

Together for Children Fostering – Sunderland

Together for Children Sunderland Limited
Sandhill Centre, Grindon Lane, Sunderland SR3 4EN
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Together for Children Fostering – Sunderland is an independent fostering agency which has been registered since March 2017. The service operates from a registered office in Sunderland.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including respite, permanent, long-term, short-term, and parent and child arrangements. Placements are provided by connected persons and recruited foster carers.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 279 fostering households that are caring for 363 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 September 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be 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: N/A

Overall judgement at last inspection: N/A

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children and young people are in stable placements with foster carers who are committed to providing nurturing and effective care.
- Children and young people are attending and achieving in their educational settings.
- Healthcare needs are identified and met. Foster carers are making use of support structures to enhance the emotional health and wellbeing of the children and young people in their care.
- The agency promotes 'staying put' arrangements and many children are welcomed into fostering families beyond the age of 18.
- Foster carers are supervised regularly and feel well supported by the agency. There is an increased offer of support groups and opportunities for reflection on practice.
- The service is managed by a highly motivated and aspirational leader who has significantly improved the quality of the service and the support provided to foster carers, supervising social workers, and the children and young people in their care.
- There is a detailed development plan, which outlines improvement activity to address the shortfalls identified in this inspection.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Recommendations made by the panel and the agency decision maker are not explicit on the foster carers' files.
- A small group of foster carers have not signed a foster care agreement. This means they have not formally accepted the terms of the agency's expectations.
- Leaders and social workers discuss matching considerations for children and young people. They do not routinely make a record of the needs and risks considered at the point of placement.
- The agency's electronic system does not hold all of the information that is required on foster carers' files. The current record-keeping system is fragmented, which means records are not always easily accessible.
- A small minority of foster carers have not had their Disclosure and Barring Service checks refreshed after three years, which is the organisation's policy.
- The agency does not hold a clear record of the training that foster carers have completed and a personal development plan for each carer. This has recently been introduced but is not yet embedded.
- A small number of foster carers have not had an annual unannounced visit. This was rectified during the inspection. This does not provide confidence that all foster carers' homes are routinely inspected without notice to ensure a safe

environment for children and young people.

- Supervision records should be enhanced to include more information about practice discussions and behaviour management in fostering households.

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>A fostering service provider must maintain a case record for each foster parent approved by them which must include copies of the documents specified in paragraph (2) and the information specified in paragraph (3).</p> <p>The documents referred to in paragraph (1) are—</p> <p>(b) any recommendations made by the fostering panel,</p> <p>(d) the foster care agreement,</p> <p>(Regulation 30 (1)(2)(b)(d))</p>	30/11/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 13.8)
This is with particular regard to ensuring that all foster carers have their background checks refreshed every three years in line with the organisation's policy.
- Ensure that 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. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1)
- Ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.4)
- Ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meetings for short break foster

carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)

- Ensure that the fostering service has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 26.1)
- Ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 26.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Many children and young people are happy and settled in stable and nurturing placements. One child's social worker said, 'I couldn't have picked a better carer. She is very creative. She is always the first one to be there in the child's corner making sure they get what they need. The children are extremely happy.'

Children and young people's healthcare needs are identified and met. Foster carers are proactive in seeking support from healthcare professionals to ensure that specialist healthcare needs are addressed. The number of children who attend their annual health assessments is increasing. Foster carers ensure that children and young people access appropriate therapeutic support when needed. A lead healthcare professional said,

'Inter-agency meetings have been established. We have examples of the additional training and support that foster carers have been provided with in order to meet the needs of children going into their care. The relationship between the health and fostering service is robust and open.'

The agency is committed to monitoring and improving educational attendance and attainment. Meetings to determine additional support for children and young people in educational settings are very well attended by foster carers. The virtual school works closely with the fostering service to support foster carers to advocate for children and young people when necessary. One young person's social worker said, 'I have found the carers to be positive role models. Their work ethic has transferred to (name of young person) as she is tenacious in job searches and engaged in full-time education. She is always thinking of her career.'

Children and young people enjoy a range of leisure activities that include family holidays, swimming, bike rides, and clubs, providing social opportunities. Contact with families and other important figures in children's and young people's lives is maintained and promoted. Careful matching results in largely secure placements that are successful in meeting the needs of children and young people. However, records in relation to matching considerations are not always completed at the point of placement. A recommendation is made to enhance this area of practice.

