

# Freedom Fostering

Freedom Fostering Limited  
27 Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton WV1 4DJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Freedom Fostering is an independent fostering agency registered in 2003. The Director of the company is the responsible individual. The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The range of placement types provided include emergency, long-term, medium-term, short-term and parent and child placements. As at 31 March 2016, the service had 29 fostering households, with 47 approved individual foster carers offering 59 fostering places. The service does not have any foster carers who provide for short breaks.

**Inspection dates:** 8 to 12 May 2017

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>inadequate</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	inadequate
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	inadequate
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There are serious failures that mean children and young people are not protected and their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded.

**Date of last inspection:** 4 March 2015

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection**

None

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is inadequate because:

- Safeguarding practices are poor. Leaders and managers have failed to rigorously, or quickly, investigate safeguarding concerns. This places young people at potential risk of serious harm.
- Leaders and managers do not take effective action when child protection concerns are raised.
- Partnership working with other agencies regarding safeguarding and child protection processes is poor. Leaders and managers have failed to keep relevant professionals updated regarding serious concerns.
- Young people do not always receive sufficient information about their foster carers prior to moving in.
- Management monitoring of the quality of care provided to children and young people is poor. Leaders and managers have not identified the weaknesses within the agency. Poor record keeping and administration mean that management oversight of this agency is inadequate.
- Staff supervision is not provided with sufficient regularity and the recording of supervision is unacceptably poor.
- Leaders and managers do not consistently seek the views and opinions of children and young people, or their foster carers.
- Young people's case files do not contain the documentation needed in order to ensure that matching to families is appropriate, or that foster carers know how to meet children and young people's needs.

The independent fostering agency's strengths :

- Some children and young people are making good progress in their foster placements.
- Some foster carers speak positively about the support that they receive from staff at the agency.
- The registered person promotes positive experiences for children and young people by providing activities and days out.

## 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
The fostering service provider must produce a written guide to the fostering service ('the children's guide') which includes the address, including email address, and telephone number of the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3 (3)(c))	26/08/2017
The fostering service provider must notify the Chief Inspector of any revision of the statement of purpose within 28 days. (Regulation 4(b))	26/08/2017
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to 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. (Regulation 8 (1)(b))	26/08/2017
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. (Regulation 11 (a))	26/08/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect and provides, in particular, for liaison and co-operation with any local authority which is, or may be, making child protection enquiries in relation to any child placed by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 12 (3)(a))	26/08/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect and provides, in particular, for the notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 12 (3)(c))	26/08/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect and provides, in particular, for written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response.	26/08/2017

(Regulation 12 (3)(d))	
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect and provides, in particular, for 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 (3)(e))	26/08/2017
The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. (Regulation 35 (1)(a))	26/08/2017
The registered person must maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(b))	26/08/2017
The registered person must maintain a system which provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (3))	26/08/2017

## Recommendations

- Ensure that foster carers understand what is in the child's placement plan and have clarity about decisions they can make about the day-to-day arrangements for the child, including such matters as education, leisure activities, overnight stays, holidays, and personal issues such as haircuts. (NMS 7.3)
- Ensure that prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets the child's development needs. (NMS 13.6)
- Ensure that 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)
- Ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. (NMS 19.1)
- Ensure that, when recruiting staff and others, the registered person must have an effective system for reaching decisions as to who is to be appointed and the circumstances in which an application should be refused in the light of any criminal convictions or other concerns about suitability that are declared or discovered through the recruitment process. (NMS 19.5)
- Ensure that the fostering service has a designated person, who is a senior manager, responsible for managing allegations. The designated person has responsibility for liaising with the LADO and for keeping the subject of the allegation informed of progress during and after the investigation. (NMS 22.5)
- Ensure that staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with

regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. (NMS 24.4)

- Ensure that a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)
- 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. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- Ensure that managers, staff, volunteers and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and the lines of accountability, are clearly defined. (NMS 25.5)
- Ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 25.6)
- Ensure that no one may foster more than three children unless: the foster children are all siblings in relation to each other, or the local authority within whose area the foster carer lives exempts the foster carer from the usual fostering limit in relation to specific placements (in which case, they must set out the terms as detailed below), and the foster carer's terms of approval allow it (any terms of approval must be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for, even if an exemption to the usual fostering limit has been granted, unless the placement is in an emergency and for less than six days). (Statutory guidance – Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 1, page 16)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate**

Significant information is not adequately assessed or given sufficient consideration. Leaders' inadequate management of safeguarding allegations and incidents has meant that, for some children and young people, their experiences in their foster placements have been poor.

Children and young people's files do not contain enough information to inform foster carers about their needs. For example, some children and young people's files do not contain their annual 'looked after health assessment', or up-to-date local authority care plans. Some foster carers are unclear about delegated authority and what decisions they can make, such as whether a child or young person can have their hair cut or stay overnight with friends. This impacts on their ability to provide appropriate care.

