

# Children Always First Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman
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<b>Registered manager</b>	Jan Tomasz Kazimierz Blazak
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Julie Anne Elliott
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	12/09/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is privately owned. It provides a range of foster placements including short term, long term, emergency, respite, and parent and child. It was registered in September 2013 and currently has 11 fostering households recruited and approved in its first year of operation. At the time of the inspection 16 children and young people were in placement.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This is the first inspection of this agency, which was registered in September 2013. It has made an impressive start, and although judged good overall, some aspects of practice are outstanding. There are a number of significant strengths. These include: the systems for tracking children's and young people's progress; the quality of foster carer training; the comprehensive and up-to-date record keeping which reflects the quality of the practice; and the absolute commitment to involve children and young people in the development of the service.

Children and young people have their needs fully met by their foster carers. They settle, make good, and in some cases exceptional, progress and have positive experiences. They feel very much a part of the fostering family and are happy and safe.

Safe placements are promoted through robust recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers, comprehensive policies and procedures and excellent training for both staff and foster carers. This results in a safe service which has safeguarding and promoting children's and young people's well-being as its primary focus.

Children's views are central and an area which is developing further with the appointment of a specific worker to concentrate on ensuring their voice is heard throughout the agency at every stage. Foster carers feel valued, supported and part of the team around the child. They say: 'You are encouraged to be part of the team', and, 'the agency has time for you and listens to your needs.' There is good and effective partnership working with social workers, schools and other agencies.

Leaders and managers are significantly involved on a daily basis with the running of the agency. They are passionate about providing a service of high quality to promote positive outcomes for children and young people. The staff are similarly passionate and committed, as well as skilled, experienced and well qualified.

One area for improvement has been identified as a result of this inspection, which relates to ensuring children and young people are only placed with foster carers whose approval category meets their circumstances. This deficit has not had a negative impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that other than in an emergency, a child must only be placed with a foster carer whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.3)

### Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people have positive experiences as a result of living in foster care. They make good progress and have good outcomes, and for some these are exceptional. One social worker commented: 'I am so glad the young person had the experience. It made a big impact on how she is now and how she will be.' Even though some children and young people have only been in placement for a short time, they have made good progress in regards to issues such as self-care, confidence, personal hygiene and self-respect. Another social worker commented: 'There has been a massive change in such a short time.'

Each fostering family has developed a child-friendly profile of their household, giving basic information, including photographs. These are given to children and young people prior to moving in so that they know what to expect from the foster carers and can settle more easily. Where placements are planned, children and young people visit in advance, which gives them a better opportunity to feel at ease.

Children and young people are well cared for and have all their needs well met. They are happy and settled with their foster carers and feel safe. One child said, 'I have a lovely family.' Placement stability is good, with fewer than 5% unplanned endings, which is below the national average of 7% for independent fostering agencies. Many of the placements are long term, and children only move when their safety and well-being are at risk of being compromised. This enables them to develop attachments and form positive relationships with the adults who care for them.

Children and young people are able to live with their brothers and sisters in foster care. Most of the current placements are sibling placements. Where there are other siblings elsewhere, foster carers are very supportive of ensuring contact takes place on a regular basis. They are also fully supportive of contact with parents, so that children and young people maintain these relationships and an understanding of their backgrounds.

Children and young people lead healthy active lives. All children and young people are registered with doctors, dentists and opticians and have regular check-ups to maintain their good health. Those who need therapeutic or psychological input are referred to relevant local services. An additional resource is the clinical psychologist who provides consultation for staff, which is then relayed to the carers to help them support the young people appropriately. Young people who have risk-taking behaviour such as going missing are supported to reduce the risk, with varying degrees of success.

There are good opportunities for children and young people to express their views about both their day-to-day care and the development of the agency. They are involved when their foster carers are having their annual review; are consulted about their own statutory reviews; have opportunity to talk alone with the supervising social worker; involved in consultation groups and surveys, and are provided with information about other services such as advocacy. As a result, they feel valued; they develop self-esteem and confidence and know their opinions are important.

All the children and young people are in educational placements and their attendance is excellent. Some young people have achieved remarkably well, for example, they receive commendations from their school for particularly good pieces of work. One young person hopes to apply for a university place. Others have returned to education after long periods of absence. For all, their attitude and engagement are much improved. Their future life chances are improved as a result.

