

Foster Care Associates North West

Foster Care Associates Limited

Lincoln House, Foxhole Road, Ackhurst Park, Chorley, Lancashire PR7 1NY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is part of a large national company that recruits, assesses, approves, trains and supports foster carers.

This particular registered provision offers a wide range of placements throughout the North West of England. At the time of this inspection, there were 268 children and young people living in foster families.

All the main functions operate from the head office in Chorley. There are three other main offices in Liverpool, Middleton and Lancaster.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 March 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 **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 27 June 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children speak positively about their relationships with their foster carers. They say that they feel safe and feel very much a part of the family.
- Wherever possible, prior to placement, children receive information about the foster carers with whom they are being placed. This helps children to feel prepared for their move.
- Placement planning meetings are held within required timescales to enable the clarification of the aims, objectives and desired outcomes for all children being placed.
- The vast majority of children make progress from their initial starting points. Where progress is limited, the agency implements additional strategies and support to help children with their progress.
- Foster carers work in partnership with other professionals.
- Children and young people take part in a wide range of activities. This includes activities on an individual basis and with their foster families.
- Participation is an exceptional strength of the agency. Children and young people are encouraged to contribute their views and be involved in the development of the agency in a variety of ways. This includes specific consultation groups, activities and through discussion with agency social workers and management.
- A number of children remain with their foster carers post eighteen under the staying put scheme. This provides them with additional support and stability during the transition to adulthood.
- The agency has replaced the previous technology to enable greater ease of use for staff and foster carers. It also supports effective monitoring by the registered manager and reflects the progress that the children and young people are making.
- The records maintained by foster carers and the agency provide a good overview of each child and their placement. This will enable children and young people to have a good understanding of their time with the agency if they choose to view their individual records.
- Children and young people contribute their views to the foster carer reviews as well as being supported to attend their own reviews. The agency is proactive in ensuring that the views of children and young people are listened to and acted upon wherever possible.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Initial risk assessments are completed. However, when new risks are identified prior to the commencement of placement, risk assessments are not consistently updated to reflect the additional risks in a timely manner.
- Recruitment records do not always accurately reflect an individual's actual time working for an organisation. This is in particular reference to when they have worked for the same organisation within a number of roles.
- Training for foster carers has significantly improved since the last inspection. However, when training needs are identified, the training is not consistently completed in a timely manner.
- The agency responds to allegations. However, outcomes are not always completed within the organisation's identified timeframe.
- Identified second carers, who share the role of fostering, do not consistently receive the same level of supervision and support as the first named foster carer. When the fostering role is shared, this would be beneficial to both foster carers to develop their roles.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. In particular, risk assessments are completed when risks are identified. (National Minimum Standards 4.1)

- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice. In particular, that an applicant's professional reference includes the period of their employment. (National Minimum Standards 19.2)

- Ensure that support and training are made available to foster carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. This relates to the timeliness of training and in particular what training should be provided before any children are placed or early in the placement. (National Minimum Standards 20.8)

- Ensure that each foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's need and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. In particular, that identified second carers receive this support. (National Minimum Standards 21.8)

- Ensure that investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled fairly, quickly and consistently. In particular, that their approval to foster is reviewed as soon as possible after an investigation is concluded. (National Minimum Standards 22.8 and 22.9)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency is an established agency. Since the last inspection, the agency has experienced a period of change and development. However, the commitment to supporting children to develop and achieve their full potential has remained central to the agency's practice.

The vast majority of children build good relationships with their foster carers. Children said that they are fully involved in their care and are an integral part of their foster family. Children said that they feel 'happy and safe'. This supports them to make progress, which the agency monitors well. One placing social worker commented, 'The young person has made good progress since living with the foster carers. They encourage and support [name] well. The agency keeps me fully updated and I receive information about their progress and any issues or concerns. I have placed children with the agency and have always been pleased with the communication and support provided.'

Children's wishes and feelings are central to practice. The children's guide provides information to children about their rights and how to complain. Participation of children to update the children's guide is part of the consultation and participation group. This group has also made a short film about children's experience of living with foster carers and the positive impact that it has had on their lives. The agency is continuing to increase participation for children to ensure that they are fully included in how the agency operates.

