

Three Circles Fostering Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC443768
Inspection date	11/02/2014
Inspector	Marian Denny
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	10/05/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Three Circles Fostering limited is an independent fostering agency, which has been registered since May 2012. This is the first time that the agency has been inspected. It provides emergency, as well as short and long-term fostering placements for children and young people, who have a variety of needs. It aims to recruit a diverse range of carers who will be able to provide placements which reflect the different socio-economic, cultural and Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in the North West region. The agency aims to promote a secure base and positive placements for all children and young people. Currently there are 40 children and young people accessing the fostering service and 30 fostering households.

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 agency has been operating for 20 months. It is a well-managed agency and provides a very child focussed service. It has a very positive, inclusive value base and as a consequence, the views of all those involved in the agency are actively listened to and taken into account in the delivery of the service.

The agency has a very holistic approach to fostering and as a result, the agency provides a wrap-around service to ensure children and young people's needs are effectively addressed. For example, the service actively promotes education and uses

the services of the National Teaching and Advisory Service (NTAS) to support this. In some cases, NTAS provides direct work to children and young people to ensure that they are well supported to make good educational progress and achieve their potential educationally. The agency also totally believes that all children and young people in their care should achieve their potential and has extremely strong aspirations for all children and young people being cared for by them. The agency strives to achieve this and provides considerable support to both foster carers and all children and young people in their care so that this can be achieved.

The service has also recently embarked on providing its staff and foster carers with a cognitive analytical approach to fostering so that they have a therapeutic and psychological understanding of fostering. The service also works hard to ensure the emotional needs of the child are met and provides memory boxes to ensure there is a complete record of their lives, while in foster care, which they can look back on in the future.

The agency works extremely hard to ensure children and young people's welfare is paramount. Consequently, safeguarding is high on the agency's agenda and it does its utmost to ensure children and young people are effectively protected. Since registration, there has been one safeguarding concern, which was fully investigated and the matter subsequently addressed.

The agency works hard to ensure children and young people are well matched with carers, who have extremely good parenting skills. This supports placement stability. During 2012-2013, the agency reported one unplanned ending. This equated to 3% of all Children and Young People (CYP) placed at any point in the year. This is lower than the comparator group for all independent Fostering Services (IFS) where 7% of children and young people placed were subject to unplanned endings. However, this is a small agency; therefore it is important to remain mindful of this when talking in percentages based on small numbers.

Since registration, the agency has more than met its own set target for the recruitment and preparation of foster carers. At the time of the inspection, the agency had recruited 25 fostering households. However, active recruitment was also taking place to increase their number of foster carers. This also included actively working to recruit an increased number of diverse carers in order to meet the needs of children and young people in the North West requiring foster carers.

The quality of the written assessments of foster carers is of a high standard and this is endorsed by the panel and agency decision maker. Assessments are completed within timescales and they focus on the potential carer's accounts of their upbringing are reflective and are insightful demonstrating how these family relationships have influenced their development. The assessments also demonstrate carers parenting capacity and their ability to meet the diverse needs of those children and young people, requiring foster placements.

Foster carers see themselves as integral to the agency and part of the team around the child. They advocate in the best interest of the child. Foster carers show a strong

commitment to their role within the agency. The agency ensures that partnership working with local authority, social workers, schools, and health professionals are effective. This helps to positively contribute to the children and young people's experiences, progression and outcomes.

Carers state that the supervision and support provided by the agency is 'fantastic'. They are also extremely positive about the training they receive, which they describe as 'excellent'. This ensures foster carers are able to effectively meet children and young people's complex and diverse needs and to maintain placements successfully.

The service is well managed. Leaders and managers provide strong leadership, clear direction and excellent support to staff. They also demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous development and have a very clear strategy in place to achieve this.

As a result of this inspection four recommendations were made relating to ensuring all written references were verified, improvements were made in relation to the agency quality assurance systems, details were provided in the children's guide, as to how children and young people are able to contact the independent reviewing and all notifiable events are submitted to Ofsted within the required timescales. However, this latter omission did not adversely impact on the children's welfare or on their outcomes.

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 the children's guide contains details as to how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, if they have any concerns (NMS16.4)
- ensure telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references for all people working in the fostering service (NMS19.1)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the agency, with specific reference to foster carers' supervision records (NMS 25.2)
- ensure an incident notifiable under regulation 36, is submitted to Ofsted, so that discussions can take place regarding any further action that may need to be taken. (NMS 29.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people develop extremely good relationships with their carers. This provides them with a firm foundation to enjoy a variety of positive experiences, which enables them to make real progress and achieve good outcomes in their lives.