The agency demonstrates commitment to children and young people beyond the age of 18 and promotes 'staying put' arrangements. Some young people have continued to live with their foster carers after their 18th birthday. This has provided those young people with enhanced life chances and a stronger support network into adulthood.

The service has recently revised the children's guide to provide information for children and young people about their rights and entitlements. The manager of the agency has surveyed children and young people about their care experiences, with largely positive results. The agency is beginning to develop a consultation group for children and young people to attend who want to influence the development of the

agency and the care they receive. This is in its infancy but evidences a positive commitment to listening to the views of children and young people.

Newly recruited foster carers experience a good level of preparation and training. Fostering assessment reports contain good analysis and evaluation, demonstrating the applicant's ability to provide safe and qualitative care for children and young people. There is a realistic plan for growth of the service. The agency has approved six new fostering families in the last six months.

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

Allegations and complaints are dealt with in a timely manner. The manager of the agency shares information with appropriate agencies. When practice concerns are identified, a combination of reviews and care standards meetings has enabled the agency to make clear recommendations. This process is designed to enhance the practice of foster carers and ensure that children and young people are living in households with carers who know how to keep them safe and manage their behaviour appropriately. The recommendations made by the panel are not explicit in the foster carers' electronic files. There is a risk that the agency may not put appropriate measures in place to meet the recommendations. A requirement is made to address this matter.

Leaders evaluate unplanned endings to ensure that there is appropriate learning from incidents. Most placements are stable. At the point of placement, risks are considered and appropriate strategies to manage the risks are discussed, although a detailed record is not always made of this discussion. A recommendation is made to enhance this aspect of practice.

Children and young people rarely engage in high-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home. Foster carers' homes are routinely subject to health and safety checks. Safe care plans are individualised to both the children and young people and the fostering household's needs and risks. A small group of carers have not had an unannounced visit to their home in the past year. This was rectified during the inspection. This must be a clear priority in the future to ensure that foster carers provide a safe home environment for the children and young people they care for.

Foster carers and staff in the agency are vetted to ensure that only suitable adults are caring for and working with children and young people. The agency has a policy of screening foster carers through Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks every three years. A small number of carers had not had their checks refreshed in line with the agency's policy. While risk assessments were in place and the checks had been applied for, a best practice recommendation is made.

Leaders have recently launched an online platform for foster carers to complete training. The new training offer includes enhanced topics such as child sexual exploitation. Foster carers have recently been provided with tools to complete individual training portfolios, but this is not yet fully embedded.

Foster carers and social workers identify in regular supervision sessions that they understand and manage any risks to the safety and well-being of the children and young people in their care. The records of supervision are not explicit enough on these matters to provide confidence of accountability should practice concerns be identified in the future.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is an experienced and qualified social work professional. She registered as the fostering service manager in January 2018. She is passionate about improving the outcomes of the children and young people in the care of the agency. The manager is supported by three competent assistant team managers who provide direct supervision of social workers in the agency. Social workers and managers report that they feel well supported and that the service is well managed by a confident and inspirational leader.

The manager has a comprehensive understanding of the service's areas of strength and development. There is a detailed strategic development plan in place to drive improvement across the service. Leaders have made considerable progress in addressing the development areas over the past year. The registered manager of the agency has introduced and makes good use of a wide range of monitoring mechanisms.

The methods of record-keeping in the agency are hampered by the fragmented nature of the electronic systems that are in place. This means that information is not always readily accessible. Foster carers and social workers also have varied methods of recording information. Recommendations are made to focus on creating a consistent approach among carers and social work teams and to ensure that appropriate attention is given to enhancing the electronic system to fully meet the needs of the service.

The agency's central list of fostering panel members provides a wealth of professional and personal experience to the panel. The panel chair is a qualified and experienced professional who is independent of the agency. The panel provides appropriate scrutiny and challenge. Panel members have received recent training and have their performance regularly appraised. The agency decision maker provides a prompt response with a detailed rationale for her decisions. Both the panel and agency decision maker offer sufficient rigour in the approval and review processes of foster carers.

Placing social workers have provided very positive feedback about the service. One social worker described the staff as 'helpful and pro-active'. Another social care professional said, 'They are approachable and easy to communicate with. They quickly raise any concerns.' Foster carers also provided positive feedback about the support they receive. One foster carer said, 'The agency is very supportive. My fostering officer listens and comes up with ideas when I run out of them.'

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: 1254786

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Inspector

Nicola Thomas, social care inspector



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