

A1 Foster Care

The Grangefield Centre, Oxbridge Lane, Stockton-on-Tees TS18 4HY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency was first registered on 11 May 2017. The agency is registered as an individual provider. It changed to this status at registration; previously the agency had been registered as an organisation. The agency provides short- and long-term placements for children with a range of needs. At the time of the inspection visit the agency was providing placements for 24 young people and had 22 approved foster caring families. The agency's staff team comprises the registered provider, a manager and four part-time supervising social workers.

Inspection dates: 23 to 31 January 2018

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	inadequate

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: not applicable, first inspection

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- The agency's fostering panel has not been quorate on every occasion. This means that its recommendations to the agency are not valid and are less robust than they need to be.
- The fostering panel does not record the reasons for its recommendations within the minutes of the meeting. This limits the information on which the agency makes decisions about the suitability of foster carers and means that they are not as robust as they should be.
- On one occasion, the agency made the decision to approve foster carers without having access to the final minutes of the meeting. This meant that the decision was made without certainty that the minutes correctly recorded the panel's deliberations and recommendation.
- The agency does not undertake foster carers' reviews correctly. It does not undertake the review and provide a report of the outcome to its fostering panel, but undertakes the reviews at the panel. It is not within the panel's remit to undertake reviews and this weakens the rigour of the reviews themselves.
- There is inconsistency in the maintenance of records of people appointed to work for the agency. Proof of their identity is not reliably maintained, which leads to uncertainty regarding whether this was checked prior to their appointment.
- The agency has failed to notify Ofsted about most of the significant events that have occurred regarding children and their foster carers. This limits the regulator's ability to monitor the agency's practice and actions.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Foster carer assessments are thorough and carers are well prepared to undertake their fostering role.
- Foster carers receive good supervision and are well supported to care for the children they foster.
- The agency provides its carers with a wide-ranging training programme, which is appropriate for their needs and relevant to the children they care for.
- The agency is careful in matching children with foster carers when placements are made.
- Children benefit from stable placements, their lives are improved and they make good progress.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the agency does not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering agency unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20(3))	10/03/2018
Ensure that no business is conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel, either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs, one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience, and three other members. (Regulation 24(1)(i)(ii)(iii))	10/03/2018
Ensure that the fostering panel make a written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations. (Regulation 24(2))	10/03/2018
Ensure that the fostering provider, in deciding whether to approve X as a foster parent and as to the terms of any approval, take into account the recommendation of the fostering panel. (Regulation 27(3))	10/03/2018
Ensure that at the conclusion of a foster carer's review the agency must prepare a written report setting out whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable, and the terms of the foster parent's approval continue to be appropriate. (Regulation 28(4)(a)(b))	10/03/2018
Ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	10/03/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that the fostering panel provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel. (NMS, 14.2)

Inspection judgements

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

This agency provides children and their foster carers with good support, which helps children to enjoy stable placements and make good progress. However, there are significant shortfalls in the agency's leadership and management. These mean that the agency's work is not sufficiently underpinned by strong decision-making and management. This limits the judgement in this area to one of requiring improvement.

Assessments of prospective foster carers are thorough in checking their suitability to foster. They are competency-based and explore applicants' backgrounds, attitudes and motivations to foster. The reports are evaluative and make clear recommendations about suitability to foster and the terms of approval.

Once approved, the agency provides its carers with effective supervision and good training. Training is based on a rolling programme of core and advanced training that is comprehensive, wide-ranging and covers the specific needs that carers may have to help them work with individual children. For example, one foster carer said, 'I was made very welcome and part of the team. Training and assessments were very clear and there was fantastic support throughout. The A1 team is always available at any time.' Ongoing support for foster carers and the children in placement is good, with supervising social workers working well with carers to help them care for children in line with their plans of care. Another foster carer said, 'The agency is fully supportive of its carers and also all of the carers within the agency are very supportive and helpful with each other.' This means that foster carers are well equipped to promote positive outcomes for children and to help them make good progress.

The agency is careful in the way it proposes matches for children. Agency staff carefully consider referrals, discuss these with foster carers and work closely with placing social workers to share information and plan placements wherever possible. Placement meetings always take place to ensure that good information is exchanged and delegated consent is clarified.

As a consequence of the careful matching and strong placement support, children make good progress. The agency provides children with good support for their education. When children are finding school difficult, the agency supports carers to address this with schools and placing authorities. For example, the agency successfully advocated for a child who was not receiving schooling for a short

period. It also works well to ensure that children attend schools that are appropriate to their needs. This support means that children are not absent from school and are supported to continue their education. The agency's carers ensure that the children have access to a wide range of varied out-of-school activities.

Children and young people have their health needs met. They are registered with all primary health services and receive any specialist support they need. Consent arrangements for medical treatment and health support are clearly identified. When young people have specific health issues, the agency and its foster carers provide them with high levels of support. For example, one young person's health has improved significantly because of his weight loss since placement. The agency has been supporting this by giving rewards and encouragement.

The children and young people feel well cared for and a part of their foster families. This improves their emotional well-being and helps them to make progress. One young person said, 'My foster carer is really nice, she is like a mum to me, she's always there, I'm just so grateful.' The agency seeks children's views by both formal and informal methods. They have a say in their own lives and care as well as having input into how the agency is run.

However, the agency's fostering panel arrangements and those for the approval and subsequent review of foster carers are not good enough. They do not provide sufficient rigour in ensuring that foster carers are, and remain, suitable to foster. This means that the agency's ability to promote high-quality outcomes for children is not as assured as it should be.

