

UK Fostering

UK Fostering Limited

5 Twisleton Court, Priory Hill, Dartford DA1 2EN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency's head office is in Kent; there are four additional offices located in Warrington, Sunderland, Birmingham and Hounslow. At the time of this inspection, the agency provided support and supervision to 100 approved foster care households and looked after 85 children. This agency offers emergency, short-term and long-term placements and a small number of specialist placements, including remand and parent and child placements.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 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: 25 November 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children experience placement stability.
- Children make positive and notable progress from their starting points.
- Children sustain and make progress in education.
- Children benefit from a wide range of social activities.
- Children's physical health and well-being improves.
- Children see the difference that living with their foster carers makes to them.
- The value of diversity is embedded across the organisation.
- Prospective carers are carefully assessed.
- The panel is exceptionally well organised and internal monitoring provides good professional scrutiny.
- Supervising social workers and their managers provide good support and supervision to carers.
- The agency has a strong focus on safeguarding practice.
- The agency has a strong senior leadership team that is directly involved in the service.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- The implementation of risk assessments is inconsistent.
- Gaps in training for carers are not consistently considered.
- Some carers have not attended all the training expected of them.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the service consistently implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (National Minimum Standard 4.5)
- Ensure the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can be reasonably 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 Standard 15.1)
- Ensure training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. (National Minimum Standard 20.8) In particular, ensure that carers have access to radicalisation training and all carers complete mandatory training.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The majority of children make good progress and for many this is sustained over time. Children are settled in placement and benefit from the positive difference that the carers and the agency make.

The rich cultural diversity of the carers and staff is a significant strength. This means that the children referred are more likely to have the opportunity to live with families in which there are many shared experiences, for example in relation to culture, language, religion and cuisine. These experiences enable children to express themselves and encourage children to express their identity.

The carer recruitment process is often timely. The evaluation and analysis of prospective carers' personal and social history is thorough, which means that the agency has a lot of information about applicants before initial assessments are presented to the panel. This information helps the agency to build supportive and meaningful relationships with carers from the beginning of their journey in fostering.

The vast majority of children receive a warm welcome and integrate into the family and extended family network. The vast majority of foster carers are dedicated and committed to helping children to reach their potential. Some children are placed alone, and others live with their siblings. At the point of the initial assessment, the agency asks prospective carers to actively identify who they might call on from within their existing network to offer additional support should they be approved as foster carers. The agency then undertakes some additional checks. This measured and organised approach helps to prepare prospective carers for the practical challenges of the fostering task.

Referrals are initially considered by the placements team and then passed to the supervising social workers. Commissioners confirmed that placements are well matched. Carers unanimously say that there is no pressure whatsoever from the agency to accept placements should they not wish to progress with a referral. This approach helps to ensure that the vast majority of children have good experiences from the beginning of the placement. This inspection found that on some occasions the agency does match children who have high levels of need or engage in significant risk-taking behaviours with newly approved carers, without first demonstrating that full consideration has been given to the effect of the match on the household. After children are placed, and as issues arise, the agency is responsive and takes purposeful action to address gaps and put in additional resources. For example, laundry services were retrospectively arranged for a family who had four siblings placed.

Children experience holidays with their carers. Carers ensure that children access a range of out-of-school clubs and weekend activities, such as sports and dance lessons. Carers recognise their responsibilities to support children in education and they help to ensure that children receive the help and support that they need.

Children succeed in education. Attendance and attainment improve, which helps to ensure that children reach their academic potential.

The agency has recently introduced a children's council that creates further opportunities for children to have their say. Regular agency events and outings provide opportunities for children and adults to have fun together. The agency actively supports charitable work that helps to develop children's social conscience and provides some children with a unique opportunity to experience a life changing visit to India spending time supporting schools for children living in slums.

The agency has some young people in placements who are 'staying put' after reaching 18 years of age. Supervising social workers track children's progress by routinely adding information to an electronic system. Over time, this information helps the agency to see at a glance any patterns and trends in areas such as health, emotional well-being and education. The agency is very good at identifying when a child may benefit from other services, such as individual therapeutic support. The agency is also good at sharing information and talking to placing authorities when a specific need arises. This communication ensures that children receive good, targeted support to help them to address any individual emotional or mental health needs, and it also provides an additional level of emotional support for carers.

