

Evaluation criteriaⁱ

The criteria that Ofsted inspectors use to make judgements, including benchmarks of what good looks like are detailed below.

The overall experiences and progress of children and young people

Areas of required evidence are:

- the quality of individualised care and support provided and the influence and impact of the agency on the experiences and progress of children
- the quality of relationships between children, professionals, carers, parents and other key individuals
- how well foster carers are prepared and supported to promote the progress children make in relation to their health, education, and emotional, social and psychological well-being
- how well children's views are understood and taken into account and how their rights and entitlements are met
- the quality of children's experiences on a day-to-day basis
- how well children and young people are prepared for their futures and how well transitions are managed
- how well the needs of children and young people who live outside their home authority are met
- how well prospective carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed
- the quality and impact of fostering for adoption work

Good

Children are able to build trusted and secure relationships with their foster carers, who know them well, listen to them, spend time with them, protect them and promote their welfare. Children are able to build an appropriate sense of permanence and belonging and are fully included in their foster carer's family lives.

They make progress and have a range of positive experiences. Foster carers are provided with respite care only when it is in the child's or young person's best interests, including improved stability of the child's or young person's placement with the foster carers. Any respite care provided takes full account of the child's or young person's needs.

Children, including those who cannot communicate verbally, are supported to actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, as appropriate. They are sensitively helped to understand where it may not be possible to act on their wishes and where other action is taken that is in their best interests. Children have access to, and are actively encouraged to involve, an independent advocate and, where appropriate, an independent visitor.

Children know how to complain. The agency's complaints policy is easy to understand, accessible and child-focused. Children understand what has happened as a result of their complaint. Their complaints are treated seriously and responded to clearly. Urgent action is taken and practice and/or services improve accordingly.

Children attend school or other educational provision. They are learning and making good progress from their starting points. Foster carers are ambitious for children and support children to attend and do well in their education. There is effective liaison with the school/college and the virtual school head.

Children enjoy access to a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities, including activities in the local community, where appropriate. They are able to participate in after-school activities or community-based activities and school trips and holidays. They are supported to engage in faith-based activities if they wish.

Children are supported to develop their independence in line with their individual needs, while protecting themselves from being in unsafe situations or with unsafe people. The agency challenges the local authority when they have concerns about the future plans for the young person, including the timing of leaving care.

Young people are able to remain living with their carers as long as they need the care and help that are provided. 'Staying put' arrangements are considered and planned as early as possible.

Children are in good health or are being helped to improve their health or to manage lifelong conditions. Their health needs (including their mental and sexual health needs, as appropriate) are identified. They have access to local health services when they need them.

Arrangements for managing medication are safe and effective and promote independence wherever possible.

Foster carers and agency staff develop effective relationships with health professionals to promote good health.

Specialist help is made available according to the individual needs of children, including those who live away from their 'home' authority. The help is available as soon as it is needed, at the intensity required and for as long as it is required.

Where specialist services from elsewhere are not available, or children are waiting for a long time for help, the agency is proactive in challenging and escalating concerns with the placing authority and/or other partners.

Any specific type or model of care delivered or commissioned by the agency is provided by staff or carers who are suitably trained, experienced, qualified and supervised. The benefits of this to children are clearly evident. The care is reviewed regularly.

Children who are new in placement are welcomed sensitively and with careful and considered planning. Where children leave the foster home, work promotes positive endings and helps with building their 'life story'. When endings are unplanned, the welfare and wellbeing of children remain paramount and the agency and carers act at all times with this in mind. The needs and feelings of other children living in the foster home are taken into account.

Children develop skills and strategies to manage their own conflicts and difficult feelings through developing positive relationships with carers. There are clear, consistent and appropriate boundaries for children.

Children are treated with dignity and respect. They experience care that is sensitive and responsive to their identity and family history, including age, disability, ethnicity, faith or belief, gender, gender identity, language, race and sexual orientation.

The care and help assist them to develop a positive self-view and to increase their ability to form and sustain attachments and build emotional resilience and a sense of their own identity. The care and help also help them to overcome any previous experiences of neglect and trauma.

