

Child Focus Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC381635
Inspection date 7 March 2016
Inspector Lee Kirwin
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

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Date of last inspection 05 March 2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Child Focus Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency which is a subsidiary of Sherico Care Services Limited. The agency provides care to children from birth to 18 years, irrespective of gender, and at the 31 March 2015, had 12 fostering households providing care for 17 young people. The fostering agency provides short-, medium- and long-term, parent and child and emergency placements. Currently, most of the young people in placement are young people who arrived in the United Kingdom as unaccompanied minors.

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: **Inadequate**

The agency social workers do not always recognise when concerns indicate that young people are at risk of harm. They do not have effective quality assurance systems in place to ensure that, when incidents occur, action is taken to keep young people safe. They do not always inform the placing authority or Ofsted of safeguarding concerns.

When young people are placed with foster carers, the agency does not pay close attention to matching the needs of young people already in placement. This increases the risks and vulnerabilities of young people and creates a situation where risk-taking behaviour increases.

Feedback from placing authorities suggests that agency social workers do not always demonstrate good knowledge of social work practice. They report that the agency is not always sufficiently alert to the impact of safeguarding concerns or responsive

when asked to provide information to inform child protection strategy meetings.

The agency does not clearly identify risk factors or develop effective risk management plans to help young people to reduce risk-taking behaviour and keep themselves safe.

New foster carers are not always subject to a rigorous evidence-based assessment to ensure that they are suitable for the role. The fostering panel does not effectively challenge poor assessments, and sometimes makes recommendations to approve applicants as foster carers based upon inaccurate or incomplete information.

The agency does not have robust systems in place to ensure that foster carers undergo an annual review which assesses their suitability to foster or change their terms of approval. The panel pays insufficient attention to the views, progress and experience of young people when considering whether to recommend approval. They do not clearly record the reason for their recommendations and the agency decision maker provides no effective scrutiny of the panel recommendations before making decisions. The independent social worker, who undertakes annual reviews of foster carers, does not make use of the information presented by the agency supervising social worker. This means that foster carers are recommended for review without sufficient scrutiny of their ability to provide safe care for young people.

The agency's policy in relation to young people going missing from care does not ensure that the agency response is proportionate to the risks of individual young people. The absence of individual risk assessments in this area means that young people may be reported missing when this is not necessary to keep them safe, or not reported when it is necessary.

The agency social workers are inexperienced and do not receive sufficient social work training to ensure that they are effective in their role, particularly in relation to safeguarding. They undertake regular visits to foster carers and young people in placement, but social work practice across the agency does not consistently demonstrate that they provide sufficient challenge to address practice issues.

The acting manager does not have sufficient knowledge and experience to provide clear leadership and direction to the agency staff. She does not have effective systems in place to monitor the quality of care provided to young people and does not demonstrate clear oversight in terms of the safeguarding practice of agency staff or carers.

Foster carers do not always follow the agency policies in relation to behaviour management. This means that young people are sometimes subjected to sanctions that are not appropriate for the behaviours that they display.

Young people learn independence skills and are encouraged to learn how to budget and cook for themselves. The lack of individual risk assessments means that carers do not always achieve the right balance between managing risks and promoting independence. Most of the young people in placement are placed because they arrive unaccompanied in the United Kingdom. Most of them are well behaved and self-motivated to do well in education. Most, but not all, of these young people make good progress and have a positive experience living in their foster families. They take part in a range of positive activities within the foster families and also some organised by the agency.

There are no young people currently looked after under either permanency or staying put arrangements. The agency does not provide a range of carers with the necessary skills and experience to meet the needs of young people with more complex needs.

Sherico Care Services own this agency and the panel chair is involved with them as a non-executive director. This compromises her independence and suitability for the role.

Areas of improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times This is with particular reference to making sure that there is a risk assessment and safety plan in place to address the vulnerabilities of each child. (Regulation 11(a)).</p>	<p>01.05.2016</p>
<p>7.—(1) A person must not manage a fostering agency unless they are fit to do so.</p> <p>(2) A person is not fit to manage a fostering agency unless that person—</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">(b) having regard to the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it—</p> <p style="padding-left: 80px;">(i) has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for managing the fostering agency. This specifically refers to the need for the agency to appoint a manager with the sufficient experience and skills to improve the standards of care to young people (Regulation 7 (1)(2)(b)(i)).</p>	<p>15.05.2016</p>
<p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">(b) the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill.</p> <p>This specifically requires the provider to ensure that there is an effective management structure in place to monitor the quality of</p>	<p>15.05.2016</p>