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

The agency's assessment, preparation and training of foster carers help to ensure that they are suitable people to look after children. They are helped to understand the risks that children face and how to work to keep them safe. The agency provides its carers with training in keeping children safe, safeguarding and online safety, as well as training in recognising and responding to risks from radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. The take-up of this training by foster carers, who have a high regard for its quality, is good. The agency also provides carers with training in how to understand and manage children's behaviour. This training includes topics such as understanding trauma and attachment, self-harm and cognitive development, safe-handling and de-escalation skills, as well as managing challenging behaviour. The agency also provides foster carers with good ongoing individual support. When children's behaviour is challenging, the agency works with the placing authority to develop strategies to address this. This means that foster carers understand how to keep children safe and help them to manage their own behaviour.

The agency's careful work to match children with their foster carers helps to ensure that children are placed with the right carers who have the information about them that they need to promote their safety. Foster carers have their own individualised safe caring plan for each child or young person placed with them. These are specific and detailed, with clear statements about how care will be delivered safely. Good

risk assessments and effective supervision and support help to ensure that care is provided in a way that keeps children safe. Children know who to talk to if they have concerns. This means that children feel safe in their foster homes. For example, one young person said, 'It's the first time I have felt safe and wanted.'

The agency and its carers work effectively to keep children safe from the risks of going missing. Very few children go missing, or are absent without authority, from their foster homes. One young person said, 'I don't run away, this is my home now.' When this does happen the agency and foster carers take appropriate action to keep children safe. Only two young people have been absent from their foster homes without authority since the agency was registered. One young person was absent on one occasion only. In the other case, a young person was placing herself at severe risk from sexual exploitation while going missing. In this situation the agency and foster carers worked hard to keep the young person as safe as possible while liaising with the placing authority to arrange a move to a placement that was able to ensure her safety.

The agency monitors significant events that occur within foster homes and ensures that placing authorities are notified of all events relating to the children they have placed. It responds to any allegations made about its carers appropriately and refers matters to the local authority and the designated officer appropriately. However, the agency has not notified Ofsted, as it should have done, of most of the significant events that have taken place.

The agency's staff recruitment procedure is generally thorough. Staff members described thorough suitability checks and a rigorous interview process prior to their appointment. However, some staff's and panel members' recruitment records do not contain evidence that proof of identity was sought and retained prior to appointment. This means that the agency is less assured of the suitability of its staff and panel members than it should be.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Although some aspects of the agency's leadership and management are appropriately developed, significant shortfalls in key areas lead to the judgement of inadequate.

The agency has been successful in recruiting sufficient foster carers and has developed effective relationships with placing authorities. This has enabled it to find stable placements for a growing number of children. It has sufficient numbers of social workers, which allows the agency to provide good levels of support to foster carers and the children they care for. This in turn helps children to make good progress.

The agency's supervising social workers are well managed and supported. The agency provides them with good supervision and they have access to the training they require to carry out their role. The agency provides its foster carers with a comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of training. This covers core training then more advanced courses for carers with specific needs. Commendably, the

agency has provided a number of carers with a 12-week course in attachment and trauma. This means that carers are well equipped to understand the complex needs that some children have.

The agency provides children with good information about being fostered and also about how to complain if they are not satisfied. Children's needs and views are taken into account, along with those of foster carers and placing social workers, and help inform the development of the service.

The registered provider has a monitoring system in place that feeds into the agency's development plan. Although this monitoring system did not identify the shortfalls identified by this inspection, the development plan, which is based on this monitoring, does recognise the agency's panel as requiring further development. This development plan is realistic and based on improving practice outcomes. The agency has recently introduced an electronic recording system and, at the time of the inspection visit, was working to upload records to this. When implemented, this system will help improve the operation of the agency and improve monitoring arrangements.

The agency has almost doubled in size, in terms of numbers of foster carers and children, since its registration in May 2017. The registered provider has appointed a manager who, at the time of the inspection, was awaiting his interview for registration with Ofsted. This significant growth has challenged the agency. The registered provider has focused on working with foster carers and children to ensure that they receive a supportive service and children make good progress. However, in doing this, significant shortfalls, which undermine the quality of the service provided, have not been identified and addressed.

The agency's fostering panel and decision-making process are weak. Arrangements for managing the panel are not effective enough and lead to breaches in regulation and reduce the robustness of approval decisions. The minutes of the panel do not record the reasons for the recommendation it is making. This weakens the agency decision-maker's ability to decide whether approval should be granted and the terms of this approval. One foster carer's first review was considered by a panel that was not quorate but still made a recommendation that the agency decision-maker acted on. In another situation, the agency decision-maker made an approval decision based on the draft rather than the final version of the panel minutes. Therefore, it was not certain that the information on which the decision was made was accurate or complete.

Weaknesses in the operation of the agency's fostering panel have also led to failings in the foster carer review process. Rather than undertaking the review of a foster carer and producing a report on which the panel should base its recommendation regarding continued approval, the agency has been compiling reports for the foster carer's review. They have then presented these to the panel without a concluding report from the review meeting. The panel has then undertaken the review during its meeting. This practice is not in line with the regulations, as the panel should not have a role in the agency's day-to-day practice and means that reviews are less rigorous than they should be.

In addition to decision-making weaknesses, the agency has failed to notify Ofsted of significant events relating to children and foster carers. Although the agency had notified the placing authority and the designated officer when appropriate, it failed to notify Ofsted of four out of the five significant events which have taken place that are set out in the regulations as requiring notification. This means that the regulator is unable to monitor the agency's practice and check that it is complying with regulations and safeguarding children sufficiently well.

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 differences 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: 1232379

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Stephen Smith, social care inspector



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