Children and young people are informed about their foster carers, receive information about them and where ever possible planned introductions take place. This is of great help in preparing a child or young person for their move to foster carers and greatly assists them in settling into their foster home. They are well matched with their foster carers. This ensures carers have a very good understanding of their individual needs and they go to great lengths to ensure they are met.

Children and young people are very well cared for, feel safe and are at ease with their carers. They enjoy a safe family home environment. They trust their foster carers and value the guidance and support they receive from them. This was quite clearly demonstrated by the young people spoken with, who confirmed that they were well cared for and happy in their home. For example, one young person said, 'My family are the best, I could not be happier. I know I am special.' In developing strong relationships with their carers, children and young people's ability to trust people gradually grows, as does their confidence and self-esteem. Gradually, children and young people through education, recreational activities and daily life begin achieving in their lives.

All children and young people in the service have memory boxes and they are encouraged to keep items in them, which capture memorable moments, experiences, celebrations and achievements. This ensures they have a complete picture of their lives, which they can reflect upon in the future

Children and young people are able to express their views to their foster carers, the agency's supervising social workers, managers, as well as through one-to-one and review meetings with their social worker. They also have access to an independent advocate via their responsible placing authority when there is a need. They are listened to and are encouraged to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. This enables them to feel good about themselves and empowers them to make appropriate choices in their lives. Consequently, there are many examples where children and young people's behaviour and outlook to life changes. For example, they acquire new abilities and improved intellectual, social and emotional skills. This is demonstrated by a significant increase in their school attendance, a reduction of their risk taking behaviours, development of positive peer relationships and aspirations for the future.

Children and young people live in a healthy environment where their physical, emotional and social well-being is actively promoted. They all have up-to-date health assessments, which clearly outline their health needs. Health care plans are in place, along with signed parental consent forms for medical treatment. This ensures that children and young people gain the treatment they need when they need it. Foster carers are provided with specialist health care training if caring for a child or young person with complex needs or life threatening illnesses. In some cases, the excellent care provided by foster carers has extended children and young people's lives. All children and young people have full access to the necessary health professionals and resources so their health needs can be met. They also benefit from healthy lifestyles,

as foster carers work hard to ensure children and young people enjoy a well-balanced, nutritious diet. In addition, they are encouraged to undertake healthy exercise, such as playing football, running walking, cycling, and playing snooker. All children and young people are able to pursue their individual interests and social activities, such as singing, dancing and playing snooker, as foster carers and the agency are proactive in ensuring these are fulfilled. This means children and young people can lead full and active lives.

The agency very actively promotes education. This has resulted in children and young people benefitting from attending schools, which meet their needs. It has also resulted in the vast majority of children and young people attending school regularly and in taking in account their starting points, are making good educational progress and attaining well educationally. Consequently, there are examples of children and young people exceeding their educational targets and catching-up with their peers. This is underpinned by foster carers establishing very positive relationships with schools and doing their utmost to ensure they encourage and support young people to attend and succeed at school. Effective support from foster carers, as well as the agency's association with NTAS has ensured children and young people gain qualifications and move on to further education.

Children and young people, where it is appropriate, are able to live with their brothers and sisters. This enables them to meet their personal and emotional needs and maintain a family bond. In other circumstances, children and young people's views and opinions are respected in relation to contact arrangements and they are supported to maintain appropriate family contact. Foster carers clearly, fully understand the importance of family contact. Consequently, in appropriate circumstances they have worked hard and often in a creative way to rebuild family relationships and enable the child or young person to keep in contact with their family. This has enabled them to remain connected to their family background and to develop a sense of identity.

Many children and young people in this service have enjoyed long-term stability within their placement and this has continued even though there has been a change in the management of their carers. Those spoken with commented extremely positively about the new fostering agency and the general view, as expressed by one young person, is that they are, 'Great.' Children and young people stated that they know all the staff in the agency very well, as they all meet up on a regular basis to engage in leisure activities. This enables them to have fun together and if they want to; they can share their experiences of being fostered and support each other. During these sessions they also have the opportunity to talk to staff individually or as a group. For example, they can talk personally about any issues troubling them or talk about their ideas regarding the development of the fostering service. They stated that staff are always extremely eager to listen to their views and will use them to develop the service. For example, they have been involved in devising questions for the selection of staff and plans are in place for a children's and young person's forum to be developed.