Bespoke memory boxes provide a visual reminder for children of their journey through their placement. One child told an inspector, 'My life has changed. I think I would have been in prison or dead if I had not come to live with my carer.' The vast majority of foster carers dedicate substantial amounts of time and patience to nurturing and helping the children to grow. Children who have experienced early childhood trauma learn that many things are possible. This helps to build children's confidence and to raise their self-esteem.

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

Since the last inspection, the agency has increased the number of carers recruited and expanded its geographical reach. The agency recruits in a variety of ways, for example by word of mouth and social media. The agency also holds some targeted recruitment events. Managers and senior staff go out to conduct initial home visits. The staged and managed assessment means that some applicants are screened-out during the process, which helps the agency to identify more effectively the applicants who are likely to be able to offer children safe and nurturing experiences.

The agency efficiently carries out the full range of required checks during the pre-approval process. Applicants are invited to attend pre-approval training. The feedback process from group training helps the assessor to have a clearer understanding of how the fostering task may affect the adults and any children living in the household.

The panel is exceptionally well organised. Video conference facilities are used to ensure that, although the agency has grown, one panel retains oversight of all prospective and approved carers. This arrangement provides continuity. Managers are mindful that as the agency grows the number of cases presented to the panel

grows, and they are actively taking steps to address this. For example, a recent decision has led to an increase in the frequency of panel meetings, which helps to ensure a manageable workload at each panel meeting.

The panel adviser is also the registered manager. He is consistently on hand to provide advice and guidance to panel members should this be needed. Panel members play a critical role in professionally scrutinising the quality of information presented. The panel may ask the agency for additional information before making a recommendation. The panel includes an impressive breadth of social and cultural diversity, skills and knowledge. Minutes and observation show that its discussions are balanced and focused on the applicants' strengths and potential limitations.

In some cases, when the panel requires reassurance, the members may recommend that, following approval, carers are placed on hold or that they are returned to the panel six months after the initial panel. The reasons for making a recommendation to the agency decision-maker are sufficiently clear in relation to general approval. However, the recommended terms of approval when the assessing social worker and overseeing manager consider a prospective carer to be suitable to care for more than one child need to be explicit for the agency decision maker.

Children know how to complain and have access to different resources, including age-related children's guides. This includes an online video by a care leaver explaining the guides in their own words helping children understand more effectively. There are few complaints from children because the agency provides good information to applicants and to newly approved carers to help them to understand the agency's ethos. For example, the foster carers' handbook states, 'We believe that every child and young person has a right to experience living within a supportive family where they are valued and respected. We have a firm commitment to providing them with a secure, caring and nurturing home environment.'

The agency responds promptly and professionally to any allegations or complaints made about carers' practice or conduct. Effective liaison takes place with the designated officer. The agency seeks to improve practice and to learn from unexpected events. This helps to ensure that a robust safeguarding culture prevails across the agency.

Physical intervention is rare. A small number of children go missing from home. The majority of those who do go missing receive good support and help from their foster carers to help them to reduce this behaviour. On occasions, should the agency believe that it cannot meet the needs of children, it ends placements following full consideration with local authorities.

Since the last inspection, the agency has introduced a safeguarding committee. This committee ensures that every child who is considered to be at risk of harm, or has the potential to place themselves at risk of harm, is known to the managers and leaders.

The agency uses safer-care policies and risk assessments to evaluate and assess the impact of children's behaviour. The agency has introduced a child sexual exploitation

screening tool that helps the supervising social workers to understand the possible risks to individual children. In some cases, risk assessments are not consistently updated following a significant event, and the content of some safer-care policies is of limited value. For example, they do not all provide sufficient information to carers about the action to take to minimise risk following a serious incident.

Unannounced visits to carers' homes take place. Supervising social workers spend time with children, and the agency ensures that all children have contact numbers for their placing local authority social worker and the supervising social worker. The agency offers a number of routes for children to make their views known, and it makes good use of information technology to facilitate this. For example, a live web-based chat room is available in the evening, which enables those children who have access to compatible devices to make contact with a member of staff instantly. This provides an additional layer of safeguarding for some children.

