

# Excel Fostering Limited

Excel Fostering Limited  
243-245 Clifton Drive South, Lytham St Annes, Lancashire FY8 1HW  
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned. It was registered in October 2009. At the time of the inspection, 89 approved fostering households were providing foster placements for 162 children and young people.

The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short-term
- long-term
- respite
- parent and child.

**Inspection dates:** 25 April to 28 April 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>Good</b>
How well children and young people are helped and protected	Good
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Requires improvement to be good

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

**Date of last inspection:** 14 June 2013

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** Good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** None

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children say that they feel part of their foster families, which gives them a sense of belonging.
- Children feel safe in their families and believe that their foster carers want the best for them.
- Children enjoy a range of social and leisure opportunities; this enables them to learn new skills and improves their self-esteem.
- Many children have a sense of permanence. The agency supports a range of permanence options. In particular, many young people have been able to remain with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements.
- Foster carers feel valued by the agency and part of a team.
- Foster carer assessments demonstrate that they have the skills necessary to be a good foster carer.
- Training provided for foster carers covers a wide variety of topics to ensure that foster carers have the skills they need to meet the needs of the children in their care. The agency ensures that foster carers complete their mandatory training in a timely fashion.
- The strategic management of the agency is strong. The directors champion fostering and are involved in regional and national fostering forums.
- Managers challenge placing agencies effectively when they believe that decisions are not in the best interest of the child.
- Managers are constantly trying to improve their service and keep abreast of local need.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- Continuity in relation to the safe recruitment of staff.
- The need to be mindful of regulatory requirements in relation to the fostering panel being quorate.
- Improve quality assurance and monitoring to ensure: consistency of practice; the accuracy of records maintained; and make better use of electronic systems to help track children's progress.

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

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>20: Fitness of workers</p> <p>Ensure that the fostering service provider does not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(1)(3))</p> <p>Specifically, a reference from the person's most recent employer and where a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults verification, so far as reasonably practicable, of the reason why the employment or position ended.</p>	12/06/2017
<p>24: Meetings of fostering panel</p> <p>Ensure that no business is conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel – one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience. (Regulation 24(1)(ii))</p>	12/06/2017
<p>27: Approval of foster parents</p> <p>Ensure that the fostering service provider fulfils their obligations as outlined in their foster care agreement. (Regulation 27(5)(b))</p>	12/06/2017
<p>35: Review of quality of care</p> <p>Ensure that the system for monitoring set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals includes all the matters listed in the schedule; specifically evaluation of the use of any measures of control, or discipline; and that the system provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(1)(3))</p>	12/06/2017

## **Recommendations**

- Ensure that written records kept by the fostering service where a child goes missing detail actions taken. Specifically, the accuracy of records and that placing agencies are reminded of their responsibilities to undertake return interviews. (national minimum standards 5.10)
  
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. (national minimum standards 25.2)

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: Good

Children feel safe and well cared for in their foster families. They feel part of the family, which gives them a sense of belonging and permanence. Children spoken to during the inspection describe family holidays together, saying that this cemented their feeling of being part of the family. Children and young people made many positive comments about their foster families. Examples of these include:

- 'My foster carers have always been there for me.'
- 'I have always been included as a family member.'
- 'I am treated fairly. If anything is offered to the other girl in my placement, it is offered to me as well. I actually couldn't be happier with how we're both treated.'
- 'My foster carers always listen to me, and respect what I have to say.'
- 'They are very supportive of everything I achieve, and if it's something I have struggled with, they will always tell me how proud they are of me.'

Children feel that they have a number of opportunities to provide feedback about their wishes and feelings. They provide formal feedback as part of their foster carers' annual review process. These forms have recently been reviewed by young people to make them more child-friendly. Supervising social workers also ensure that they see children regularly as part of their support visits to foster carers. In fact, some children comment that they know the agency's social workers much better than they know their own social workers. In addition, since the last inspection the agency has set up a young person's council, so that they can consult with young people on a regular basis regarding their views. As a result, a number of agency documents have been subject to review and updated to make them more user-friendly. Young people feel they have played an important role in this and, in turn, this will help others in a similar position to themselves. They also feel valued by the agency as a result.

The agency's practice is child-centred. Foster carers prepare a helpful profile of themselves so that children know a little about them prior to meeting them. Children who have received these say that this helped to ease their anxieties prior to their move. The agency advocates strongly for young people, particularly for those reaching the age of transition. Managers have challenged local authority decision-making effectively and supported young people to commission their own advocacy. As a direct result, a number of foster carers are now supporting young people under 'staying put' arrangements. One young person commented, 'I don't think that I would have been able to stay with my foster carers if it wasn't for Excel, and I wouldn't have been able to manage without their support.' This commitment to young people ensures that they are in a better position to manage when they do move on to independence.

