

Children First Fostering Agency

Children First Fostering Agency Limited 03894588

3 Lords Court, Cricketers Way, Basildon, Essex SS13 1SS

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Children First Fostering Agency provides support to 73 children and young people in the Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and London areas. The agency has 78 foster households. The fostering agency is able to provide bridging, respite, short-term, long-term and permanent placements. The agency also provides preparation for adoption placements and parent and child placements. The fostering agency has contracts with a range of local authorities.

This independent fostering agency is a part of the National Fostering Agency (NFA) group.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 January 2018

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

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: 8 September 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The agency makes a positive difference in children's lives. The children enjoy stability and benefit from nurturing homes, where they thrive.
- Due to the help and support that they receive, individually the children make good progress.
- The children develop long-term supportive and meaningful relationships with their foster carers.
- The children feel safe, loved and valued. They know that their carers believe in them and will support and advocate for them.
- The agency works well in partnership with the children, parents and other agencies to promote positive outcomes for the children.
- Carers feel well supported, respected and valued.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Exemptions and placements outside of the carer's terms of approval are not always managed in accordance with regulatory requirements or good practice with clear oversight by the agency decision maker.
- Matching processes do not consistently identify and explore all gaps in skill and knowledge or identify ways to bridge these gaps.
- Not all carers have received an unannounced home visit in the past year.
- Agency records are not consistently maintained to a high standard and do not always reflect the actions taken by carers and staff to promote children's welfare.
- Panel member vetting practices are not consistently sufficiently robust.
- There is no system for requesting local authorities to undertake return home interviews following the occasions when a child is missing from home.

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
A person may exceed the usual fostering limit if he is exempted from it by the local authority within whose area he lives. In particular; arrange for the placement of no more than three children in a fostering household without an exemption having been formally approved. (Children Act 1989 Schedule 7(4)(1))	12/03/2018

Recommendations

- Where a child goes missing and there is concern for their welfare, or at the request of a child who has been missing, the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and the responsible authority to consider the reasons for their going missing. The fostering service considers with the responsible authority and foster carer what action should be taken to prevent the child going missing in future. Any concerns arising about the foster carer or the placement are addressed, as far as is possible, in conjunction with the responsible authority. (National Minimum Standards 5.9)

In particular, establish a system to prompt the arrangement of a return interview after each missing from care event.

- Ensure 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. (National Minimum Standards 15.1)
- Ensure the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes CRB checks. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (National Minimum Standards 19.2)

In particular, ensure that recruitment practice for panel members includes taking up the most relevant and suitable references and that potential gaps in employment are identified and explored.

- Ensure 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. (National Minimum Standards 21.8)
- Ensure 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. (National Minimum Standards 25.4)

In particular, where a child is placed outside of the carer's terms of approval, demonstrate agency decision maker oversight at the point of placement.
- Ensure staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (National Minimum Standards 26.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The matching processes are not always consistently applied. For example, on one occasion the panel recommendations in respect of carers' training and matching with children were not known by the staff who initially screen the referrals. Therefore, these would not have been considered in the matching process, had a perspective placement been identified. On another occasion, a carer's knowledge of epilepsy was not fully considered when making a placement of a child with epilepsy. When more children are placed with a carer than they are approved for, there is no consistently applied documented review of the carer's capacity to care for this larger number of children. However, these gaps in process have had no negative effect on children placed. In practice, children are well matched with carers who are able to meet the vast majority of their needs effectively. Consequently, the agency has a high level of placement stability, with many children either long-term matched or living with their foster families for a number of years.

The children live in settled, secure and nurturing environments, where they flourish. They benefit from responsive individualised care and, as a result, the vast majority of children make good progress. They grow in confidence and maturity, showing improved resilience and self-esteem. The children's views are consistently sought and carers help their views to be heard.