Carers receive regular supervision and the majority attend regular support meetings. Foster carers unanimously say that they feel valued and enthusiastically supported by their supervising social workers and the agency. Carers provided inspectors with impressive examples to demonstrate how their named worker goes over and above to offer support. For example, out-of-office-hours staff and managers make themselves available to their carers at any time of the day or night as situations arise. The registered manager said, 'We do have high expectations of our supervising social workers to support our carers.'

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There were no requirements or recommendations raised at the first inspection in 2013. Since 2013, there has been significant but considered expansion, such as an additional four offices that operate across England.

The directors of the company are actively involved in the service and have embarked on the process of growth carefully. The registered manager and the responsible individual are also directors of the company. The registered manager visits all of the offices and is in regular communication with the managers based in each of the regional offices, and they in turn oversee the day-to-day practice. These arrangements ensure continuity and provide a clear reporting structure. The agency has written to advise the regulator of the developmental plans as they have arisen. This demonstrates transparency.

Since the service began, the same experienced, knowledgeable and dedicated registered manager has been in post. He is a reflective and skilled individual who takes an active role in nurturing the growth of every aspect of the service. The registered manager works seamlessly with the responsible individual. Working with the other directors, this senior leadership team competently implements structures and systems to drive innovation and creativity. For example, a robust range of team and committee meetings ensures that the leaders maintain an efficient and vital overview of important issues affecting staff, carers and children. The monthly safeguarding committee meeting enables the registered manager and the agency decision-maker to monitor and track the progress of children whose behaviour may

give rise to concern or indicate risk of harm. These systems enable the directors to put resources in where they are needed most.

The agency delivers the ethos outlined in its statement of purpose effectively. Communication with other agencies is very good. The agency strikes a successful balance in its working relationships with others. This is because the staff are very good at building professional working relationships while also holding other services to account. This approach ensures that children get the help that they need.

The majority of carers who have been approved for over 12 months have completed the training support and developmental standards. The agency expects that all carers complete core training. Courses include managing challenging behaviour, safer caring and first aid. In addition, carers have the opportunity to attend external discussions and conferences. Carer take-up of training is inconsistent. Some carers have undertaken the required core training and some have not. The directors are aware of this shortfall. Prior to this inspection, the registered manager identified and is implementing a plan to address gaps in carer training. Nonetheless, the agency has on occasions placed children with carers who have not undertaken the necessary training, such as parent and child training and first aid. The agency does not routinely provide carers with training in relation to the risk of radicalisation. This does not consistently ensure that all carers are robustly prepared for the role.

The agency follows robust staff recruitment processes. Managers who have previous experience in fostering have been recruited to work in each of the regional offices. Each office has a team of supervising social workers. Some of the staff have significant experience of working in fostering. This experience ensures that there is a good mix of relevant sector expertise permeating across the agency. All supervising social workers maintain a low caseload, which helps significantly to ensure that practitioners at all grades have sufficient time to respond to emerging issues and time to dedicate to foster carers and children in placement. This means that the agency has a robust infrastructure that ensures that the overall quality of foster carers' support remains high and is not diluted by change and growth in the wider organisation. Consequently, children consistently receive the help and support that they require.

New staff receive a supportive induction that focuses on the agency's ethos to provide effective services for children. All staff receive an annual appraisal and regular supervision that is designed to encourage reflection and professional development. Some staff take lead roles in areas such as managing child sexual exploitation and missing children. The agency is committed to staff development, and the staff access a range of additional resources and training opportunities. These opportunities help practitioners to develop their knowledge and understanding of fostering. The use of technology enables the agency to have regular virtual group meetings. Monthly practice-led discussions enable time for reflection on and deliberation of the current important messages in the social care and fostering sector.

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: SC448220

Registered provider: UK Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: 5 Twisleton Court, Priory Hill, Dartford, Kent DA1 2EN

Responsible individual: Amarjit Dhull

Registered manager: Urs Biemann

Telephone number: 01322 473 243

Email address: enquiries@ukfostering.org.uk

Inspectors

Rosie Davie, social care inspector

Joanna Heller, social care inspector

Heather Chaplin social care inspector (two days)

Marina Tully social care inspector (Warrington office – one day)

Lucy Chapman social care inspector (Hounslow Office – one day)



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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