The agency promotes the health and educational needs of young people in their care. Social workers are able to demonstrate the individual progress that young people make. They have ready access to therapeutic support within the agency, both for individually commissioned work and for advice and support to foster carers

and supervising social workers. Foster carers say this helped them deal more effectively with some presenting behaviours displayed by young people. Similarly, some children have received private tuition to ensure that they meet their educational targets. However, monitoring systems to evidence young people's improving outcomes over time are not yet sufficiently embedded to demonstrate this progress. The agency is not currently making best use of their information held electronically. Many young people have achieved good national examination results, well above the national average for children looked after. Young people receive support to go on to university to enhance their education and employment opportunities.

Foster carers and the agency celebrate children's progress and achievements. A regular newsletter has a section on achievements. In addition, the agency held its first award ceremony in June 2016, which was a huge success. This will now be an annual event. Children also talk fondly about the 'Excel's got talent' event, where young people were able to demonstrate their musical and creative skills. Such events allow children and young people the opportunity to meet with their peers, so that they realise that they are not alone, as well as providing positive recognition of their achievements. This motivates them to achieve further and increases their self-confidence.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is good. Senior managers, who have a clear understanding of the skills required and the needs of the children requiring foster placements, undertake all initial home visits. While the agency participates in a range of recruitment initiatives, such as radio advertising, family and friends have recruited the majority of successful applicants via word of mouth and recommendation. Foster carers receive appropriate pre-approval training to ensure that they have a realistic view of the fostering task. The majority of fostering assessment reports contain good analysis and evaluation, demonstrating their ability to care for children safely and competently.

Support to approved foster carers is good. Foster carers speak positively about the agency and the support they receive. Many positive comments were received during the inspection and in the annual survey returns requested by Ofsted. Examples of these include:

- 'I am treated as part of the professional team and feel that we add value to the process.'
- 'I feel valued. I am praised and my hard work acknowledged.'
- 'My agency is superb and provide all support needed.'
- 'I have no complaints. They have always been there for us.'
- 'Staff are professional, supportive, friendly and thorough.'

The fostering agency is proactive in pursuing full information about children to ensure that foster carers are able to meet their needs. However, some children still require a placement in an emergency, when social workers know little about them and the agency is providing placements for some children and young people with challenging behaviours. This may account for the agency's disruption rates being higher than the national average, although fuller analysis of the reasons for this, by the agency, is in its infancy.

## **How well children and young people are helped and protected: Good**

There is a good safeguarding ethos within the agency. Children and young people say that they feel safe and secure in their foster families. Details about how they can raise any concerns or complaints are also clear in the children's guide to fostering, which they receive when they move in with their foster family. The agency also ensures that children and young people have access to an independent advocate, should they need one. Supervising social workers see the children in placement on a regular basis. These measures ensure that those in placement with the agency are able to access support if they need it and help agency staff monitor their well-being.

Staff undertake unannounced visits to foster carers annually. However, currently the foster care agreement indicates that staff will complete such visits three times a year. The agency has been unable to fulfil this commitment, except in a small minority of cases, which is somewhat misleading.

The agency acknowledges and deals with allegations and complaints safely. The welfare of children is clearly the priority of staff. Liaison takes place with other bodies with safeguarding responsibilities. The agency takes action if recommendations arise from any investigation, thus demonstrating that managers learn from any challenging situations that do occur.

Safe care policies and risk assessments outline the specific risks for each individual young person. They are agreed with placing social workers. This ensures that appropriate safeguards are in place. The agency also ensures that young people receive information about how to keep themselves safe. For example, the children in care council is currently devising a play to alert young people to the signs of bullying and help equip them with the skills required to deal with such a situation.

A small number of young people are involved in risk-taking behaviour, such as going missing from home. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities when incidents do occur and are proactive in trying to locate young people. Foster carers and agency staff work alongside the police and placing social workers in educating young people about the risk that they place themselves in when their whereabouts are unknown. The agency has recently appointed a supervising social worker to take the lead on the monitoring of children who go missing. However, this inspection identified some errors in records and the agency is not robustly challenging placing social workers when they are not completing return interviews with young people in a timely fashion, or providing the agency with information gleaned during these interviews. This information is crucial in the prevention of further episodes.

