

Fusion Fostering North West

Fusion Fostering Limited

Office 325, SBIC, Broadstone Mill, Broadstone Road, Stockport SK5 7DL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is one of the branches of Fusion Fostering Limited. This registered office covers the north west of England and its base is in Stockport. It provides a range of fostering placements, including parent and child, emergency, short- and long-term placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing foster families to 27 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 August 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected requires improvement to be 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: This is the agency's first inspection since registration

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Highly supported foster carers provide children with warm, nurturing care.
- Children benefit from placement stability.
- The agency is aspirational and wholly supports children to achieve to the best of their ability.
- Children's achievements are recognised and celebrated and this helps the children to grow in confidence.
- Committed staff support foster carers extremely well. Consequently, carers feel valued and part of the agency.
- Many children benefit from living alongside their brothers and sisters. When this is not possible, foster carers support them to keep in touch with their family and friends in a planned and safe way.
- An experienced registered manager knows the children and foster carers extremely well. He demonstrates a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Shortfalls in risk assessments, safer caring policies and the reporting of all child protection concerns weaken safeguarding practice.
- Foster carers do not always make a record of the medication provided to the children in their care.
- Panel minutes do not always reflect the key issues discussed or accurately record panel recommendations, which undermines the panel's quality assurance role.
- Delays in progressing foster carer applications have interrupted the growth of the agency.
- Monitoring systems are weak. As a result, the registered manager is unable to demonstrate all children's progress and outcomes. Furthermore, current monitoring systems have failed to identify the shortfalls found in the agency's records.

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>11: Independent fostering agencies – duty to secure welfare</p> <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. (Regulation 11(a)) In particular, risk assessments, sharing child protection concerns.</p>	29/09/2017
<p>15: Health of children placed with foster parents</p> <p>The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 15 (1)). In particular, recording the administration of medication.</p>	29/09/2017
<p>17: Support, training and information for foster parents</p> <p>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. (Regulation 17 (1)). In particular, foster carers' training.</p>	29/09/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. (NMS 1.3) In particular, children's individual care documents.
- Ensure that 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. (NMS 13.7). In particular, form F assessments.
- Ensure that fostering panel makes its recommendation on the suitability of a prospective foster carer within eight months of receipt of the prospective foster carer's application to be assessed. (NMS 14.4)
- Ensure that 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)

- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. (NMS 25.1) In particular, monitoring children's progress.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by the monitoring. (NMS 25.2) In particular, the monitoring of safer caring policies, risk assessments, case records and reports presented to panel.
- Ensure that information about individual children is kept confidential and only shared with those who have a legitimate and current need to know the information. (NMS 26.4) In particular, safer caring policies.
- Ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within 2 working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days. (NMS 31 14.10) In particular, the decisions made following a post-allegation review.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Foster carers are a key strength of this agency. Many carers provide children with stable, warm, nurturing care and this helps children to feel part of their family. The children's comments reflect this: 'I am comfortable living here, I feel loved,' 'I am treated very much as part of the family,' 'My carers make me feel safe and care for me,' and 'We get everything we would get in a family and more.'

The agency is committed to keeping brothers and sisters together whenever possible. They have succeeded in recruiting foster carers who can provide sibling groups with long-term placements. At the time of inspection, the agency had 12 brothers and sisters living together. Furthermore, the agency has supported children to remain living with their parents by providing good-quality parent and child placements. Feedback from a parent that lived in a parent and child placement demonstrates this: 'Being in the placement was life-changing. The carers are very supportive and I have learned a lot of life skills. For example, I learned how to cook, use the washing machine and more. I am very happy at the placement and it has been very beneficial.'

The majority of children are in full-time education and making noticeable progress from their starting points. When barriers to education arise, the agency supports foster carers to arrange alternative provision that better suits the child's specific needs. This includes working collaboratively with virtual headteachers and social workers to secure individualised education packages, such as one-to-one tuition.

