

Foster Care Associates Thames Valley

Foster Care Associates Limited

Hale Court, Hale Road, Wendover, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP22 6NJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates, Thames Valley region, is a local branch of a well-established national organisation offering a range of fostering placements to placing local authorities. The Thames Valley branch has its operational headquarters in Wendover, Buckinghamshire. The branch offers emergency, short and longer placements, with a particular focus on more-difficult-to-place children and young people for whom an enhanced package of care, based on a team parenting model, is needed. The agency currently supports 83 fostering households that are providing care for 94 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 8 to 14 May 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 14 November 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 make good progress while living with carers.
- The registered manager has established a positive culture and ethos in the agency that ensures that staff are child-focused and accountable for their practice.
- Children feel safe and they build secure relationships and bonds with carers.
- Participation groups, activities and supportive networks are helpful to children and carers.
- Carers review their own behaviour and the impact of this on children in order to explore and consider alternative approaches and management strategies.
- Leaders, managers and staff respond swiftly to concerns and allegations that arise. Appropriate referrals are made to other agencies and related records are detailed.
- Leaders and managers have developed systems, processes and meetings to monitor and review the outcomes that the agency is achieving.
- Leaders and managers have acted on the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection.
- Leaders are clear about the agency's strengths and weakness and they have developed appropriate plans for improvement.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- Staff do not ensure that they gain the views of young children or those who have impaired communication.
- The children's complaints policy is not in a child-friendly format, nor is it accessible to all.
- Staff do not ensure that they have all assessments and reports to inform children's care plans, particularly for those who have complex needs.
- Staff and carers have not explored, assessed or reviewed the restrictions they use to meet children's needs.
- Documents relating to matching decisions do not evidence that all risks have been explored, or that consideration has been given to how these risks will be managed or minimised.

- Systems and processes for safer recruitment have improved but they still lack thoroughness and the level of detail that is required.
- Staff have recently been provided with good-quality supervision. However, previously it was not regular or thorough enough to ensure that staff are held to account for their practice.

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
<p>Fitness of workers a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person— (a) is of integrity and good character, (b) has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform, (c) is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (20(3)(a)(b)(c) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)</p>	01/07/2018
<p>Employment of staff The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— (a) receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (21(4)(a) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)</p>	01/07/2018

Recommendations

- The child's wishes and feelings.
Children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 1.3). Specifically that they ensure that they seek the views of young children and those who have impaired communication
- Promoting positive behaviour.
Each foster carer is aware of all the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances, including any significant recent

events, to help the foster carer understand and predict the child's needs and behaviours and support the child within their household. The fostering service follows up with the responsible authority where all such necessary information has not been provided by the authority ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 3.9).

■ **Safeguarding children.**

The service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 4.5).

■ **Promoting good health and well-being.**

Foster carers receive guidance and training to provide appropriate care if looking after children with complex health needs ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 6.8).

■ **Preparation for a placement**

Children are carefully matched to a foster placement. Foster carers have full information about the child (as set out in standard 3.9) ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 11.2).

■ **Supervision and support of carers**

The fostering service supports their foster carers to ensure they provide foster children with care that reasonably meets those children's needs, takes the children's wishes and feelings into account, actively promotes individual care and supports the children's safety, health, enjoyment, education and preparation for the future ('Fostering Services National Minimum Standards', 21.1).

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make reasonable progress, taking into account their individual capabilities. Children build trusting relationships with their foster carers that promote their welfare and well-being. Some children experience stability and have remained with their carers for a considerable length of time.

Foster carers support children to engage in a wide variety of activities, hobbies and interests. Children develop positive friendships and their self-esteem and confidence improve.

The agency has not developed systems to ensure that all children have a voice, despite the availability of a variety of resources and communication methods. Records and plans lack evidence that the views of children under five and of those who have impaired communication have been sought. Children know how to make a complaint, but the process is not suitable for those who have impaired communication and cognition.

The therapeutic approach and support that is offered by staff to some foster carers encourages them to review their responses to children's behaviour. The direct work undertaken with children enables them to explore their experiences and begin to make sense of them. This proactive support has provided stability and support to children and carers when placements have been under strain and at risk of breakdown. Children's resilience improves and they are increasingly able to develop strategies that help them to manage their emotions, feelings and frustrations. Staff request additional support and guidance when this is needed.

Overall, children are supported with their physical and emotional health needs. However, those who have complex health and behavioural needs do not have clear enough plans to support and guide staff and carers. One child has restrictions on aspects of their daily life for safety reasons; this child's records lack evidence that assessments and plans have been informed or reviewed by relevant specialists.

Foster carers and staff provide children with the support that they need to maintain the links and relationships that are important to them; this includes those who live a significant distance from their family and friends. One professional said that this support has had a positive impact on the quality of contact a child has with their family.