Children and young people are very much a part of the fostering family. They are involved in family events such as weddings and holidays. Some young people have experienced things they have never done before such as going abroad and going to

theme parks. Children and young people are also encouraged to make friends and have sleepovers. Any interests are fully supported, for example, going to Girl Guides, doing martial arts and taking part in various sporting and musical activities. Their outcomes improve because they develop their social skills, their confidence and have a sense of achievement.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The quality of service is outstanding, with many areas of impressive practice. The manager has an accurate awareness of the needs of children who may require fostering placements as he is personally involved in assessing all referrals. Foster carers comment on how welcoming and responsive the agency is when they first make contact, which is cited as one of the reasons they apply. Currently a third of foster carers are from a non-White British background, which reflects the agency's inclusive attitude towards diversity. The placements are complex and challenging, including a large number of sibling groups.

The recruitment, preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers is well thought out. Some recruitment is targeted, but the main focus of recruitment is attracting carers who share the same ethos and are committed to making a difference to children's lives. The pre-panel training is thorough, with a strong focus on safeguarding and identity. It also includes foster carers, to enable applicants to get a first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a foster carer. This prepares them well for the task. One carer commented: 'It made me think differently.' Assessments are comprehensive, analytical and carried out in a timely way.

The fostering panel adds further robustness to the process. Panel members are competent, diverse and bring a range of personal and professional experiences to the role to enable them to make informed challenges and recommendations about approval and review to the agency. The panel administration is efficient which ensures that panel members have a good opportunity to read the papers in advance and be well prepared. Although daunting, applicants are made to feel welcome. The minutes are good and provide an accurate reflection of the meeting and the reasons for the recommendation. Decision making is similarly prompt and robust.

Matching children to appropriate carers is a significant strength of this agency, and results in children thriving, making good progress and experiencing placement stability. There is a comprehensive and systematic approach to obtaining information and demonstrating how all the child's needs can be met by the carer, including those relating to religion, culture and ability. The agency works extremely hard to obtain all the relevant local authority documentation, including the care plan, risk assessments and delegated authority. The manager escalates this if it is not readily forthcoming. One placement had been made in a young person's best interests but was not within the foster carer's current terms of approval. This has now been clarified and has had no negative impact on the young person as it is an excellent placement for a number of different reasons.

Another significant strength is foster carer training, which exceeds expected practice. Primary carers undertake at least seven courses every year, and in addition to core training, such as first aid and safeguarding, there is a significant emphasis on attachment training. Carers undertake an 18-session course on attachment which they find extremely effective with supporting the children in placement. Carers use the information and strategies to promote positive outcomes. They demonstrate a significant depth of understanding about how different attachment disorders impact on children's behaviour. The training programme is comprehensive, good quality and enhances the skills of the foster carers. This is supplemented by regular carer support groups.

Carer supervision and support are other areas where there are significant strengths. Of particular note is the availability of a clinical psychologist who the agency uses for consultation. This has had a significant impact on outcomes for some children as it provides carers with additional strategies to try, for example, with regard to sibling attachments to improve relationships within a family. The supervising social workers also provide a high level of supervision and support, which foster carers value. The records of the supervision reflect the high quality, challenge and focus on children's outcomes. Each carer has a personal and professional development plan which addresses their training and support needs, based on the outcomes of supervision as well as their own needs and those of the children. This promotes an impressive level of professionalism.

Carers feel valued and well supported by their supervising social worker and the input of the clinical psychologist. They are proud to work for the agency and have trust and confidence in the social workers, the responsible individual and the manager. The family feel is important to them and they say the agency is friendly, professional and efficient. One carer commented: 'I know they will deliver.' There is also a good range of social activities for foster carers, foster children, birth children and extended family members. These provide opportunity for everyone involved with the agency to get together and have a good time. One young person commented that she liked the agency, 'because we do stuff', and another said, 'there is no division. You can't tell who is fostered, who is a foster carer or who works for the agency.'

Foster carers have good relationships with the children's social workers which enable them to be active, positive and appropriate participants in care planning. The agency provides good support to carers if the plans appear not to be focused on the child's best interests. This includes involving an independent advocacy service. One young person said of her supervising social worker: 'She was immediately on the case.' Social workers and independent reviewing officers have commented on the professionalism and skills of the foster carers, saying they are 'very impressed', and 'the carers did an amazing job', and, 'the carers were fabulous'. Carers have a very good understanding of their role and responsibilities and the levels of delegated authority.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Safeguarding practice throughout the agency is good, resulting in children who are safe and feel safe. The first module of the pre-panel training is entitled 'It's all about safeguarding', which sets the scene for prospective foster carers to understand the focus of the fostering task. This is supplemented by thorough assessment, further training and supervision. Supervising social workers see children alone on a regular basis to give them the opportunity to raise any concerns. However, the emphasis on safeguarding is not at the expense of children being enabled to take age-appropriate risks which promote their development and independence.