Some children and young people do not have clear and rigorous matching documents on file. Records do not detail all of their behaviours, outline the potential risks, or demonstrate how carers should manage them. This does not support children and young people to have positive experiences or support their foster carers to look after them appropriately. For example, foster carers failed to understand the risks that one young person presented and did not provide the necessary levels of supervision. As a result, some of the young person's risk-taking behaviours increased.

Consultation with children, young people and foster carers is poor. The registered person does not consistently seek feedback or children and young people's views, wishes and feelings. Information provided to children and young people prior to their placement is inadequate. On some occasions, the registered person has not ensured that children and young people receive any information prior to moving in. The children's guide does not contain information about who they can contact if they are unhappy or feel unsafe. This compromises children and young people's experiences and means that they do not have easy access to an independent person if they feel unsafe.

Poor record keeping means that there is a lack of information regarding how children and young people should be supported within their foster placements, or how the fostering agency's social workers provide support to their foster carers. For example, children and young people do not always have the things that they need, such as toys. This impacts on some children and young people's social and emotional well-being.

Some young people do not always have sufficiently detailed plans place that set out the support necessary for their transition to independence. Experienced foster carers have used their own knowledge and experience gained through previous employment to support young people to have a smooth transition to independent living. Some creative work is done with young people to help strengthen their life skills including having opportunities through the help of the foster agency to learn

how to write a CV and how to apply for jobs. This gives young people increased responsibility and essential life skills for their futures.

Some young people have struggled to cope and make progress in their education placements. The agency has challenged education providers when children's learning assessments have not been completed in a timely way. However, the agency has not escalated their concerns sufficiently when delays have continued. Systems to identify and track children and young people's educational progress are not sufficiently rigorous. This has delayed identifying their learning and support needs. Consequently, some children and young people are not achieving their full academic potential.

The fostering agency supports sibling groups to remain together. However, on one occasion, the registered person did not seek agreement from senior managers within the local authority to exceed the number of children a carer was registered for and placed a sibling group of four children and young people together. As there were already two young people living in the home, this was significant. In this instance, the exemption certificate did not accurately reflect the number of other children that were living in the home. The registered person did not sufficiently assess the impact that this may have on the children and young people. In addition, they failed to assess the capacity of the foster carers to support all of the children and young people with basic tasks, such as completing homework and accessing out of school activities.

Despite some significant shortfalls, some young people make progress in their foster placements and they speak positively about the relationships they have built with their foster carers. For example, one young person described his relationship with his foster carer, stating, 'They are my family.' Another young person told her foster carer she feels safe. The foster care said, 'We have had to do lots of work with [young person] reminding her she is special and loved.' This shows the passion foster carers make to improve children and young people's lives. Leaders and managers provide activities and frequent days out for foster children, their foster carers and birth children. Children and foster carers speak positively about the diversity of experiences.

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

Leaders and managers have failed to keep all children and young people in this agency safe as they do not safely recruit staff who work for the fostering agency. For example, when leaders and managers have been aware that staff or foster carers have criminal offences, or known police information recorded on their criminal records disclosure and barring certificate, they have failed to identify what the offences are or consistently complete risk assessments. This places children and young people at potential risk of significant harm from adults who may be unsafe or inappropriate to care for them.

Some children and young people are at potential risk due to poor assessment of risk. Foster carers' assessments do not rigorously assess the possible risks the applicants may pose to children and young people. For example, when safeguarding concerns

have been raised by other agencies, leaders and managers have failed to robustly assess the impact of the information on the foster carer's ability to protect and safeguard children and young people. Assessments do not identify and consider whether carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding issues or how these should be managed. In addition, leaders and managers have failed to consider information from some carers' previous fostering agencies, including allegations that have been made against them. Leaders and managers have failed to communicate effectively with other professionals, or complete agreed actions from multi-agency safeguarding meetings or child protection investigations in an appropriate timescale. The fostering service's panel has not rigorously challenged leaders and managers when investigations have not happened, or when decision-making has been poor.

Leaders and managers fail to act swiftly or follow safeguarding procedures when concerns regarding foster carers' conduct are identified. For example, some carers failed to adequately supervise a young person, despite the young person posing a significant risk to others. Leaders and managers took insufficient action to address this. When foster carers raised concerns that a young person had a knife in their bedroom, was burning their carpet with a lighter and engaging with substance misuse, managers failed to provide support to the foster carers to manage these risks.

The management of allegations and other safeguarding incidents is very poor. For example, it is unclear how many allegations have been made against carers, or whether these have been acted on. It is unclear who has made decisions regarding safeguarding issues, or the reasons that these decisions were made. The fostering agency's staff do not always know what has happened during safeguarding investigations. For example, fostering agency workers and foster carers have not known or understood the rationale for unannounced visits to foster carers' homes, their frequency or the reasons why they stopped. This lack of transparency and accountability for decision-making creates confusion amongst the agency's staff and foster carers and significantly compromises young people's safety.