The agency and its carers place the well-being of individual children at the centre of their practice, irrespective of the challenges they may present. All their achievements are celebrated and appropriately rewarded. Their day-to-day needs are met, such as routine, privacy, personal space and nutritious meals.

The agency supports children to have appropriate and carefully assessed contact (direct and/or indirect) with their family, friends and other people who are important to them, such as previous carers.

There are no unnecessary restrictions in place. Staff work proactively and positively with parents and former carers to promote meaningful and safe contact and continuity of care where appropriate.

Prospective foster carers contacting the agency feel valued and welcomed by the agency. The process for assessment is timely and sensitive to the needs of the carers.

Assessments that identify foster carers as suitable for a child are informed by a clear understanding of that child's needs and of the skills necessary to help and support them.

The agency works well with local authorities to ensure that full information is always shared with foster carers before a placement begins so that appropriate care can be provided. If information is not shared, the agency can provide evidence that it has pursued it. Careful matching contributes to the stability of placements and the retention of foster carers.

Foster carers benefit from professional and supportive relationships with the agency, which helps them to provide high quality care. They work very effectively together with children's social workers so that placements are appropriate, planned and meet the needs of children.

They are part of the team around the child, which is mutually supportive. They are actively involved in planning for the child or young person, and their views are valued by the fostering agency and positively influence children's and young people's progress.

Foster carers are well supported to ensure that plans for children remain in their best interests. Foster carers and their families value the support provided by the agency, which helps them to cope with the additional demands of fostering on their family life.

Children who receive short breaks are making progress in their development and acquiring skills and/or new experiences because of the quality of the service.

In short break services, there are effective relationships with parents or carers so that they feel confident leaving their child for their stay and they understand what the placement can offer. Parents feel involved in the planning of the short break placement and they are able to raise concerns and complaints. Carers and agency staff are accessible and keep parents informed about their child's short break experiences.

Fostering for adoption arrangements minimise delay and disruption for children who require adoption, leading to early permanence. Children's needs are always central to practice and decision-making. Preparation and support for fostering for adoption placements help carers and, where relevant, their children to manage the impact of fostering for adoption on their family life. Assessments are robust. Information provided to prospective adopters about fostering for adoption is clear and helpful.

Requires improvement to be good

The experiences and progress of children are likely to require improvement when the agency is not yet delivering good care and support for children and carers. The weaknesses identified need to be addressed to fully support children's experiences and progress and to mitigate risk in the medium and long term. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate

The experiences and progress of children are likely to be judged inadequate if there are serious or widespread failures that mean that children are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded or if their care, support and experiences are poor and they are not making progress.

Outstanding

The experiences and progress of children and young people are likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a good judgement, there is evidence of the following.

Professional practice consistently exceeds the standard of good and results in sustained improvement to the lives of children even where they have complex or challenging needs.

There is significant evidence of change and improvement for children because of the agency's practice. The progress of children is exceptional, taking into account their starting points.

The care and support received by children and carers enhances children's life chances. For children with the most complex needs, the agency is able to evidence the sustained benefit they have had in making a difference to the lives of children. There are examples of excellent practice that are worthy of wider dissemination.

Research-informed practice, some of which may be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children.

How well children and young people are helped and protected

Areas of required evidence are:

- how well risks are identified, understood and managed and whether the support and care provided help carers to ensure that children and young people become increasingly safe
- how well carers are prepared and supported to respond to children that may go missing or may be at risk of harm, including exploitation, neglect, abuse, self-harm, bullying and radicalisation
- how well carers are prepared and supported to manage situations and behaviour and whether clear and consistent boundaries contribute to a feeling of well-being and security for children and young people
- whether safeguarding arrangements to protect children meet all statutory and other government requirements, promote their welfare and prevent radicalisation and extremism

Good

Children feel protected and are protected from harm, including neglect, abuse, sexual exploitation, accidents, bullying and radicalisation. There is a strong, robust and proactive response from all those working with children that reduces harm or the risk of harm to them, including self-harm. That response includes regular and effective contact and planning with the child's allocated social worker and their family, if this is appropriate and in accordance with plans for their future.