Foster carers show empathy and understanding of the children's experiences and situation. For example, one said, 'We haven't forgotten that we were children once.' A social worker said, 'The carer and family saw a child in trauma, not just complex difficulties. They made him feel wanted and part of the family, and they never gave up on him. Like real families don't give up. It's just amazing, he knows this family is always thinking of him.' The carers speak warmly and proudly of their foster child's achievements and the children respond positively to the encouraging attitude of their foster carers. For example, one foster carer said, 'For a child who was not expected to do that well, she excelled and got the award for the best improved child.' Another said, 'I am proud of all of my foster children.' Consequently, the children develop strong attachments to their carers, who they know will be there for them when times are tough. One child said, 'They are kind of like my family now. They've been there for me through thick and thin. They've always been there for me, and I call them Mum and Dad.' A social worker said, 'She's a fantastic carer. He wants to stay with her. He loves that woman so much, but won't let on.'

Although some children do not choose to follow their carer's guidance, the children receive good support to maintain a healthy lifestyle. All children of statutory school age are enrolled in education and the vast majority are making good progress from their particular starting points. Carers have clear aspirations and continue to strive to help the children to achieve, even when children continue to be highly resistant to formal education. A virtual head teacher said 'the agency is very strong. It attends all PEPs (personal education plan meetings) and is supportive of the carers and promoting children's achievement.' The agency is creative in its approach. For

example, it has built partnerships with a local bookshop to provide all of the children with a book on their interests. Carers support the children at a day-to-day level, such as helping them to read after school, and some personally fund extra tutoring to help the children to achieve their optimum goals. One child said, 'They help me with my homework or, if I am not doing as well at school as I should be, they have helped me with that, too.' Another said, 'She [the carer] has helped me educationally, as well as to be comfortable. As a result, I have got better grades in my GCSEs than I would have done.'

The children have the opportunity to have fun and to participate in activities which they enjoy, such as bowling, camping, church activities and family holidays. They build happy memories of family experiences. For example, one child 'lit up' as they joyfully described their Christmas Day in onesies, peeling the potatoes, central to the whole extended foster family partnership of making the Christmas dinner. Another described their personal pride in their sporting achievements as captain of the school netball and basketball teams and competing in the hurdles event for the school.

The carers help older children to access suitable further education or employment, as well as to prepare for independent living. They ensure that the children are fully involved in planning their future. Some are able to remain living with their carers after their 18th birthday. For example, one young person continues to live with their foster carers while they complete higher education. This helps to ensure a smoother transition into adult life.

Carers understand the importance of contact and family relationships for the long-term life successes of the child. For example, one social worker said, 'The relationship with birth mum is beyond what I ever expected it to be. They've worked so hard in that relationship, it is amazing. She [mum] said at the last review 'Thank you; it's the best thing you ever did', in reference to placing the children with these carers. To hear a birth mum speak so highly of foster carers is almost unheard of.'

New carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed effectively. Carers work positively in partnership with other professionals to promote the children's well-being. Placing authorities consistently hold the carers and agency in high esteem. They said:

- 'I'm chuffed with them and the really very nice work they're doing.'
- 'I think the carers are really good and have gone above and beyond.'
- 'This is a real successful case and an absolutely joyful placement. They've provided security, stability and aspirations for the child. It's been amazing.'
- 'They are very much his mummy and daddy, but he also knows his birth family.'
- 'They are very special people. They're the best I've seen in all of the years.'

Without exception, all of the feedback from children about their carers is highly complementary. When asked about living in a fostering household, children said:

- 'They're lovely people, they've taught me manners. They're good listeners and

are really nice and caring people. They understand me.'

- 'It's good, because they treat me like their own child.'
- 'Living with them is good, because we have fun all the time.'
- 'They are kind; they feel like a real family to me.'
- 'They're amazing foster carers who look after us well.'
- 'I have an awesome foster carer and I feel like I've known her for a very long time.'
- 'I have a loving and amazing foster carer.'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

The fostering staff ensure that children receive effective help and protection. The children say that they feel safe and are well protected. One child described how, following a serious incident at school, their carer walked them to and from school every day, and how this made the child feel safe. The child's social worker said, 'She [the child] knows they have her back and her corner.'

