they require additional support. The appointment of a clinical psychologist and a therapeutic social worker, who are based in the agency, enables specialist support to be given in a timely way. Foster carers say that they value this support. When placements break down, the clinical psychologist, in conjunction with the child's social worker and supervising social worker, provides additional support to the new carer to avoid further placement breakdown. This supports successful transitions for the children.

Prospective foster carers who contact the agency feel welcomed. One foster carer said that despite them being the only person who attended a welcome event, the agency still delivered their presentation, which made them feel especially valued. There is a clear process in place for assessments, which are undertaken in a timely way. Assessments of foster carers and connected carers are of good quality. Vulnerabilities that are identified at stage one of the assessment process are thoroughly explored during stage two of the assessment, which supports the agency's recommendations to the panel. The panel's scrutiny of the quality of assessments undertaken means that only suitable carers are approved to care for children.

Effective matching of children with their foster families leads to stability for children. The matching process of children with their foster families is informed by a clear understanding of the child's individual needs alongside the skills and experience of the foster carers. Additionally, collaborative work between the child's social worker and the agency ensures that all of the children's relevant information is shared with the foster carer before any decisions are made.

The agency provides good-quality support to foster carers and connected carers, which children benefit from. Children's day-to-day experiences are enhanced because of the continued support that is provided to foster carers and connected carers. A carer said: 'I can pick the phone up at any time and speak to someone. Even if it's not my own supervising social worker, there is always support available. I cannot fault them.'

Children and foster families that are part of the 'Mockingbird' group benefit from the nurture and support that the programme brings. The groups help foster families to build resilience through extensive practical and emotional support. The programme improves children's experiences by extending their foster family networks and their peer friendships. At times of difficulty, children and foster families can readily access respite care and support from people that they know and trust. This enables the children and carers to safely pause and rebuild any frayed relationships, which reduces the risk of children's placements breaking down.

Children do make good progress from their starting points. However, the agency has missed an opportunity to illustrate how they help the children to recognise the areas where they have made progress and where they require ongoing support. This is because the agency does not have an effective monitoring system in place which tracks this.

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

Children are better protected because the supervising social workers and foster carers understand their safeguarding responsibilities. As such, the agency's safeguarding procedures are consistently followed. This promotes the children's safety and welfare.

Children receive positive and clear messages from the agency, the staff and their carers that their safety and well-being are a high priority to them. When children do go missing, which is infrequent, the agency's missing-from-home policy is followed. Carers are prepared and supported to respond to children that may go missing from home or may be at risk of harm from exploitation. Once children are found and returned home safely, they are provided with an opportunity to speak to an independent adult. This helps to better inform safer arrangements and planning for children.

Safer recruitment processes are followed when each carer is assessed and then again before their annual review. This provides assurances to the agency that all of the carers are properly vetted and only suitable carers provide care to the children. There is a clear monitoring and reviewing system in place, which ensures the ongoing safety and well-being of children. This includes a regular review of the carers' health and safety checks, such as Disclosure and Barring Service checks, medical checks and at least twice-yearly unannounced home visits. Furthermore, there are regular opportunities for the children to speak to the supervising social workers without their carers being present. This offers an added level of protection to children at different intervals.

The implementation of the therapeutic reparenting model of care and the clinical psychologist's support means that the children's positive behaviour is promoted consistently. Foster carers use effective de-escalation techniques and alternative strategies which are specific to the children's individual needs. This is effective as there has been no need to use physical holds on children. Therefore, children continue to flourish and maintain positive relationships with their foster families.

On the whole, risks to children are identified, understood and managed well by the foster carers and connected carers. However, some safer care policies have not been updated following emerging risks being identified for the children. Not providing clear guidance in safer care policies has the potential to lead to inconsistent responses to children.

When allegations are made against foster carers, the agency takes immediate action to safeguard the children until both the police and internal investigations have been completed. Safeguarding procedures are followed and the carers are provided with ongoing support. However, the manager has not consistently notified Ofsted of these events or updated Ofsted when a child protection enquiry has commenced or been concluded. Furthermore, there was a significant delay in notifying Ofsted on one occasion. This oversight has prevented Ofsted from evaluating the agency's response in relation to safeguarding incidents and from being assured that the agency has responded appropriately.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leaders and managers have an ambitious vision for the service. There is a culture across the service of high expectations and innovative practice with a continual focus on children. The manager is very well supported by senior leaders and together they share a vision to support ongoing improvements in the service.

Effective collaboration of the agency working with other departments and external agencies improves children's outcomes. The agency works innovatively to track children who may require foster placements. Early identification of children that require foster placements helps to better support children through early placement planning. This supports the good matching of children with their foster families, which is successful, as it provides children with stability.

The agency is proactive in the support that they provide to foster carers. For example, foster carers and connected carers are encouraged to join support groups and access training. This helps them to meet the needs of the children in their care. Support groups provide the foster carers with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills, as well as an opportunity to access peer support.

Panel minutes provide a clear appraisal of the panel's business. The panel provides feedback to the agency about the quality of assessments discussed. This process supports the agency to make continual improvements to practice. The panel chair describes how there is a positive culture in the agency to learn and improve practice.

This helps to maintain a focus on delivering a good service to foster families and children.

All staff receive regular supervision. However, the quality of these records is variable. Some supervision records are brief and do not evidence reflective discussions. This means that there is an inconsistent approach to the quality of staff supervisions, which does not meet the requirements of the agency's own supervision policy.

Some foster carers report that they receive good-quality supervision and that they value the opportunity to reflect on their practice. However, this is not consistently evidenced in all foster carers' supervision records. While some supervision records are detailed, others are of poor quality and do not consider the progress of the children or the training and development needs of foster carers. Therefore, a recommendation that was made at the last inspection to address this has been reissued.

The agency has clear systems in place to monitor practice through performance data. However, managers do not routinely quality assure all aspects of the supervising social workers' practice. Consequently, the leadership team has missed an opportunity to review the quality of the staff's practice to ensure that it continually meets the needs of foster families, connected carers and the children.

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

Statutory requirements

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
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36)	14 October 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that they implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. In particular, ensure that safe care policies are reflective of children's emerging needs and known risks. Children's risk assessments should explicitly reference where risks to children reduce or increase. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carer's supervisions have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure that the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and ensure they offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. Foster carers' files should include detailed records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that they regularly monitor and quality assure all records kept by the service to ensure that they are compliant with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the staff's supervision evaluates the staff's practice and fostering activity to ensure that it is consistent with the 2011 regulations, national minimum standards and with the agency's own policies and procedures. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.3)
- The registered person should ensure that information about a child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files

now or in the future. In particular, ensure that when tracking children's progress, there is a clear evaluation of the progress that children make from their starting points. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.6)

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: 1254786

Registered provider: Together for Children Sunderland Limited

Registered provider address: Stanfield Business Centre, Addison Street,
Sunderland SR2 8SZ

Responsible individual: Majella McCarthy

Registered manager: Daniel Kenny

Telephone number: 0191 561 2223

Email address: Majella.McCarthy@togetherforchildren.org.uk

Inspectors

Jacqueline Tate, Social Care Inspector

Paula Shepherd, Social Care Inspector

Louise Hollick, Social Care His Majesty's Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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