Children can identify a trusted adult who they can talk to about any concerns. They report that adults listen to them, take their concerns seriously and respond appropriately.

Any risks associated with children offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, self-harming, going missing or being sexually exploited are known and understood by the adults who look after them.

Individual, up-to-date risk assessments address any known vulnerabilities for each child effectively and set out what action should be taken to address the risks. There are plans in place that are reducing harm or the risk of harm and there is evidence that these risks are being minimised.

Children who go missing experience well co-ordinated responses that reduce the harm or risk of harm to them. Risks are well understood and minimised. There is a clear plan of urgent action in place to protect them and to reduce further harm or risk of harm.

The agency is aware of, and implements as appropriate, the requirements of the statutory guidance for children who are missing. It challenges the local authority where an independent return home interview is not offered or arranged by the local authority and takes appropriate steps to escalate concerns. Parents, if it is appropriate, are made aware of incidents where the child has been or is missing.

Children are supported to take age-appropriate risks that are considered with carers, placing social workers (as appropriate) and the children themselves.

Children are protected, and helped to keep themselves safe, from bullying, homophobic behaviour, racism, sexism, radicalisation and other forms of discrimination. Any discriminatory behaviours are challenged and help and support is given to children about how to treat others with respect.

Children receive help to manage their behaviour and feelings safely. Foster carers respond with clear boundaries about what is safe and acceptable and seek to understand the triggers for behaviour.

Positive behaviour is promoted consistently. Foster carers use effective de-escalation techniques and creative alternative strategies that are specific to the needs of each child and planned in consultation with them where possible.

Restraint is used only in strict accordance with the legislative framework and the agency policy to protect the child and those around them. All incidents are reviewed, recorded and monitored and the views of the child are sought, dependent on their age and understanding, and understood.

Conflict management is effective and includes the appropriate use of restorative practices that improve relationships, increase young people's sense of personal responsibility and reduce the need for formal police intervention.

Proactive and effective working relationships with the police help to support and protect children. The agency and carers work with the police to protect children from any unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system.

Foster carers understand the risks that use of the internet may pose for children, such as bullying, sexual exploitation and radicalisation. The agency has well-developed strategies to support carers in keeping children safe and to support them in learning how to keep themselves safe.

Careful recruitment and regular monitoring of staff and carers prevent unsuitable staff or carers from being recruited and having the opportunity to harm children or to place them at risk. The relevant authorities are informed of any concerns about inappropriate adults.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation and training of foster carers have a strong focus on keeping children safe. The agency promotes safe care, makes unannounced visits to foster carers at least annually and ensures that children have regular opportunities to speak to a trusted professional adult without their foster carers.

Agency staff and foster carers know and follow procedures for responding to concerns about the safety of a child. Any child protection concerns are immediately shared with the placing and/or host local authority as required and a record of that referral is retained.

There is evidence that the agency follows up the outcome of the referral quickly and that appropriate action has been taken to protect the child from further harm. Where the agency is not satisfied with the response from either the local authority where the placement is located or the placing authority, it escalates its concerns appropriately, including by writing

to the director of children's services in the local authority placing the child.

Investigations into allegations or suspicion of harm are shared with the appropriate agencies and are handled fairly, quickly and in accordance with statutory guidance. Children are supported and protected. Support is given both to the person making the allegation and the person who is the subject of the allegation. Sensitive and carefully assessed decisions are taken if removal of children from carers is necessary if a carer is subject to an allegation.

The agency has effective links with local authorities, designated officers and other key safeguarding agencies. There is good communication about safeguarding issues, such as any injuries sustained during restraints or allegations against foster carers. The agency has good relationships with relevant local voluntary sector organisations that may be able to offer specialist support to children in keeping themselves safe.

Foster homes are safe and secure and protect children from harm or the risk of harm. They provide a comfortable environment for children. All necessary adaptations and equipment are provided.

Recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers have a very strong focus on child protection, including help to ensure that children living in foster homes are safe and feel safe. Preparation of foster carers addresses the potential impact of abuse and neglect on the behaviour and needs of children and helps prepare them for the developing needs of any children placed.

Requires improvement to be good

The help and protection offered to children are likely to require improvement if children are not yet receiving good help and protection, but there are no serious failures that leave them either being harmed or at risk of harm.

Inadequate

The help and protection offered to children are likely to be inadequate if there are serious or widespread failures that leave children being harmed, at risk of harm or with their welfare not being safeguarded.

Outstanding

The help and protection offered to children and young people are likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a good judgement, there is evidence of the following.

Professional practice results in sustained improvement to the lives of children. Highly effective planning manages and minimises risks to children. Where children are new in placement, any risks are well understood and are significantly reducing.

Proactive and creative safeguarding practice means that all children, including the most vulnerable, have a strong sense of safety and well-being and they are unlikely to be missing from care on a regular basis. Children are involved in creating ways to de-escalate situations and finding creative alternative strategies that are effective.

Research-informed practice, some of which may be innovative, continues to develop from a strong and confident base, making an exceptional difference to the lives and experiences of children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

Areas of required evidence are:

- whether leaders and managers show an ambitious vision, have high expectations for what all children can achieve and ensure high standards of care
- how well leaders and managers prioritise the needs of children and young people
- the extent to which carers are supported to ensure that children and young people continually make progress from their starting points across all aspects of their development, because leaders and managers have a clear understanding of the progress that children and young people are making in respect of the plan for them
- whether leaders and managers provide the right supportive environment for staff through effective supervision and appraisal and high quality induction and training programmes, tailored to the specific needs of the children and young people
- how well leaders and managers know and understand the setting's strengths and weaknesses, prevent shortfalls, identify weaknesses and take decisive and effective action
- whether the agency is achieving its stated aims and objectives
- the quality of professional relationships to ensure the best possible allround support to children and young people in all areas of their development
- whether leaders and managers actively challenge when the responses from other services are not effective
- the extent to which leaders and managers actively promote equality and diversity

Good

The agency is managed effectively and efficiently by a permanent, suitably experienced and qualified registered manager. Urgent action is taken to address any vacancy of the registered manager post.

The agency is properly staffed and resourced to meet the needs of foster carers and children. Staff and panel members are suitably vetted and qualified and are able to deliver high quality services to foster carers and children. Arrangements for recruitment and appraisals are robust.

Leaders and managers actively and regularly monitor the quality of care provided. They use learning from practice and feedback to improve the experiences and care of children. This includes, for example, direct testimony from children, young people, parents, carers, other professionals and other stakeholders.

They learn from complaints, staff feedback, placement successes and breakdowns, and any serious events. They identify strengths and areas for improvement and implement clear development plans that continually improve the experiences of children.

Robust action is taken to address all issues of concern, including any concerns or complaints from children, young people and local residents. Proper investigations are undertaken. Placing and host authorities are engaged as necessary. Effective action has been taken to address all requirements and recommendations from previous inspections. The agency's responses to recommendations from the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) are timely and appropriate.

Leaders and managers take steps to ensure that plans for individual children comprehensively address their needs. The agency works proactively and positively with other agencies and professionals. Leaders and managers seek to build effective working relationships with parents and social workers from placing authorities and with the local authority where they are located to secure positive outcomes for children.

Where children are not settling into their placement, leaders and managers take steps to ensure that the plan is reviewed with the placing authority, the carers and parents (where this is appropriate) to consider the best steps to take next.

They challenge effectively and take action when they are concerned that placing authorities are not making decisions that are in children's best interests, when the statutory requirements for looked-after children are not met, or when they cannot keep children safe.

Leaders and managers understand the plans for the children and actively drive the achievement of important milestones, goals and permanence for their futures. Leaders and managers monitor the progress that individual children make and can demonstrate the positive impact that a placement has had on individual children's progress and life chances.

Managers and staff receive regular and effective supervision that is focused on children's experiences, needs, plans and feedback. Supervision is recorded effectively. There is effective support and challenge, including through team and management meetings, to ensure that the professional development of staff and leaders results in the right environment for good practice to thrive.

