

Family Foster Care

Family Foster Care Limited
Beech Bank, 2 Stanley Road, Worcester WR5 1BE
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Ofsted registered this agency in 2008. It has offices in Dudley and Worcester and is one of three agencies operated by a small private company. There are 45 children living in 31 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 July 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be 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 is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 21 October 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- The management team has not yet fully resolved the issues raised at the last inspection.
- Changes in personnel are ongoing. These changes unsettle staff and do not provide consistency for foster families and children.
- Leaders do not manage new projects well. For example, the introduction of a new recording system has caused substantial difficulties.
- Not all carers complete mandatory training.
- Some staff do not receive suitable supervision to enable them to reflect on and develop their practice.
- Staff do not always assess risk well.
- Managers do not follow safer recruitment practice to ensure that they only employ suitable people to work with children.
- Foster carers do not always have the opportunity to attend the agency's fostering panel, when their approval is discussed.
- Panel members do not receive joint training with fostering agency staff at least annually.
- The manager does not have a development plan to drive forward improvements in the service.
- Managers and staff do not have good systems to obtain documents from children's social workers. This leads to delays in carers receiving the information they need about the children they care for.
- The fostering agency does not use well-established foster carers to support those foster carers who are new to the agency. This is a missed opportunity to share their valuable experience.

The independent fostering agency's strengths :

- Most children experience stability.
- Children contribute to discussions and decisions about their care.
- Carers promote education with their foster children and help them to achieve their potential.
- Most children lead healthy lifestyles, which promote their good health.
- Children enjoy a range of activities. This allows them to develop new interests, build confidence and have fun.

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
Ensure that the registered provider and the registered manager carry on and manage the fostering agency with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8(1)(b))	16/10/2017
Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a)) Specifically, obtain all necessary documentation about children's care needs from the placing authority.	05/09/2017
Ensure that the registered person provides foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1)) Specifically, this relates to managing behaviour including de-escalation.	16/10/2017
Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to employees in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(3)) Specifically, verify the reasons why previous employments or positions with children or vulnerable adults ended.	05/09/2017
Ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate supervision. (Regulation 21(4)(a))	05/09/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (National Minimum Standards (NMS) 4.5)
- Ensure that foster carers have the opportunity to attend and be heard at all panel meetings at which their approval is being discussed. (NMS 14.5)
- Ensure that there is a written development plan, reviewed annually. (NMS 18.2)
- Provide each person on the central list with an opportunity to attend an annual joint training day with the staff from the agency. (NMS 23.10)

- Ensure that there are efficient and robust administrative systems. (NMS 27.1)
- Consider how fostering households can be a valuable asset to the fostering service, for example in mentoring and training other foster carers. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 13, paragraph 2.12)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The overall effectiveness of the agency is not at a good standard, but the majority of children do well.

Most children experience stability and many stay with their foster carers long term. This is an improvement for several children who have experienced many breakdowns of their previous placements. Children develop positive and meaningful relationships with their carers. This helps them to make good progress. A social worker said, '[Children] are thriving and developing; they have positive attachments and they are all settled [with their carers].' One child wrote, 'I feel loved', and another said, 'I'm happy to stay here'. An independent reviewing officer commented, 'The children I speak to are generally very positive about their experience of [living with] their foster carers.'

A few children's placements with their carers have ended earlier than expected. The manager does not use monitoring information about this to understand the reasons why and to inform the service's development plan, to prevent reoccurrence.

Supervising social workers provide some good support to foster carers. However, because of the high turnover of staff, this is not always consistent.

Managers and staff have difficulties obtaining relevant documentation about children in a timely way. There is no escalation procedure to enable the fostering service can challenge the placing authority. Lack of relevant documentation has the potential to undermine children's care and progress.

Children contribute to discussions and decisions about their care. Thus, children have a voice and people listen. For example, one child went to live with a foster carer in her home area but decided that she needed to be further away. Social workers and the fostering agency acted on her wishes and she is happier as a result.

The staff understand foster carers' individual strengths, skills and experience. They use this understanding to match new children with foster carers, and the staff do this well. This good practice increases placement stability for children. As one family support worker said, 'It's not about filling beds.' Supervising social workers provide

children with information about their new foster families before they move in. This helps children to prepare for their move and to settle in.

Most children achieve high school attendance rates and do well at school. Carers communicate well with teachers to help children progress their learning. Children receive extra help when they need it. Because of the good support they receive, children make good progress relative to their starting points. For example, one child is expecting to go to university and another child now receives positive daily reports from his teacher. One child who has a learning disability was two years behind at school when they first came to live with their foster carers. The child quickly recovered a year, showing a marked improvement in their academic progress. A headteacher wrote about one child's progress, '[He] shows impressive dedication and attitude and is reaching his age-related targets. His behaviour no longer draws negative attention so he gains as much as possible from school.' An independent reviewing officer wrote, 'I notice a positive emphasis [by carers] on education and the children are often doing very well.' Making good progress at school improves children's confidence and may improve their life chances.

Carers and supervising social workers work with placing authority social workers to arrange additional help for children who have emotional difficulties. Some carers use the services of a psychologist to guide their conversations with their foster children and to help them understand their backgrounds. Foster carers consider this support invaluable.

Children are in good physical health. Carers ensure that children attend routine appointments. Most make marked progress in relation to their health, especially in the period immediately after their arrival. One child has lost a lot of weight and now has a better understanding of what foods are healthy. Relatively few children require medication for specific conditions. Most of those children who need to take medication have learned to self-administer their medicines or treatments. This is important to their self-esteem. It also shows that children learn to take responsibility for their own health.