Likewise, foster carers have a good understanding of the children's individual health needs and promote their physical and emotional health well. This sometimes involves working with local children and adolescent mental health services and advocating for specialist support. However, some carers do not keep a daily record of all medication administered to children, in particular when children have refused medication and how this affects their behaviour. This hinders the monitoring of children's health conditions and the effectiveness of their prescribed medication.

Additionally, placement stability, security, acceptance, and a sense of belonging are helping many children to develop better emotional resilience and coping strategies. An independent reviewing officer's comments confirm this: 'I have been delighted with his carers and feel that they have done a great job in stabilising him and helping him to develop. I saw the young person with the male carer only last week at the end of the parental contact session and it struck me how much they have helped him to heal emotionally.'

The agency supports foster carers well. This is achieved through monthly supervision, 24-hour support, regular support groups, and peer support through a foster carers' 'buddy' scheme. All of the carers consulted with spoke highly of the agency and their supervising social workers, reporting that there is always someone available when needed. This high level of support is enabling foster carers to take an

active part in care planning, which in turn, promotes effective partnerships with other agencies connected with the children.

Children enjoy an active life. They benefit from a wide range of exciting activities, such as playing musical instruments, attending local clubs, and going on holiday with their foster families, all of which improves their confidence, increases their skills and provides them with opportunities to discover and broaden their talents and interests. This also helps them to develop their independence, which will benefit them when they move on to adulthood. The agency recently hosted an awards evening where children's achievements for excellent school attendance, improved reading and drama productions were acknowledged and rewarded by the agency. This shows children that the agency values them, which also encourages the children to continue with their hard work and efforts.

Most children move to their foster families in a planned way. The agency provides children with information about their foster carers before they move in. Children receive foster carer profiles, via the placing authority, which include photographs of the carers, family members, pets and the home. This helps to alleviate children's fears of them moving to an unfamiliar home. Similarly, unplanned placement endings are rare, which enables carers and supervising social workers to work in partnership with the placing authority to ensure that transitions from the agency are a positive experience for the children. This was confirmed by a young person who said, 'My foster carer was great; she kept chasing things up and so did her supervising social worker. I still keep in touch with the carer and that's good.'

Children confirmed that they receive the agency welcome pack, which includes the children's guide that informs them about the agency. The children's guides provide children with clear information about the agency's complaints procedure and other independent support and advice services. This ensures that children have access to independent people should they have a concern or feel unhappy about their care.

Foster carers understand how important it is for children to continue relationships with significant people, such as parents, relatives and friends. Carers support young people to maintain appropriate contact in a safe and planned way. A parent was highly complimentary about the agency, in particular their trusting relationship with the foster carer, whom they described as 'one in a million.'

The agency is developing its children's participation strategy. This includes introducing an electronic consultation tool to enable children to consult with agency leaders directly. The agency has established a children's council and they intend to build on its membership to widen the representation of the children in their care. There has been some consultation work undertaken with children, which provided the registered manager with children's views on the care that they receive. The feedback from this consultation demonstrated that children are consistently happy with the care that they receive. The voice of the child is clearly important to this agency. However, children's case records, such as safer caring policies and risk assessments, could better reflect children's views, wishes and feelings. On occasion, agency records have included sensitive information about a child in another child's safer caring policy. This is not upholding children's rights to

confidentiality and privacy.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

The vast majority of the children placed with the agency are safe and feel safe. However, there are areas of safeguarding practice that need to improve to ensure that all children are safe and protected from potential harm.

The agency's risk assessments and safer caring policies are not sufficiently robust. They do not assess all potential risks or give foster carers clear and effective guidance. For example, risk assessments for parent and child placements do not detail what action the carer must take if they had concerns regarding the immediate safety of the child.

High-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home, child exploitation and substance misuse are not currently an issue for this agency. Most children are extremely settled and say that they feel safe and secure. However, on one occasion, where a child was at risk of radicalisation, the carer was not sufficiently equipped to manage the potential harm linked to his needs. Here, the agency did not provide the carer with relevant training or clear, consistent guidance on managing risk within the community. The agency has acknowledged these shortfalls, reflected on its practice and identified areas for development, which include training and improved risk assessments.