Risk-taking behaviour, such as offending and going missing, reduces for the majority of the children during the time that they live with their carers. The children feel that their foster carers worry about them and have their well-being at heart. One child described very clearly how their carer had supported them through some very challenging times, giving them consistently good advice about keeping safe. The child said, 'It's been great. I've changed for the better and my attitude has changed, and I'm not doing crazy things anymore. She [the carer] is a nice woman. She takes care of me and listens to me. I've learned I need to listen more to her. It's always been a good place, but I wasn't in the right place to appreciate it before.' The child's social worker said that the carer supported and advised him 'until she was blue in the face. Her 'stickability' is amazing.' They reflected that this solid, unwavering commitment had made the difference for this child. The social worker said, 'That boy has done me proud. He has helped me reflect on my own practice as a social worker and the need to not give up.'

However, the information held by the agency does not consistently demonstrate the protective actions taken by the carer and agency staff when children go missing, nor do the records always provide clarity regarding the frequency of 'missing' episodes. There is no system in place to request that placing authorities conduct a return interview following each occasion when a child goes missing. As a result, few of these interviews occur and opportunities to gain a greater understanding of how to keep the children safe are potentially missed.

The carers and agency social workers know each of the children and their individual risks well. One placing authority social worker said that the agency social worker 'Has provided lovely consistency; she's been very good when it's not going well and checking anything out.' The relationship between the agency social workers and carers is supportive and professional, which gives the placing authorities confidence that any concerns are managed thoroughly. Agency social workers routinely meet with the children in placement and the children feel able to raise concerns with

them, should they feel the need. Any concerns that the children raise regarding their carers are investigated appropriately.

The agency provides appropriate training and guidance to carers. Consequently, they understand that one of their most important responsibilities is to keep children safe. The majority of the staff and carers have undertaken training relating to the wider safeguarding agenda, such as child exploitation and radicalisation. The manager plans to ensure that all carers undertake such training to ensure that there is a consistently strong awareness of these key issues.

There have been no incidents of physical restraint and the agency provides carers with clear guidance on behaviour management and the use of electronic surveillance. The consistently applied boundaries contribute to a feeling of well-being and security for children. The carers are successful in helping the children to understand the reasons for their behaviour and to reflect on its impact on themselves and others. One social worker said, 'The carer has a laidback attitude. It is the calmest I have seen her [the child], she seems to have settled really quickly.'

The manager has effective systems in place to monitor significant events and safeguarding issues, although on occasion poor record keeping of events, such as the frequency at which a child is missing, undermines the accuracy of these. The agency investigates any safeguarding concerns, where appropriate in partnership with other statutory agencies.

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

There have been significant changes in the senior management of the service in the past year, as both the registered manager and team leader have left. While the organisation has tried to limit the impact of this, it has had a significant effect and the oversight of the agency has not been as robust as previously the case, although the new manager is beginning to redress this. The newly appointed manager is a qualified and experienced fostering social worker. She has recently submitted an application for registration, therefore her suitability has yet to be determined. The new manager has a good understanding of both the strengths of the agency and the areas for development, in addition to a clear improvement plan which she has begun to implement.

Panel processes are effective, with membership drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds and life experience. Panel members are well supported through regular training, appraisal and good administrative systems. Vetting procedures for fostering agency staff are robust. However, the same thoroughness is not consistently applied to the recruitment of panel members. For example, on one occasion the applicant's employment history was specified in years, yet this was not explored. As a result, there is potential for gaps in employment not to be identified and investigated. Furthermore, there is no consistently applied system to define what references will be undertaken. For example, no enquiries were undertaken with the relevant fostering service for a panel member who had previously been approved as a foster carer. There has been no access to children by panel members, therefore no actual risk was presented. However, these shortfalls limit the ability of the manager to

effectively scrutinise applicants' fitness. Consequently, information which may potentially have a bearing on suitability may not be identified.

