

The Homefinding and Fostering Agency

Kent Homefinding and Fostering Ltd
67 College Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6SX
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The Homefinding and Fostering Agency is operated by a privately owned limited company; it was registered on 30 October 2003. The agency provides emergency, short-term and long-term placements for children of all ages. It also offers parent-and-child placements. The agency ensures that sibling groups are placed together wherever possible.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 45 foster carer households providing care for 61 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 10 to 14 September 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: 16 November 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- The lack of knowledge and poor management oversight have failed to identify the areas of agency practice that are not compliant with the relevant regulations and statutory guidance. This has the potential to compromise the safety and welfare of children.
- The agency staff, and consequently foster carers, have not been sufficiently challenged and supported to keep up to date with current practice. Supervision records of staff and foster carers lack reflection, analysis and evaluation of the work being undertaken and its impact on children.
- Recording practices are weak. Records lack detail and do not provide a secure audit trail of decision-making, risk assessment and matching, for example. Children's histories have not been properly maintained.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Strong relationship-based practice has promoted the stability of placements of children with families who care for them. Contact arrangements are well supported by consistent staff in a homely setting.
- Capable and committed foster carers work tirelessly to meet the needs of children placed. Their work is informed by relevant, practical training that they use successfully to help children make progress.
- The new responsible individual has a sound understanding of the fostering task and is working with a social work consultant to begin to address the deficits.

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>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times.</p> <p>(Regulation 11(a))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that children's risk assessments address identified risks and specify strategies.</p>	31/10/2018
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The written policy must include a statement of measures to be taken to safeguard any child before making parent and child arrangements with that foster parent.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>liaison and co-operation with any local authority which is, or may be, making child protection enquiries in relation to any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider,</p> <p>notification of the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiries involving a child placed by the fostering service provider, to the Chief Inspector,</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>(Regulation 12(1)(b)(2)(3)(b)(c)(d)(e))</p>	31/10/2018
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate</p>	31/10/2018

<p>intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority.) (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b)(2)(3))</p>	
<p>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))</p>	31/10/2018
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. (Regulation 23(1)(7))</p> <p>In particular, clarify staff roles and responsibilities and provide refresher training to ensure that all staff members are fully equipped to undertake these duties.</p>	31/10/2018
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21(4)(a))</p>	31/10/2018
<p>A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 28(2))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that annual review reports are completed as soon as possible after the review meeting is held.</p>	31/10/2018
<p>The fostering service provider must not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service 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)(c))</p>	31/10/2018

Recommendations

- The wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 1.1)
- Where children placed out of authority go missing, the manager of the fostering service follows the local RMFHC protocol. They also comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority specified in the individual child's care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care. (National Minimum Standard 5.6)
- Being able to promote positive behaviour and manage children's behaviour well is central to the quality of care provided in any foster home. Negative behaviour should usually be managed through building positive relationships with children. Foster carers need to be able to respond positively to each child or young person's individual behaviour and to be skilled at both diffusing difficult situations and avoiding situations escalating. The child's placement plan must set out any specific behavioural issues that need to be addressed or approaches to be used. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 3.96)
- Fostering panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from the fostering service. This independence means that they cannot themselves make decisions, which are the responsibility of the fostering service, but instead make recommendations in relation to their statutory functions listed below. Decisions are made by the fostering service, through its decision-maker, after taking into account the panel's recommendations (and any recommendation by the independent review mechanism (IRM)). Panels thereby play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice which is felt to fall short of the Regulations or NMS, or not to be in the interests of children. Panels are required to give regular feedback to the fostering service. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.2)
- 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 Standard 15.1)

Inspection judgements

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

Weak and ineffective management direction and oversight have compromised the overall safety and well-being of a small minority of children. Despite this, most children's needs are met by foster carers who provide them with the care, stability and security they need to make progress. They benefit from the trusting relationships they build and maintain with their foster carers. One social worker described 'high-quality care that has supported [child]'s progress in many aspects of his development, informed by a sensitive approach to and understanding of his special needs'. Most children remain in placement for several years, and some stay into adulthood. A professional noted of a foster carer, 'The family clearly have him at the heart of all they do.'

Foster carers and agency staff know the children well. There are regular opportunities for children to express their views. This is achieved through social events, questionnaires and written and verbal feedback. The impact of this is not apparent. Complaints records do not all show that all complaints have been responded to appropriately.

Children are well supported in their moves into and on from foster care. Planned introductions are sensitive and child centred. Where possible, children meet foster carers and receive meaningful pictorial information about their homes and the people who live there.

Foster carers support children to attend education and to explore employment and other opportunities with them. Children's achievements, big and small, are celebrated within the family and the wider agency. Professionals talk about children making significant positive progress in learning to read and write and improvements in speech, as well as gaining good GCSE and A-level grades.

Children benefit from foster carers' support to improve their health. Foster carers seek professional advice when necessary and advocate effectively on behalf of the children. When a specific need is identified, the agency obtains additional, relevant training.

A considerable strength of the agency is the support for children and young people to maintain relationships with family and friends. The agency facilitates and supports all supervised contact in a homely setting, using consistent staff. This enables children and their families to feel at ease and relaxed and to make the most of their time together.