Children and young people's rights are protected by listening to their views. This

enhances their sense of security. Children and young people feel valued because foster carers listen carefully and take on board any comments and feedback that is given. They willingly act as advocates so that views of the child are taken seriously and acted on. Children and young people know and understand that they have the right to complain if they are unhappy, concerned or bullied. Opportunities are provided to see the child alone, so the voice of the child is heard and opportunities for improvement are not lost.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has a recruitment policy, which is based on the needs of children and young people who require to be fostered. However, recently the agency has broadened its recruitment campaign in order to attract a more diverse group of carers.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is good. All potential foster carers are invited to attend the 'Skills to Foster' training programme ahead of the formal fostering assessment. This training programme places a strong emphasis on attachment training and safe care and child development are well communicated. In recent months, the agency has also provided training in the cognitive analytical approach to fostering to staff and foster carers. This has enabled both staff and carers to gain a therapeutic and psychological understanding of fostering.

Foster carers spoken with confirmed that they have benefited from the training programme, as it had enabled them to understand and help the child to trust, develop attachments, increase in confidence, self-esteem and to manage their behaviour. Assessments are of a high quality. This was also commented upon by both the panel chairperson and some of the panel members.

Foster carers receive very good quality supervision and support. The majority of foster carers are very experienced. Those spoken with said, 'We can approach anyone in the agency for support from the Chief Executive Officer, the managers, social workers and even administrative staff. They are all terrific.' Others said, 'The support provided by all the staff is excellent.' 'They are available twenty-four/seven and will always go the extra mile for you.' Foster carers particularly appreciate this when in crisis and requiring additional guidance and support. A number of carers talked of their experiences in this agency, in comparison with those of other agencies. The comments made were extremely complimentary and can perhaps be best illustrated in the comment made by one carer who said, 'It is the best fostering agency I have been in, as there is none of this us and them.' I really cannot praise this agency highly enough.'

The agency knows each carer's strengths and weaknesses well. This greatly enhances the matching process with children and young people being well matched with carers and their needs effectively met. As a result, fostering placement

disruptions and unplanned endings are relatively low.

The agency places a real importance on providing training for its foster carers. Since becoming operational the agency has provided carers with a wide range of training in order to ensure they receive continuous professional development opportunities. A number of foster carers are experienced carers and have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training with their previous agency. These carers bring with them a wealth of knowledge and skills, as evidenced in their training portfolios. Some carers have commenced the Training, Support and Development (TDS) Standards. All new carers are also working towards completing the TDS standards in order to increase their professional practice.

The agency is proactive in obtaining the local authorities' written policy on delegated authority. It will also challenge local authorities when individual children and young people are disadvantaged because the authority has not delegated appropriately. In the main though, the agency's persistence usually means the local authority's written policy on delegated authority is obtained. Consequently, foster carers work professionally with the child's social worker within the agreed delegated authority and this leads to effective day-to-day decision making for the child. It also ensures the placement plans are reviewed regularly.

Commissioners, independent reviewing officers' and social workers are extremely complimentary about the care provided to children and young people. For example, they said, 'children were warmly welcomed in the foster home and foster carers work hard to settle the child in the home.' They said, 'Children and young people are encouraged to see themselves as part of the foster home and are very much involved in decision making.' The agency's key strengths as demonstrated by those spoken with, are the high quality of care provided to children and young people, the excellent communication, partnership and collaborative working that exists between all those involved with the agency.

The agency has a robust fostering panel which plays an important role in the quality assurance of agency practice and promotes safe, secure and stable placements. The majority of panel members are independent and this ensures they have the necessary independence and objectivity. They have also been recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds, as well as different knowledge bases and expertise. The diversity of the panel is a real strength of the agency, as it ensures panel matters are considered from a variety of perspectives.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency places a real emphasis on safeguarding, which is clearly reflected in the preparation, assessment and supervision of foster carers. Robust risk assessments are in place. These are regularly reviewed to ensure they are up-to-date and continue to significantly contribute to managing and reducing risks to young people.