Training, development and induction activities are effective and are focused on ensuring that the agency can meet the specific needs of the children who they are responsible for.

Activities are evaluated to ensure that they lead to effective practice. Leaders, managers and staff are up to date with current practice in their specialist area.

The staff team works collaboratively to provide consistency and stability. There are clear responsibilities and accountabilities and the staff team has a sense of shared ownership about its practice. Staff report that they are well led and managed and there is other evidence to support this.

Leaders and managers make child-centred decisions when matching children with foster carers, including giving consideration to the needs of other children already living with the carers.

The statement of purpose and children's guide, which is kept under review, clearly sets out the ethos and objectives of the fostering agency.

The registered provider is financially viable and can deliver high quality, stable care for children.

Case records reflect children's lives and the work that is undertaken with them. Case records

reflect children's achievements and clearly relate to the plans for their futures. The style and clarity of records increases the understanding that children have about their histories, background and experiences. The records are available to children who are able to see or contribute to them as they wish, with appropriate support.

The registered person ensures that notifications of all significant events that relate to the welfare and protection of children placed with the agency's carers are made to the appropriate authorities. The registered person takes the necessary action following the incident to ensure that the child's needs are met and that they are safe and protected.

The culture of the agency is characterised by high expectations and aspirations for all children. This is demonstrated in practice.

Leaders and managers regularly review and act on any known risks to children, taking advice and guidance from local partners and agencies.

Carers receive regular and effective supervision that is focused on children's experiences, needs, plans and feedback. Supervision is recorded. Carers receive a formal review annually. Early reviews are held where needed. There is effective support and challenge through the supervision and review processes to ensure that carers are providing high quality care.

The agency recruits a range of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of children who are looked after or children receiving a short break service from the agency. Recruitment is in line with the agency's statement of purpose. The agency offers placements to children with complex needs and challenging behaviour and provides the necessary specialist support and help for as long as they are required. Managers review, and act on, the trends and patterns in the recruitment of foster carers.

Foster carers receive effective training and supervision in respect of the specific and complex needs of children and placements are more effective and stable as a result. Foster carers achieve the training, support and development standards in foster care within 1 year of approval, or within 18 months if they are family and friends carers.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the fostering agency. It carries out a rigorous quality assurance function and promotes thorough assessments, support and training for foster carers. The panel members are recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds. It has the necessary knowledge and expertise to support the agency to make effective child-centred decisions in relation to the cases before them.

Fostering for adoption is actively and effectively promoted wherever possible. The agency does all it can to ensure that the child-centred objectives of fostering for adoption are properly understood and implemented by all involved. Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the impact of fostering for adoption arrangements.

Requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers is likely to require improvement if the characteristics of good leadership and management are not in place.

Where there are weaknesses in practice, leaders and managers have identified the issues and have plans in place to address them or they are less serious and there is capacity to take the necessary action.

Inadequate

The judgement on the effectiveness of leaders and managers will be inadequate if the experiences, progress or protection of children are inadequate and leaders and managers do not know the strengths and weaknesses of the agency. They have been ineffective in prioritising, challenging and making improvements. The agency fails to work effectively in partnership with others in the best interests of children.

Where there has been no registered manager for 26 weeks or more due to the agency's failure to recruit, or the absence of a manager leads to a risk to the welfare of children, this is likely to lead to a judgement of inadequate.

Outstanding

The effectiveness of leaders and managers is likely to be judged outstanding if, in addition to meeting the requirements of a good judgement, there is evidence of the following.

Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident and ambitious for children and influential in changing the lives of those in their care of the agency.

They create a culture of aspiration and positivity and have high expectations of their staff to change and improve the lives of the children they are responsible for.

They lead by example, innovate and generate creative ideas to sustain the highest quality care for children.

They know their strengths and weaknesses well and can provide evidence of improvement over a sustained period.

They maintain professional relationships between the agency and partner agencies that ensure the best possible care, experiences and futures for children.

Social care common inspection framework (SCCIF): independent fostering agencies