<p>care to young people and provide support and direction to supervising social workers (Regulation 8 (1)(b)).</p>	
<p>In order to ensure all staff and foster carers understand and implement child protection procedures. The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>(a) is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>(b) sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>(e) consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b)(3)(e)).</p>	<p>01.05.2016</p>
<p>13.—(1) The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>(2) The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that—</p> <p>(b) no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable.</p> <p>This is specifically to ensure that young people are not subjected to inappropriate sanctions, such as fines – when this is not for reparation (Regulation 13 (1)(2)(b)).</p>	<p>15.05.2016</p>
<p>17.—(1) The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.</p> <p>This is with particular reference to making sure foster carers understand child protection issues in relation to taking and sharing photographs of young people. (Regulation 17 (1)).</p>	<p>15.05.2016</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to—</p> <p>(b) the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>This specifically relates to the need to ensure that agency supervising social workers have sufficient training, support and direction in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of young people (Regulation 19 (b)).</p>	<p>01.05.2016</p>
<p>21.—(1) The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>(4) The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons</p>	<p>15.05.2016</p>

<p>employed by them—</p> <p>(a) receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal.</p> <p>Specifically, supervising social workers must undertake child protection training in key areas such as child sexual exploitation, trafficking and PREVENT (risk of radicalisation) (Regulation 21 (1)(4)(a)).</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must appoint panel members including—</p> <p>(i) a person to chair the panel who, in the case of any appointment made after 1st October 2011, must be independent of the fostering service provider. Specifically, this person must not be employed by Sherico Care Services (Regulation 23 (4)(i)).</p>	15.05.2016
<p>28.—(1) The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>(3) When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>(a) make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent’s household continues to be suitable, and</p> <p>(b) seek and take into account the views of—</p> <p>(i) the foster parent,</p> <p>(ii) any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child’s age and understanding), and</p> <p>(iii) any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent.</p> <p>Specifically, the agency must, having gathered the views of the parties mentioned above, demonstrate how these views support the agency decisions to approve foster carers or amend their approval. (Regulation 18(1)(3)(a)(b)(i)(ii)(iii)).</p>	15.05.2016
<p>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.</p> <p>Specifically, the agency must notify Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector without delay, if an incident occurs that triggers a child protection investigation in accordance with The Children Act 1989 (Section 47) (Regulation 36 (1)).</p>	15.05.2016
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>(a) monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p>	15.05.2016

<p>(b) improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>(3) The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority).</p> <p>Specifically, the agency must ensure that the data used to inform management monitoring is accurate (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b)(3)).</p>	
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

Ensure a good quality learning and development programme that includes post-qualifying training for social workers (NMS 23.1).

The written report on the person’s suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information. The reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider’s fostering teams (NMS 13.7).

Reviews of foster carers’ approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers’ ongoing suitability to foster (NMS 13.8).

The manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers (NMS 17.5).

The fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child’s assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1).

Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer’s work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child’s needs, taking into account the child’s wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer’s performance and develop their competencies and skills. In

particular, social work interventions should demonstrate a clear focus on the needs of young people and sufficient challenge to foster carers to improve quality of care issues if they arise (NMS 21.8).

All foster carers, fostering service staff and volunteers understand what they must do if they receive an allegation or have suspicions that a person may have:

- a. behaved in a way that has, or may have, harmed a child;
- b. possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child; or
- c. behaved towards a child in a way that indicates he or she is unsuitable to work with children.

The fostering service ensures that the required actions are taken, or have been taken, in any relevant situation of which it is aware (NMS 22.1).

The fostering service's procedure is in line with Government guidance and requirements, including the duty to refer information to statutory bodies. It is known to foster carers, fostering service staff, volunteers and children (NMS 22.2).

The care and support provided to children, minimises the risk that they will go missing and reduces the risk of harm should the child go missing. The agency should assess the risks to all young people and have clear management strategies in place to prevent young people absconding and to keep them safe if they do go missing (NMS 5.1).

If a child is absent from the fostering home and their whereabouts are not known (i.e. the child is missing), the fostering service's procedures are compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located (NMS 5.6).

Written records kept by the fostering service where a child goes missing detail action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return, any reasons given by the child for running away from the foster home and any action taken in the light of those reasons. This information is shared with the responsible authority and, where appropriate, the child's parents (NMS 5.10).

Children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. Children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm (e.g. sexual or labour exploitation) (NMS 4.1).

The service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This is in relation to helping foster carers balance the need to manage risks with the need to give young people a normal experience of family life and the opportunities to develop independence skills, for example – can they have a key to the home? (NMS 4.5).