Foster carers fully understand their role in securing young people's safety and protection. Consequently, they follow the systems and processes to manage risk taking behaviours once young people are placed. There is a process in place to ensure that unannounced visits are undertaken annually. This is to ensure children and young people are safeguarded and their safety fully addressed. Additionally, children and young people are informed of their rights to complain, so providing them with opportunities to raise any issues of concern.

Safeguarding, child protection and safer caring courses are all mandatory training for foster carers. This covers allegations against foster carers. Foster carers are supported by the agency, but also independently and this ensures fairness. Foster carers are very well informed about issues relating to safeguarding and are clear about what aspects of care can be risky. This helps to safeguard children and young people.

The promotion of safety for children and young people in this agency is good. The practice is underpinned by good policies and procedures which guide foster carers and social workers in caring for children and young people safely. However, the agency does encourage children and young people to take appropriate risks in keeping with their age and abilities.

Foster carers confirm that they have a good understanding of safeguarding issues and procedures. They have an open attitude to disclosures and fully understand the impact of abuse upon young people's behaviour. Consequently, they are confident in responding to children and young people's changing needs for protection.

Since registration, there have been few young people who have gone missing. Foster carers say that the agency has very clear step by step guidance for dealing with missing events. In addition, there is support and debriefing strategies. The agency has worked proactively on reducing these events and there has been none since early 2013. This shows a clear reduction over time and a positive impact in reducing risk taking behaviour.

The agency follows good recruitment processes. Recruitment and vetting procedures are generally thorough and are robustly applied for staff, foster carers and panel members to ensure their suitability in working with children and young people. A large sample of files were seen, however, in one staff file there was no documentation available to confirm that the verification of references had been undertaken.

Partnership working is effective with local authorities and other partner agencies. This helps to ensure that the changing needs of children and young people remain central to safeguarding practice.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leadership and management make a positive contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people. They act effectively when problems arise. Over time, children and young people show improvement. They are experiencing more favourable educational and emotional outcomes. Children and young people also feel well care for and safe and this has a positive impact on their social well-being. This is underpinned by effective working relationships with social workers and the placing authority.

The Registered Manager carefully monitors and tracks children and young people's health, education and all aspects of their development, as well as their leisure interests and activities. This system identifies if children and young people are underperforming in any areas and enables the agency to provide additional services and support so they can progress. Children and young people join clubs, have opportunities to pursue their interests, hobbies and meet with their friends to have fun. This ensures that children and young people have positive experiences in their lives and this increases their self-confidence.

The manager, staff and panel members are professionally qualified with a proven track record in all aspects of children's services, including fostering. The agency provides good training to staff and foster carers. Staff and foster carers' supervision is effective and ensures development of the agency positively impacts on children and young people's achievements. This helps to make a positive difference in relation to their education, health and welfare.

Staff and panel members are positive about the service, including the supervision and support they receive which enables them to provide good care to the children and young people living in their home. Other professionals spoken with are also extremely positive about the agency and state the support and work undertaken with the children and young people placed is very good.

The agency is operating within its Statement of Purpose and foster carers and staff are clear about its aims and objectives. The agency provides three children's guides in order to meet the varying ages of the children using the service. The guides are accessible, attractive and very child friendly. However, while the guides contain very useful information for children and young people being placed with the agency's foster carers. They do not contain all the necessary information. For example, they do not contain information about how a child can contact the independent reviewing officer.

The agency has a quality assurance system in place; however this is not sufficiently robust. For example, in one file there was no record of two supervision visits and in two other supervision records, there were two inaccuracies. However, these inaccuracies had no impact on the care provided the young person or the outcomes achieved. The agency though is totally committed to secure improvement in the service and this was clearly reflected in the managerial responses made during this inspection.

The fostering agency usually ensures notifiable events are submitted to Ofsted within

the required timescales. However, in one case not all notifications were submitted. This though had no impact on the children's welfare or on their outcomes.

The management team know their strengths and weaknesses and demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement, which is shared by all staff and foster carers. Foster carers are valued and feel valued as part of the team. There is a strong commitment to participation and inclusion in the service, which is genuine and purposeful. This enables all who are connected with the fostering service to feel that they are part of the service development. For example, foster carers are fully involved in the agency's service development through their one-to-one supervision sessions and regular support groups. This ensures foster carers are valued, respected and work effectively in partnership with agency staff and other professionals involved with the children and young people. Children and young people's views are also highly valued and respected. They are fully involved in the agency and influence developments in the fostering service. For example, plans are in place for them to review the current children's guides.

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.