The agency helps to equip its foster carers with the skills required to manage specific risks. The agency does not promote the use of restraint. However, if physical intervention is required as part of a child-specific behaviour management policy, foster carers receive specialist training. In addition, a range of specialist training courses, such as online safety, self-harm and dealing with drugs and alcohol help to ensure that foster carers have the knowledge they need to address these issues if

such concerns arise. Foster carers speak highly of the training that they receive.

This inspection identified some shortfalls in relation to the safe recruitment of staff. Although this is largely satisfactory, a reference had not been taken from the last employer for one recently appointed staff member, and the agency has not been seeking verification regarding the reasons why staff who have previously worked with children have left their former positions. This does not conform to the principles of safe recruitment. Managers took immediate action to address these shortfalls.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: Requires improvement to be good**

While leadership and management are judged as requires improvement to be good, there are some strong elements to this judgement area, in particular the strategic development of the agency and its profile. The directors champion fostering and are actively involved in regional and national fostering forums. They keep abreast of local need and dynamic development plans demonstrate how they plan to amend their services to match this. They also maintain an active role within the fostering agency, as they are familiar to foster carers, who express confidence in being able to contact them directly about any concerns that may arise. This enables them to keep informed and drive forward improvement effectively. The agency's profile is positive, enabling them to grow in size since the last inspection.

A suitably qualified and experienced registered manager manages the agency's day-to-day affairs. A quality assurance manager, who is knowledgeable about fostering issues, supports her in her role. An experienced staff team demonstrates a commitment to the agency and receives regular, good-quality supervision. This enables staff to reflect on their practice. The clear recording of casework decisions provides a clear audit trail and ensures that any tasks are completed and reviewed in a timely manner.

Similarly, foster carers receive regular supportive supervision that is documented and the content agreed by all parties. Foster carers have access to a wide range of training opportunities, both taught and online, to support them in their role. Along with direct access to specialist support, this enables foster carers to provide high-quality care. The vast majority of foster carers complete their training, support and development standards promptly.

Managers challenge placing agencies effectively when they believe that decisions or practice are not in the best interest of the child. However, they are also willing to help placing agencies whenever they are able, consequently, promoting partnership working. An annual foster carer consultation process helps highlight strengths and difficulties and informs the direction of the agency. The agency also asks placing social workers to contribute to foster carers' reviews. However, the views of stakeholders do not currently form part of the agency's internal monitoring reports. While these reports contain a great deal of data, the agency is yet to interrogate this effectively to inform its practice. In addition, with the exception of restraint, they do not include details regarding their evaluation of any measures of control or discipline



used by foster carers. The completion of these reports quarterly does ensure that the senior management team is kept abreast of the agency's current position.

The agency has recently established foster care forums, so that foster carers have a formal link to senior managers and are able to play an active part in the strategic development of the agency. Regular geographically based support groups also allow all foster carers the opportunity to meet with other foster carers and the agency staff, including the directors. The agency acknowledges that poor attendance at some groups is a concern, as foster carers simply choose not to attend, despite this being a criterion of the foster care agreement.

While some monitoring systems are in place, some elements are yet to become established and effective. Anecdotally, staff are able to give many examples of positive outcomes that children and young people have achieved. However, the use of electronic systems to chart the progress of young people from the time of placement with the agency is in its infancy and has yet to be established.

The agency has a large and diverse central list of fostering panel members, who bring a range of experience, both professional and personal, to the panel. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably qualified and experienced. The panel offers a suitable degree of scrutiny and challenge. Agency decisions are made promptly, and clearly list the agency decision-maker's own reasons for reaching the decision. However, the role that individuals play on the panel is not always clear. Consequently, this has resulted in one foster family's approval being considered without a social work representative being in attendance. The agency did arrange immediately for this item to be return to the panel.

Foster carers are aware of their rights of appeal through the independent review panel process, and two such appeals have been made since the last inspection. In both cases, the independent review panel upheld the original recommendation made by the agency panel. The independent panel did make some recommendations regarding changes to agency practice. As a consequence, managers have reviewed their practice and made some changes, such as holding a separate review panel for foster carers' annual reviews.

Although managers took action to address the requirements and recommendations raised at the last inspection, not all have been sufficiently addressed, and consequently one requirement, relating to the recruitment of staff, and one relating to the agency's own monitoring are repeated. Weaknesses in monitoring make it difficult for the agency to evidence the good work undertaken by the agency and its foster carers.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of

help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

## **Independent fostering agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC396525

**Registered provider:** Excel Fostering Limited

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## **Inspectors**

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Lynn O'Driscoll, social care inspector



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