Foster carers receive support on how to manage their responses and feelings arising from caring for children, particularly where children display very challenging behaviour, and understand how children's previous experiences can manifest in challenging behaviour. In particular, foster carers must understand how a young person's past experiences can impact on presenting behaviour (NMS 3.7).

Panel/s provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS 14.2).

The panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly

cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7).

The fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel. This has particular reference to ensuring that the agency decision maker reviews all information in relation to foster carer reviews, before agreeing to approve them (NMS 14.9).

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

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

Widespread failures in safeguarding practice have resulted in young people suffering harm and increasing risk of harm in their foster placements.

Most young people with more complex needs do not do well in their placements because the agency does not support foster carers to manage challenging behaviour. A manager from a placing authority felt that some placements broke down unnecessarily because the agency was not able to provide respite care to support young people and carers through crisis. Unplanned endings and multiple placement moves are upsetting for young people and have a negative impact on their outcomes and life chances. There are some notable exceptions, where young people have reduced risk-taking behaviour and live in foster families that work through difficulties and continue to provide nurturing support.

Young people do not always have a positive experience in their foster families and plans to move them on to independence are sometimes accelerated because young people are unhappy in their placement. One young person, who is nearly 18 years old, commented that the carer did not permit him to have a key to the house. This made him feel unwelcome and not trusted and is not consistent with an approach that helps young people feel looked after in the same way that a birth child would be. Neither the carer nor the agency could provide a valid reason for this restriction. No young people are subject to permanency arrangements or stay with foster families into adulthood.

Young people who do not present with challenging behaviours or put themselves at risk mostly do well in education. They are self-motivated, have a positive attitude to education and have good independent living skills. These young people make positive progress in all areas, they enjoy living in their foster homes and develop positive attachments to their carers.

Where young people are safe, they are also healthy. Foster carers ensure that their health needs are met and promote a healthy lifestyle. Young people enjoy a range of positive activities, both in the community and with their foster families.

The agency is seldom able to place young people with families who are a cultural match or speak their language. Most foster carers make efforts to learn about the young people's culture and help them to integrate into a multi-cultural environment. One young person commented that she really enjoyed the Caribbean food that her foster carer cooked and that she preferred this to the food from her own culture. Other young people were less positive and commented that if they wanted to eat food from their own culture, they had to buy and cook it for themselves. A foster carer explained that the young person shopping and cooking for themselves was a strategy to help them learn independence skills, but some young people experienced this as being uncaring.

The agency approach to promoting the welfare and emotional well-being of young people is not underpinned by training or knowledge of theories of attachment, trauma or loss. There is little focus on understanding the young person's journey into

care or how their past experiences may impact on their current behaviour. The agency has access to an expert consultant in child and adolescent mental health, but does not use her to inform interventions to promote the emotional well-being of young people. One foster carer advocated an approach to help them 'forget their past', without any understanding of the past experiences of the young people in her care or why they did not want contact with their birth families. This means that young people do not have the opportunity to explore feelings of loss and trauma as a way of making sense of the past.

The young people currently in placement are mostly well behaved but foster carers do not always follow the agency behaviour management policies. Sometimes, this means that young people are subject to sanctions which are punitive and not proportionate to their behaviour.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

The serious and widespread shortfalls in safeguarding practice across the agency demonstrate that social work practice is not of the quality required to keep young people safe.

The supervising social workers in the agency are inexperienced and relatively new to the role. They do not receive the necessary direction, guidance or training to be fully effective in their role. This has an impact on the quality of support that they offer to carers. A social worker from a placing authority commented that when supervising social workers attend professional network meetings, they do not always demonstrate knowledge of good social work practice.

Supervising social workers undertake regular supervision visits, some of which are unannounced, but the support they offer does not always provide effective challenge or demonstrate interventions to help foster carers improve their practice. This means that the focus of the support can sometimes pay more attention to the needs of carers than the needs of young people. Supervising social workers talk to young people in foster care, but do not always record their views. The agency does not always demonstrate how the views and experiences of young people inform the foster carers' annual reviews.

The foster carer review process does not provide a rigorous assessment of their suitability to provide safe care or prioritise the needs of young people. In one example, a foster carer created an extra bedroom by reducing the size of the lounge. The panel recommended approval for this carer to take an extra placement without any assessment of the carer's capacity to manage more placements. They did not consider the impact of the reduced communal space on the young people already placed there.

The independent social worker who the agency employs to undertake annual reviews of foster carers does not take into account the information contained in the foster carers' reports. This means that foster carers are approved to foster, even when there are concerns about their conduct.