There have been few child protection concerns in this agency. However, on one occasion, the agency did not report a child protection concern to the responsible authority through the correct procedure. This caused a delay in the responsible authority receiving the information and responding to the concerns raised.

In the main, the agency manages allegations against foster carers well. They share concerns with the placing authority and other safeguarding professionals, which enables an independent investigation. Furthermore, following the investigation, an early foster carer review is arranged to identify additional safeguards, such as training or increased home visits. However, on one occasion, the agency did not inform the carer of its decision to increase its home visits, which delayed implementing the actions from the review. These procedural shortfalls are undermining the agency's good safeguarding practice.

Relationships between carers and children are very positive. Carers build strong bonds with children and provide them with clear boundaries, which help children to manage their behaviour and to be clear about expectations. Additionally, the behaviour management training provided to foster carers equips them with the knowledge and skills to de-escalate situations, which reduces the need for carers to use physical intervention or restraint.

Safer recruitment practices for foster carers, panel members and agency staff are in place. The agency panel members and the agency decision-maker demonstrate robust practice when determining foster carer approval. Occasionally, panel minutes

have lacked clarity and accuracy, including the inaccurate recording of panel recommendations. The quality of information that is presented to panel is inconsistent; for example, some reports lack information about personal references for prospective foster carers. Recording shortfalls in panel documents weaken the robustness of the panel and the agency's decision-making process.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The agency is part of a national organisation. This is the agency's first Ofsted inspection since receiving registration in its own right in August 2016. Prior to this, it had been operating under a different registration since 2015.

The agency operates a unique service provision model. Rather than directly employing staff, such as supervising social workers, the agency contracts care partners. Care partners, who are largely supervising social workers, are responsible for their own budgets and fostering households. This includes recruitment, assessment and ongoing support to their carers. The agency holds responsibility for overseeing the care partners' work in relation to fostering. All carers are highly complimentary about the level of support that they receive from the care partners and the agency. A carer's comments reflect this: 'We're like one big family.' New carers value the 'buddy' scheme, which provides them with support from more experienced carers.

The registered manager is a qualified social worker who has many years of experience in managing and delivering children's social care. He provides appropriate, regular supervision to the supervising social workers, who have expertise in providing social care and support to children living in foster care. Annual appraisals also support individual staff to reflect on their practice and develop their abilities.

The responsible individual for the agency provides direct line management and supervision to the manager. He is a qualified social worker and has a good understanding of children's social care and fostering. Consequently, the registered manager receives appropriate supervision and guidance from a competent professional.

Children's social workers, reviewing officers and commissioners are positive about the agency and their effective partnership working. A professional said, 'The agency is fantastic and the carers are excellent – very skilled, nurturing and keep children at the centre of their approach. Children are very much part of their family.'

Foster carers' training can improve. Many carers had large gaps in their training, including equality and diversity, health and safety, child protection, missing from home, attachment, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. Consequently, foster carers are not suitably equipped to promote all children's welfare and safety. Furthermore, the agency is not fully prepared to meet the needs of children who present with high-risk behaviours.

The agency has ambitions to grow. They have recently recruited a new care partner to progress this. However, the agency has not achieved the national minimum standard target of assessing and approving foster carers within eight months. Shortfalls in administrative procedures prevented this.

Although the registered manager and care partners demonstrate an in-depth understanding of children's lives and experiences, monitoring systems are weak and do not provide a reliable overview of all children's progress. Ineffective monitoring systems prevent the manager from evidencing the agency's good work and children's impressive progress.

Similarly, the system in place for auditing records is ineffective. Safer caring policies, risk assessments, panel documentation, children's progress reports and carers' supervision records often lack detail and analysis, and at times, were inaccurate.

The registered manager has aspirations for the service and clearly wants children to have a good standard of care, and they do. He is a reflective leader and is aware of the service's strengths, which include committed foster carers and supportive staff. He recognises the areas that require improvement and has the experience, support and enthusiasm to achieve this.

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 whom 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: 1225624

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