Children are sometimes placed with carers outside of the carer's terms of approval without the written agreement of the agency decision maker. Therefore, the system to determine the suitability of these arrangements has not been consistently implemented and the ability of the agency decision maker to have effective oversight of the agency is potentially undermined. There is no evidence to suggest that children have been placed at risk or that this has led to placement breakdown. However, there is limited documented review of parenting capacity and what these particular arrangements may mean for the fostering household, including any birth children, as well as the child placed.

When children are placed with carers in excess of the usual fostering limit, this has been a positive arrangement agreed by those professionals involved as being in the best interests of the child. However, on one occasion the legally required exemption for the carers having four children in placement was not obtained within a reasonable timescale. This potentially placed the carers at risk of committing the offence of operating an unregistered children's home.

The staff are valued and supported, and their opinions contribute to service development. Regular team meetings, supervision, training and professional development discussions ensure that reflective practice is embedded. The staff's commitment to maintaining effective support for the carers and the children has limited the impact of recent staffing changes for most carers. The high-quality support and contribution of the staff to the carers' and children's well-being are consistently recognised by carers, who said:

- 'My supervising social worker is fantastic. She has done everything and anything I have asked her to do.'
- 'The support is vital in this work, and I do not know where we would be if we did not have it.'
- 'I know I can ring anytime and there is always someone I can talk to.'
- 'It's a brilliant agency; because of the support, you know that you're not on your own.'

Local authorities and partner agencies consistently describe strong partnerships with responsive carers and staff who have children's and young people's interests very much at heart. The agency staff are not reticent to challenge local authorities when their responses are not effective. One social worker said, 'I wrote an email to her [the agency social worker] thanking her for her support for 'x' [the carer]. The support between them is real partnership, it's fantastic.' Another placing authority said, 'She [the agency social worker] is really strong and supportive. She will challenge and advocate for 'x' [the carer] and the children.'

Equality and diversity are threaded through the service to ensure that children's individual needs are met. The children are encouraged to think about how they are vulnerable and how their behaviour can reinforce negative stereotypes.

Due to changes in staffing and insufficient management oversight, a significant number of carers did not receive an unannounced visit in the past year. In some cases, carers went without an unannounced visit for over two years. This means that there has not been a consistently robust and accurate view of day-to-day parenting, furthermore opportunities to identify concerns at an early stage may potentially have been missed. The current manager is committed to redressing this situation, and in the past few weeks has overseen a plan to conduct an unannounced visit to many households, reducing the number who are yet to have an unannounced visit.

Staff and carers generally maintain records of suitable quality. However, there is not consistently enough attention to detail. For example, on occasion key documents, such as delegated authority and foster carer agreements, are undated and unsigned, and the designation of the person signing is not always clear. There is no clear, shared strategy for maintaining electronic records and, as a result, when information is stored it is difficult to locate it. Information held does not consistently demonstrate sufficiently the actions that carers and staff take to ensure that children are well safeguarded and that their outcomes are consistently promoted.

The manager is aware of the need to notify Ofsted of significant incidents, all of which have been managed appropriately, ensuring that the child's needs remain paramount. When any complaints are received, these are managed transparently, effectively and in a timely manner, in partnership with other agencies where appropriate.

The fostering agency is appropriately resourced, which ensures that the services are delivered in accordance with the statement of purpose. The provider has taken suitable action to address the majority of requirements made at the previous inspection. Leadership and management are judged as requires improvement to become good, as some breaches of regulation and good practice have been identified at this inspection. These have had no identifiable impact on the care of children and young people. The shortfalls identified have related to systems not being consistently and effectively implemented and a lack of effective management oversight. The new manager has a clear vision for the service, is aware of the areas for development and has begun to implement positive change. As result, there is demonstrated capacity for and commitment to improvement.

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: SC034253

Registered provider: Children First Fostering Agency Limited 03894588

Registered provider address: Frays Court, 71 Cowley Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 2AE

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Registered manager: Post vacant

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