The registered person does not effectively review safeguarding incidents. For example, a serious disclosure made by a young person was not adequately investigated. No risk assessment was completed, and this meant that no consideration was given to future planning or the support that the young person may need. Leaders and managers do not promote a culture of wanting to learn from safeguarding issues in order to try to prevent future incidents. This approach means that leaders and managers do not prioritise the needs of the children and young people that they care for.

A lack of documentation and poor monitoring systems mean that leaders and managers are not always clear about what incidents have been notified to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (HMCI), Ofsted and what actions have been taken. Consequently, they have failed to inform the regulator of serious safeguarding incidents. This reduces the effectiveness of the oversight that the regulator has between inspections. In addition, it does not allow leaders and managers to monitor the progress young people make, or to accurately evaluate the quality of care provided by carers.

Generic risk assessments, matching documents and 'safe caring plans' do not help



foster carers to understand children and young people's histories, their risks or how to keep them safe. For example, when young people are at risk of child sexual exploitation or going missing, risk assessments do not provide foster carers with detailed guidance about how to manage these issues. After young people have been missing from their foster placements, they do not always have the opportunity to speak to someone independent. This means that the opportunity to gain important information about young people's safety is lost. Leaders and managers have not effectively challenged placing authorities about this, or taken adequate steps to minimise the impact of this deficit on children and young people.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate**

There is a registered manager in post who was registered by Ofsted in 2012. He is a qualified social worker with a background in youth justice and has also been head of service for family placements and adoption. The responsible individual is also a qualified social worker. A new manager has recently been appointed and is due to take over from the registered manager. The new manager has already taken up his post but has yet to apply for registration.

The management structure within the organisation is unclear. There is no guidance clarifying what the deputising arrangements are when the registered manager is not available. The registered manager is also the designated safeguarding lead within the organisation; as a result, when he is not present, arrangements for managing safeguarding matters are not explicit or sufficiently robust. The responsible individual and the staff are reliant on the registered manager as decision-maker and do not always know what actions have been taken on important safeguarding issues. This situation is exacerbated by the registered manager's failure to record all significant decisions and so key information is lost.

Leaders and managers do not promote the safety and welfare of children and young people in this fostering agency. They do not safely recruit staff or foster carers. Staff files do not contain the relevant documents relating to their job roles, their qualifications, sufficient details of their interview, or the rationale for the decisions made when appointing them.

The registered person does not ensure that staff receive sufficiently frequent formal and effectively recorded supervision. Some staff have no supervision recorded in their files since 2015. There are no records of staff appraisals. This means that staff are not receiving appropriate levels of support and this evidences poor levels of management oversight. Further, it means that there is no evidence that staff are provided with opportunities to reflect on their practice.

Children and young people's plans are poor. The registered person does not ensure that full and satisfactory information is sought to ensure that children and young people are suitably placed, or to support foster carers in meeting children and young people's needs. Despite this, foster carers are positive about the support that they receive from the agency's social workers. Significantly, the records of formal supervision of foster carers do not always detail the actions that the fostering agency social worker will take when foster carers raise safeguarding concerns.

Management oversight is weak and ineffective. There are no systems in place for

monitoring the progress and experiences of children and young people. Management monitoring systems, including quarterly monitoring reports, lack any analysis. Reports do not outline what action has been taken when young people have raised safeguarding allegations against foster carers, such as being assaulted. When weaknesses are highlighted within the quarterly statistical reports, the registered person does not sufficiently analyse the shortfall or take action to rectify it. Monitoring reports do not contain feedback from foster carers or children and young people. Leaders and managers do not sufficiently interrogate the fostering agency's data to be able to make developments to the service. As a result, the registered person does not recognise important information which directly impacts on children and young people's safety, experiences and progress. In addition, the fostering agency's statement of purpose has not been regularly updated or sent to HMCI, Ofsted.

Foster carers have received training in behaviour management and internet safety. They speak positively about the quality and variety of training on offer. Recently approved foster carers described a supportive assessment process and felt respected and listened to by workers within the agency. Equally, staff speak positively about training. For example, one staff member told the inspectors 'We do a lot of good work with the children and families, they feel supported by the agency and robust training is in place.

## **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:** SC037304

**Registered provider:** Freedom Fostering Limited

**Registered provider address:** 27 Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton WV1 4DJ

**Responsible individual:** Maureen Johnson

**Registered manager:** Darren Johnson

**Telephone number:** 01902 491117

**Email address:** [info@fftservices.org](mailto:info@fftservices.org)

## **Inspectors**

Hannah Bates, social care regulatory inspector

Rachel Britten, social care regulatory inspector

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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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