The therapeutic ethos of the agency is underpinned by foster carers' training for a formal qualification. This informs foster carers' safe, non-judgemental responses to children's trauma, experiences and feelings. Social workers comment positively on the intervention of foster carers that has enabled children to develop interests and

hobbies and engage in a wide variety of activities. A social worker said, 'He [child] attends a local social community activity and is now able to play with an increase in his concentration.' Another said, 'He [child]'s gone from being aggressive with other children to being able to play alongside other children, and I think this is due to the care that he has received from his foster carers.'

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

The agency safeguarding policy is not compliant with statutory guidance. This has led to an inconsistent response to concerns, as the correct process has not been followed in all cases. Where there is an immediate safeguarding concern, agency actions are timely and appropriate. The agency response to some allegations does not demonstrate that all staff of the agency have a secure understanding of their part in ensuring that the relevant guidance and legislation are followed to safeguard children. Management records of internal investigations are incomplete and lack full evaluation and conclusions. This hinders learning. In other cases, standards of care and annual reviews are thorough, with clear reasons for the conclusions and recommendations.

Children are kept safe by foster carers who have a good understanding of their role. This is informed by recent, relevant and up-to-date training. Staff have formed positive working relationships with the police and safeguarding agencies to ensure that they are well informed of current risks and concerns. Foster carers use police support and guidance to assist them in educating children about the impact of risk-taking behaviours. The agency supports foster carers to enable children and young people to take age-appropriate risks, recognising that young people need to develop and equip themselves for independence. However, there are weaknesses in the necessary supporting documentation for risk management. Written risk assessments are insufficiently detailed and do not, in all cases, specify the known risks and the strategies used by foster carers to reduce these. This includes the responses necessary to manage and minimise incidents of missing. In addition, the agency is not proactive in ensuring that return home interviews are undertaken. This means that the reasons for children's and young people's missing behaviour are not explored and their voice in safe care planning is not heard.

Foster carers are trained in and have a good understanding of the agency's behaviour management models and tools. These include a recognised physical intervention model. There has been a delay in the provision of the required refresher training for some people, but plans are in place to address this. Supervising social workers monitor effectively all behaviour management measures used by foster carers. They discuss the incidents and consequences during supervisory visits. Foster carers have good knowledge of the triggers and strategies to use to change behaviour. These are not clearly defined in children's written plans. Foster carers describe vividly the positive impact that using the techniques has had in their work and support with children and young people. A social worker said of a child, 'He's able to interact with other children. He no longer has meltdowns like he had when he was first placed.'

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The registered manager for the agency resigned during this inspection. The inspection process highlighted that the registered manager and previous responsible individual had failed to run and manage the agency with the competence, knowledge and skill required to safeguard children fully and to promote their welfare. The agency has been operating without due regard to some of the underpinning legal framework of regulations, standards and guidance.

The agency is child centred in its approach to placements but has not, in every case, followed a clear decision-making process. This has led to a placement being made that was not compliant with regulations. The agency and the placing authority have worked together to achieve compliance in the best interests of the child concerned. The matching process as described by staff involved is not supported by the records. These lack detail about how foster carers' skills and training equip them to meet children's identified needs and how the agency will manage any shortfalls.

The agency has not met all the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. The previous two inspections highlighted poor management monitoring; continued ineffective action to address this means that monitoring and reporting remain significant shortfalls. This greatly inhibits the identification of areas for improvement and the corresponding development of the service. Required notifications of significant events to Ofsted continue to be reported late.

After an extended period of stability in the staff team, there have been recent resignations, and these posts are yet to be filled. Most staff who remain in post have been with the agency since it was registered 15 years ago. Foster carers spoke warmly and positively about the agency staff. One said, 'I have a very good relationship with my social worker, always in my corner if I have needed it. Always willing to help. If she can't find a way to help, she will find someone who can. Really good support from the agency to support and maintain placements.' Supervising social workers have developed strong relationship-based practice, which foster carers value. However, poor supervision of the agency staff by the registered manager has failed to identify and rectify shortfalls in practice. As a result, agency staff and the foster carers they support have not been provided with clear challenge, scrutiny and direction. This has failed to maintain and improve the standards of care for children where necessary.

The independent agency decision maker has a sound understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the panel and has provided advice for improvement. The registered manager accepted the challenges and agreed with the recommendations but has not implemented these. The established panel chair has had no formal training in the role. The role and remit of the panel adviser is not well defined. As a result, there has been some blurring of boundaries. The chair acknowledged that the panel would benefit from refresher training on the fostering regulations to better support their recommendations. The quality assurance function of the panel is under developed.

All foster carers have review meetings within 12 months. However, there are delays between these meetings taking place and the report being signed off. This regularly takes the completion of the review outside the 12-month timescale, by over three months in one case seen.

The agency does not implement sound recruitment practice for all those who work for the agency. Records do not show that they have ascertained, as far as reasonably practical, the reasons why employment ended or ensured that they have a full employment history with reasons for gaps in employment explored. There is a lack of evidence that references have been verified.

The new responsible individual is determined to ensure that the agency moves forward in the best interests of children and foster carers. She has considerable experience in the fostering task, has begun relevant training and has embarked on a steep learning curve about the fostering regulations. The agency has engaged a consultant to provide fostering social work advice, guidance and support.

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: SC036653

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