The fostering panel does not provide a robust challenge to the agency in terms of

the quality of information presented to inform recommendations. This means that foster carers are sometimes recommended for approval based on poor assessments and information that is incomplete. In one example, the panel noticed significant information was missing, but still approved the foster carers and suggested that the agency gather the missing information and 'let the panel know if there is anything controversial'. This is an abdication of the panel's responsibilities to promote safe, secure and stable placements.

The agency decision maker does not demonstrate that she quality assures the work of the panel, while making decisions based upon panel recommendations without effective scrutiny or challenge.

Foster carers report that they feel supported by the agency and that they can access out of hours support whenever they need it.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

Serious and widespread shortfalls in safeguarding practice mean that young people have suffered harm without action being taken to prevent further harm. Supervising social workers do not always recognise when the care provided to young people is unsafe and do not always inform the placing authority. Management oversight is poor and this means that when errors are made, they are not picked up.

In one example, a serious safeguarding concern was recorded in the supervising social worker's review report. The independent social worker did not mention this when recommending approval. Neither the agency decision maker nor the acting manager noticed this oversight.

When the agency take appropriate steps with the placing authority to raise safeguarding issues which result in child protection investigations, they do not always inform Her Majesty's Chief Inspector. They do not have effective professional relationships with partner agencies. One lead designated officer for child protection commented that when attending a recent child protection strategy meeting, the agency did not give him any confidence that they understood the seriousness of the situation. He went on to say that the agency was not always responsive or forthcoming with the information requested in order to inform safety plans that would ensure that young people receive safe care.

The agency does not clearly identify risks to young people or develop effective strategies to manage and reduce risks. In one example, the risk assessment identified actions to protect the foster carers' property from theft, but does not identify actions to reduce risks relating to the young person going missing, self-harming and being vulnerable to child sexual exploitation.

The agency social workers have not been trained in safeguarding areas such as the prevention of child sexual exploitation, trafficking or risks of radicalisation. When there are clear indicators that young people are at risk in these areas, action is not always taken to safeguard them and foster carers are not always alert to the dangers.

Few young people go missing, but the recording system in place to monitor incidents of going missing is not accurately completed. This undermines the managers' ability to identify patterns or to have an overview of how effective the agency is at reducing incidents of going missing. The agency does not routinely assess individual young people in terms of their risks and vulnerabilities associated with going missing from care. They have a 'blanket' approach that is not proportionate and could result in young people being at risk. This also results in some young people being reported missing unnecessarily, which diverts valuable resources away from those young people who need protection.

The agency does seek medical attention when young people need it, but does not routinely make use of expert advice from health professionals when looking after young people who may self-harm.

The agency ensures that all staff and foster carers are vetted and checked to make sure that they have no criminal convictions that would make them unsuitable to work with children and young people. Employment checks in respect of supervising social workers are completed in full.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

The agency does not currently have a registered manager, and an interim manager is undertaking this role with the support of a more experienced manager from a sister agency.

During the inspection, the interim manager made it clear that she holds responsibility for the effective management of the agency and is accountable for the quality of care provided to the young people. One social worker from a placing authority described how he experienced the agency's lines of communication as being 'fractured'. He believed that this was the reason that there were delays in the agency being able to take action: there is no clarity as to who has authority to take decisions. He felt that this meant that when placements are unstable, young people and foster carers are sometimes left without support, resulting in placement breakdowns.

The acting manager has limited experience in the role and does not demonstrate the confidence or knowledge to lead the service in a way that promotes the welfare of young people or that keeps them safe. She manages a significant case load as a supervising social worker for a sister agency. This has a significant impact on the time she can give to carrying out her management role. This means that she does not have sufficient oversight of the quality of care or the capacity to provide support and direction to the agency supervising social worker, who is also inexperienced.

The responsible individual offers support to the acting manager and has an 'open door policy', but is distant from the service. She does not provide sufficient strategic direction to ensure that the agency has an effective team to carry out the agency functions effectively and ensure that the young people are safe and that they make progress in stable placements.

The agency does not provide a range of foster carers with the skills and experience to provide for the range of children and young people described in the agency's

statement of purpose. Placing authorities are reluctant to place children and young people with more complex needs, as they feel that the agency cannot meet these needs.

The agency arranges a variety of forums and activities for the young people. These are not always well attended and it is not clear how feedback from young people is used to inform service development. The agency facilitates a foster carers' support group, so that carers can share experiences and undertake learning sessions. They appreciate these forums and comment that they are helpful to share ideas and good practice. The manager of the home uses these sessions to gather feedback from carers, but it is not clear how these views impact on service development or how any concerns are addressed.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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.