The foster carers support children in their education by helping them with homework, attending parents' evenings and supporting additional extra-curricular activities. Where educational placements are not in place, the agency and foster carers advocate on behalf of the children to ensure that appropriate educational placements are found as soon as possible. There has been an increase in response to requests for updated personal education plans. This helps to ensure that the foster carers and agency have a clear understanding of children's educational needs and outcomes.

Healthcare needs of children are promoted well. All children are registered with community health services to ensure that their healthcare needs are identified and met. The service has the additional support of a therapy service. The service provides additional support for carers to help them to understand and meet children's emotional needs more effectively.

The children are able to take part in a wide range of activities, both individually and with their foster families. Some examples of activities include football, swimming and after-school clubs and groups as well as activities arranged at the agency offices, including the agency choir practices, which culminate in an annual competition. The North West region put in a successful bid to host this year's competition, with the children completing a filmed presentation to support this. In addition, children

attend family holidays and trips out to local attractions as well as using community-based leisure facilities. This helps to support children to develop individual interests as well as feeling part of the family. The agency also ensures that when they arrange group activities, birth children are invited and included. This further develops and strengthens children's sense of inclusion in family life.

A number of children remain with their foster families post eighteen under the staying put arrangement. One foster carer said, 'I would not have expected my own children to have to move out of their home just because they were eighteen, so why should our foster children have to move then? It should be when they are ready and able to do so. Everyone is an individual and what is right for one child does not mean it is right for another. Some children need additional support with learning about being independent. I consider this to be part of my role.'

The agency reflects and learns from when there has been an unplanned end to a placement. Some factors which have contributed to these include lack of information received at the time of placement, risk assessments not including newly identified risks and a delay in specific training to enable the foster carer to have additional skills to meet specific needs. The registered manager and staff are addressing these areas to minimise further risk of this occurring in future placements.

Foster carers understand and recognise the importance of children maintaining their family links and friendships. One social worker commented, 'A real strength of the agency is the commitment to making sure children's family relationships are supported. The foster carer fully supports and understands the contact arrangements for [name]. This includes helping with transport, keeping in contact with the parents of the child and making them feel comfortable and confident in their child's placement, development and progress.'

Foster carers say that they feel part of the team and are valued. One carer said, 'I contacted a number of services when I had made the decision to foster. This agency responded right away and, from the start, provided support and explained every part of the process. I hadn't expected it to be such an in-depth and, at times, intrusive process. However, I fully understand why and throughout I felt supported. I am really pleased we continued to become foster carers.'

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

Children and young people say that they feel safe. The agency has implemented a more detailed matching document to enable stronger matching processes to be followed. This means that the placement stability for children and young people has improved, with fewer placement disruptions taking place. Supervising social workers develop risk assessments to help support carers to meet the needs of the children and young people placed with them. However, when previously unknown risks are identified, additional risk assessments are not consistently completed in a timely manner. This can impact on the placement if foster carers do not know or understand the strategies to use to minimise specific risks.

Foster carers understand the procedures to follow in the event of a child going

missing. The out-of-hours support system enables the foster carers to report and seek additional guidance. Training supports foster carers to understand the potential risks for children and young people who are missing from home. Records maintained reflect the steps taken by foster carers and the agency to support the safe return and support provided to children and young people. This includes requesting return home interviews through the placing authority to enable children and young people to discuss any concerns which may be contributing to their episodes of going missing. Where these interviews are not completed, the agency staff are proactive in escalating this to the placing authority.

Induction training includes key themes on maintaining children's safety and well-being, including internet safety. Mandatory training also includes regular, updated safeguarding training. The agency recognises that attendance at training can be difficult and has expanded access through online training as well as attendance on courses at the different regional offices. Since the last inspection, the attendance by foster carers at training has significantly improved. However, a small number of foster carers have not completed training within timescales identified at their review. This could impact on the level of care and support that they provide to children and young people placed.

Foster carers are supported to manage behaviours of children and young people through training and supervision. This includes the use of de-escalation strategies. This training also includes physical intervention techniques, which are only used as a last resort, to maintain the safety and well-being of children and young people. Records of these incidents are maintained and monitored by the manager. The agency has a therapeutic service which provides additional support, guidance and strategies for foster carers to meet children's and young people's individual needs. Foster carers value this support. One foster carer said, 'The additional ways of looking at children's behaviours, the reasons for those behaviours and the alternative ways to support [name] have been very beneficial to me. I have increased my understanding and [these] have had a positive impact, not only on the child but also for me.'