Foster carers and staff support children to attend and engage in full-time education. Staff and carers are proactive in identifying and helping those children who have barriers to learning or worries about education. Those children who do not regularly attend formal education have clear plans and routines that include meaningful activities. Children have made good academic progress while living with carers.

The matching of children and young people with foster carers is child-focused, and the success of this is seen in the stability of the placements. Documents that underpin matching decisions do not always evidence that there has been a thorough consideration

of placement choice. The management team has made some progress from the previous inspection, but this is not fully embedded across the service.

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

Children and young people feel safe living with their foster carers and they have an adult whom they can trust and confide in. Children are confident about raising their concerns and about talking to others about their worries and anxieties.

The agency's approach to risk management has improved since the previous inspection. All those who work for the agency demonstrate a good understanding of the holistic nature of safeguarding. This is evident throughout the recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers and in the training and supervision of staff at the agency. As a result, safeguarding underpins its work with children.

The manager successfully promotes an open and transparent approach; this encourages staff and foster carers to share concerns and to provide appropriate challenge to others. Foster carers and staff have a good knowledge of the range of risks children may be exposed to. Their knowledge is informed by participation in relevant training courses.

Most risk management plans describe the actions that are needed to manage and minimise risks to children. However, this is not consistently evident and one record sampled by inspectors lacked evidence that new risks had been considered thoroughly. Foster carers feel empowered to speak to, explore with and challenge children about the impact of their risk-taking behaviours.

The manager and team have established good links with external safeguarding professionals. Staff and foster carers know what to do when an allegation or disclosure arises. Their response is swift, appropriate and relevant to the concern raised, with the child's welfare remaining paramount to all decisions that are made. Managers and staff monitor responses to concerns effectively to ensure that they are recognised and addressed. Staff are persistent in their challenge of others if concerns are not appropriately explored.

Episodes of children going missing are well managed; foster carers adhere to agreed plans as they report and refer to others as required. Requests for return home interviews are made and the team has developed internal processes to ensure that the views of children are sought on return.

Trained foster carers support children to de-escalate and manage their own behaviour. Carers support children to develop strategies that assist them to self-regulate their emotions, behaviours and feelings. Some records seen by inspectors did not clearly detail what or why specific interventions are to be used or how and when they should be applied. There is no formal process to explore and review these strategies, in particular those that relate to the management or restriction of children.

Recruitment procedures have improved. However, recruitment files do not demonstrate a thorough and robust application of safer recruitment procedures. Inspectors found a lack

of evidence to show that, as far as reasonably possible, these processes are used to confirm why previous employment ceased, or to verify all references that are received. One record lacked a risk assessment to cover the interim period while checks were being undertaken.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager leads the agency effectively through an open approach. The manager has strived to improve and develop staff practice, making many changes in the agency since the last inspection. The culture and ethos of the agency has changed. Staff and carers are held accountable for their practice and actions; this approach has been embraced across the agency. Managers have acted on many of the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection.

Senior leaders and managers are child-focused, with a clear vision and focus, with clarity throughout, on the agency's strengths and weaknesses. The agency development plan includes the key areas for development and appropriate actions, but it does not always state desired outcomes or set target dates.

Foster carers access a wide range of support. Foster carer representatives support, facilitate and encourage other carers. They help their fellow carers to develop and improve their practice and they advocate on their behalf. Monthly support meetings, a buddy scheme and easy access to other carers are valued by carers and have a positive impact. Foster carers are also well supported through regular supervision and review of their practice.

The agency has focused on staff and foster carer training. A wide variety of online and face-to-face training is available and routinely accessed by carers.

Staff now receive regular effective supervision which explores and develops their practice. However, this is a recent improvement and is yet to be embedded. Previously, staff have not received regular supervision, and records still do not evidence thorough monitoring and review of performance.

Leaders and managers make good use of new data recording systems to inform their oversight of the service. The weekly, monthly and quarterly monitoring discussions help them to highlight what is working well and the areas that require additional input. They investigate and respond to complaints well, and records demonstrate that areas for learning and development have been identified. When appropriate, senior leaders actively challenge local authority managers and advocate on behalf of the children who are placed. During the inspection, leaders created a formal process and procedure to ensure that staff consistently request support from their managers if agencies are not meeting their statutory obligations.

The experienced and skilled panel chair has, through targeted training, developed the skills of the diverse panel members. The panel's quality assurance process is comprehensive because of its members' inquisitive exploration and consideration of assessments and reviews. This is evident in the quality of panel minutes. The agency mainly uses independent assessors for carer recruitment processes; these have varied in

quality. Leaders and managers have reviewed the process and have now amended internal processes. Newly recruited carers now report a more positive recruitment and assessment process.

The manager is knowledgeable about each child who is placed with the agency and has formed very good relationships with children and foster carers.

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: SC047677

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