Most children enjoy active lifestyles. They join sports clubs and several excel. For example, one child attends a boxing club most days of the week, and another enjoys martial arts classes. One looks after the foster family's chickens, and many are looking forward to trips during the summer holidays. The agency's family support workers organise a programme of activities throughout the year. These successfully engage whole families, including teenagers and the sons and daughters of carers. Highlights have included Mad Science, a car-driving event, horse riding and camping. In addition to being enjoyable, these events help the agency consult with children and their carers. A recent development arising from this programme is the formation of a children's council. This provides children with the opportunity to share their views and to contribute to the development of the agency. For example, it has suggested questions to ask new foster carer applicants.

Children have positive day-to-day experiences. However, children's stability and progress are vulnerable, due to shortfalls in leadership and management and safeguarding systems.

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

Most children do not go missing from home often. On the rare occasions that they do, they return within 24 hours. Supervising social workers understand the reasons why children go missing. The reasons relate to children who are new to foster care and who want to return home to their families. Supervising social workers encourage placing authorities to conduct their own return home interviews. This provides children with an opportunity to talk with someone independent about why they went missing from home and what happened while they were away.

Managers have taken some action to improve carer training. For example, carers now use on-line courses. This benefits carers who work or are harder to reach. As a result, they complete more training than previously.

However, improvements to foster carer training have not gone far enough. Some training is of a poor standard, for example that on managing behaviour including de-escalation. This does not equip foster carers with the skills and knowledge they need to respond to young people's challenging behaviours effectively. Inspectors identified this shortfall at the last inspection and it is not yet fully resolved.

Managers do not ensure that they verify the reasons why staff have left previous employment where they worked with children or vulnerable adults. This does not help to prevent unsuitable people from working with children.

The quality of risk assessments varies. Some risk assessments lack detail and do not evaluate the level of risk. Inspectors raised this shortfall at the last inspection, and managers have not taken enough action to improve. Risk assessments that lack detail do not help staff and carers to manage risk in a proportionate way.

Carers teach children how to keep safe, often in imaginative ways. This is effective and, consequently, children feel safer. Children contribute to their review meetings. They also give feedback to the agency about their experiences of living with their foster carers. Children reported that they are happy and feel safe.

The agency's family support workers help some children to understand the consequences of their behaviour on themselves and other people. Children make improvements to their behaviour, and this helps them to make progress in other aspects of their development. For example, they improve their social skills and manage their behaviour better in school. An independent reviewing officer said, 'I find there is a general theme, that children are encouraged to behave appropriately and share their [feelings] via therapy sessions or with the foster carers.'

The agency has investigated thoroughly the small number of allegations made against carers. Managers and staff liaise with the designated officer and placing authority social workers effectively. They share information and act on concerns promptly. This helps to protect children and others.

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

Frequent staff changes affect morale. Leaders and managers recognise this, and the registered person describes staff morale as 'flat'. The agency has had four registered managers, and some temporary managers, since opening in 2008. Furthermore, the current registered manager resigned during the inspection. Frequent changes in manager do not provide consistency and continuity for staff, foster carers and children. An independent reviewing officer reported, 'In the time I have conducted work with this agency, I have noticed a bit of change of managers and workforce. I do believe a period of consistency would be of utmost benefit to the agency.'

Leaders and managers have not written a development plan. As a result, they do not prioritise what needs to improve and take sufficient action to drive improvements forward.

In recognition of the need for greater consistency, the agency has undergone a period of organisational change. The directors have recently employed a service manager to oversee the running of the company. This will enable the directors to step away from operational roles. However, leaders have not managed this period of change well, which has unsettled staff and foster carers.

Most foster carers who are new to the service have transferred from other agencies. Consequently, they are experienced carers but they are not familiar with the expectations of this agency. The manager has not implemented a system to make use of existing carers, to help carers who are new to the agency adjust. This is a missed opportunity. The panel reviews the assessments of foster carers who transfer, and panel members consider that the transfer process is rigorous. Good assessments help to safeguard children.

The geographical spread of carers between Shropshire and Monmouthshire is substantial and reflects a change in the agency's recruitment strategy. The agency has not considered the impact of this on foster carers' ability to access support groups and on children's ability to access respite care. Large geographical distances have left some carers isolated. The agency is taking some steps to reduce the risks associated with this, for example, communicating via video calls. Some carers and supervising social workers use this method to reduce travelling. Most carers feel that the support provided by their supervising social workers is very good. Carers who attend appreciate the support groups. The recent development of a support group for men who foster has been particularly welcomed.

Managers do not organise the administration of the agency efficiently. The two administrative staff are not able to deputise for each other because they each have specialist roles. This increases the risk of delay in administrative tasks during annual leave or other absences. One administrator does not receive supervision. Thus, managers do not provide this worker with the opportunity to reflect on her practice and development needs.

Since the last inspection, managers have increased their monitoring activity. They

scrutinise casework and case files to check for content and quality. They recognise that the quality of files still requires improvement and that work is ongoing. The process has exerted pressure on staff, and some have chosen to leave. Managers now expect foster carers to adhere to the terms of their foster care agreements and to undertake the necessary training. Foster carers who do not do this return to the panel at an earlier date, to review their approval. This shows that managers are taking steps to ensure that foster carers are accountable and take responsibility for their learning and development. Managers and staff track young people's progress and so can identify when they are doing well and areas where they may need more support.

The company has three fostering services, which are each registered with Ofsted. The fostering agency uses a central panel for all three registrations. This is effective in most regards, although carers' attendance can be problematic because of the substantial geographical size of the company. Carers are invited to attend panel but, because of distance, not all carers can. Panel membership is suitably diverse. The panel provides some good independent oversight of the agency. Panel members have not attended a joint training day with the fostering agency's staff for over a year. This does not give them the opportunity to update their skills and knowledge.

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: SC384460

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Inspector

David Morgan, social care inspector



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