The agency completes annual health and safety checks of foster carers' homes as well as prior to children and young people being placed. Unannounced visits are also undertaken to ensure that the children's and young people's welfare and safety are being promoted. Foster carers receive supervision on a regular basis from their supervising social worker. This enables foster carers to reflect and to continue to develop their skills in their fostering roles. However, named second carers do not consistently receive this level of supervision. This does not enable them to have the same opportunity to reflect on and develop their practice.

The agency has a complaints and allegations procedure in place, which is available to children, foster carers and other interested parties. The agency responds to all complaints and allegations. However, on some occasions, there has been a delay and the agency has not completed the response in the timeframe that they have identified in the policy. The manager is aware of this and has taken steps to ensure that this is addressed to minimise delays in future responses.

Staff recruitment to the agency is subject to safe-recruitment checks. However, a shortfall was identified at the inspection on the professional timeframe of working with a previous employer. The agency has updated the application form to ensure that it is explicit in requesting this information and that it is verified with the employer. This will further enhance the recruitment practice of the agency.

Recruitment of foster carers is in line with safe-recruitment practice. Potential foster carers have initial visits undertaken to enable them to understand the assessment process and background checks are undertaken prior to assessment commencing. This includes obtaining references on suitability to foster. Once assessments commence, regular reviews of the assessment are undertaken to ensure that any identified issues are fully explored and this enables managers to review the evaluation and judgements of assessing social workers. Additionally, the quality assurance manager is able to highlight any further areas which may need addressing prior to the application being presented at panel. The panel and vice panel chair state the quality of assessments and reviews presented to panel has significantly improved since the last inspection and the agency is proactive in making sure that this continues.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager commenced employment with the agency in November 2016 and was registered with Ofsted in April 2017. He has the necessary qualifications and experience of managing a large fostering agency. He has high aspirations for all the children placed with the agency and this is reflected across the management and social work teams of the agency in the North -West region. Since appointment, the registered manager, along with the individual area team managers, implemented an agreed action plan to address shortfalls identified at the inspection in June 2016. This has resulted in the requirements and recommendations made being addressed.

Through effective monitoring, the manager has a clear understanding of the service and ongoing areas for development. Initially, there were a number of changes within the staff team which created some instability across the service. However, the manager has focused on this and it is encouraging that staff, children and foster carers feel that the region has managed change well, with a consistent staff team in place to provide advice, guidance and support.

Systems in place to support and underpin the monitoring of the service have been improved with the introduction of a new computer programme. This programme is tailored to the needs of the service and provides clear recording systems. This enables clear oversight by staff and managers of placements and progress of children.

The manager, when first appointed, identified a number of notifiable events which were not clearly recorded as being sent to the regulator. To ensure open and transparent communication, the manager has ensured that all notifications have been forwarded to the regulator, which resulted in a large number of notifications being received, some of which were duplicates along with updates to the original

notifications. However, the new computer system enables the reporting and monitoring of notifications to be completed effectively.

The fostering service works effectively with other agencies to make sure that children's needs can be met. This includes placing authorities, the police and health and education providers. This enables the managers and staff to have a good understanding of the needs and plans for the children in placement. This contributes to the overall monitoring of children's progress. The agency has a clear recruitment strategy in place to ensure that recruitment of carers provides a diverse range of carers to meet children's social, emotional, cultural and religious needs. This has been developed by speaking with commissioning officers from placing authorities to understand the demographic area and requirements of the placing authorities that the agency covers.

Supervising social workers receive regular supervision to enable them to discuss and reflect on their practice. They say that they receive appropriate challenge and support to enable them to do so, as well as attending training courses to enhance their practice. They feel that the positive effect of having a stable and consistent staff team in place enhances the overall consistent support and care provided to children.

Foster carers complete regular and detailed reports which reflect the children's progress and experience. One young person said, 'I love living with my foster carers, but I think of them as my mum and dad. They help me loads and I am happy. I go to school and have lots of friends. I know living with them has made a huge difference for me and I have told them I am going to stay with them forever.'

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: SC040408

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Inspector(s)

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Lisa Mulcahy: social care inspector

Caroline Jones: social care inspector



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