Children and young people have a number of adults to contact if they have any worries or concerns. This ranges from their social worker, their independent reviewing officer, their foster carers' social worker, the manager, the responsible individual and independent advocacy services. Children and young people know the responsible individual and manager well because they play an active part in the social events and also see them on an individual basis. For example, the manager facilitated an opportunity for one young person with an interest in music. The role of the children's support coordinator is an important addition to this, as she will undertake some direct work with children and young people.

Safe care plans and risk assessments are of a high quality. They are comprehensive documents based on the information available and updated when situations change or develop. This ensures that foster carers are fully apprised of strategies to take in situations of risk. There have been instances of young people who have been missing from their placements. These have been appropriately addressed through multi-agency involvement. Foster carers are clear about the protocol they need to follow and have shown an incredible commitment and resilience to those young people, including directly challenging unsuitable adults and passing on information to safeguarding agencies to try to minimise the risk and protect young people.

A significant strength of this agency is its commitment to ensuring that knowledge of attachment underpins the care and support which foster carers give to the children and young people in placement. This enables foster carers to have an in-depth understanding of the reasons why children and young people behave and react as they do. Foster carers also have extensive training in safeguarding, including use of the internet. They demonstrate a robust knowledge of how to deal with allegations. The agency has appropriate links with relevant partner agencies and contacts the local authority designated officer when necessary.

Staff and panel members are recruited safely to ensure that only suitable people are employed by the agency. Staff demonstrate a robust knowledge of safeguarding, supported by up-to-date policies, procedures and training to enable them to supervise and support foster carers appropriately.

## **Leadership and management**



Judgement outcome: **good**.

Since the agency was registered last year it has developed and grown, recruiting foster carers and staff and placing children and young people. The relationships with social workers and commissioners so far are positive and effective. Commissioners comment on prompt responses and appropriate placements. Social workers make reference to good communication. As the manager is the first point of contact for all referrals, he has an accurate understanding of the needs of local authorities in relation to placements and targets his recruitment accordingly.

Leaders and managers are extremely child-focused and committed to children's and young people's active engagement with the service and its development. There have been a number of social activities and children's participation events in the last year. For example, a group of children and young people has been consulted about activities, what makes a good foster carer, and what the agency could do better. A young person has also been actively involved in staff recruitment. A children's support coordinator is now in post to expand and improve these existing mechanisms, and already has innovative ideas about meaningful engagement.

The responsible individual has developed an impressive systematic approach to monitoring and tracking the progress of children and young people. This provides a clear, visual and effective way of ensuring children and young people are making progress across all their areas of development. If progress is limited, then this is addressed through a variety of means, including foster carer supervision, additional training or extra resources. The agency can therefore ensure that it does all it can to prevent drift and help children and young people achieve as much as possible.

Monitoring is well developed at all levels. The manager has a thorough overview through supervision of staff and audit of records and files, as well as personal engagement with foster carers, children and young people. Foster carers, children and young people are formally consulted twice a year. This feeds into the responsible individual's quarterly monitoring report and then into the improvement and development plan. Therefore both the responsible individual and manager have an extremely accurate and up-to-date knowledge of what is happening, what people think and how they want to develop and improve.

Leaders and managers have a significant commitment to this agency, which they established just over a year ago. They are passionate about what they do and have high aspirations for the agency to be a service of excellence in order to support positive outcomes for children and young people. This ethos underpins the whole service, from recruitment of foster carers and staff to their ongoing training, supervision and support. Many foster carers comment that the ethos was the reason they chose to apply to this agency and that they are proud to work for it.

Staff and panel members are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced. They bring a range of skills, interests and personal qualities and experiences to the agency to enhance the service provision. Staff demonstrate a passion for making a difference to the lives of children and young people. They feel well supported by

both the manager and responsible individual, and comment that communication and engagement with them are good. They feel empowered and feel that their creativity is encouraged. Supervision is regular, challenging and of a high quality, enabling staff to reflect and develop their practice. A high premium is placed on training, and there is a good programme to enhance the competence and knowledge of staff. Staff comment that it is a learning organisation, and their development is further enhanced by practice workshops and team away days. Staff have not been in post for sufficient time to have had an annual appraisal, but an appropriate process has been established.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are well written, comprehensive and give the respective readers an accurate picture of the agency and what to expect. The information for children and young people is being further improved by the children's support coordinator, to ensure they know their rights in regard to being a looked after child in foster care. The Foster Carers' Charter has been developed by foster carers in conjunction with the agency and is therefore a very personal document which reflects what each expect from the other. Regulatory notifications are appropriately made and followed up to ensure children and young people are protected from harm. Although there have been no complaints, the agency seeks feedback at every opportunity, for example, training events. The service is under constant review to ensure it meets its published aims.

## 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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.