

Family Fostercare

Unit 7, Top Barn Business Centre, Worcester Road, Holt Heath, Worcester WR6 6NH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Family Fostercare Limited is operated by a private company. It is an independent fostering agency that has been registered since 2008. The service operates from a main office in Worcestershire, with a supporting office in Dudley. The agency offers a range of foster placements, including respite, permanent, long-term and short-term placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 29 fostering households and 30 children and young people currently placed.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 October 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

requires improvement to be good

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: 10 July 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- Managers have not resolved the issues raised at the last inspection.
- Managerial and staff turnover has continued. These changes have continued to unsettle staff and do not provide consistency for foster families and children.
- A high number of allegations and concerns about foster carer standards have not been managed well by the agency. Staff do not always assess risk.
- Staff have not always implemented safeguarding procedures or valued children's experiences when they have made allegations about foster care.
- Too many children experience unplanned endings.
- Matching of new children has not always taken account of the existing children in placement or foster carer skills and experience.
- Not enough foster carers have good-quality information, when they need it, to enable them to meet children's needs.
- The quality of foster carer assessments, approvals and reviews is inconsistent.
- Foster carers have not always had enough support, professional challenge or unannounced visits.
- Not all carers complete mandatory training.
- Managers do not evidence good safer recruitment practice.
- The agency decision-maker is not a senior officer of the organisation.
- Children's views and needs are not clear in the agency's records.
- Consultation with children, placing authorities and staff does not inform the agency's review of the quality of care.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Some children and young people thrive in long-term foster homes, where they have become part of the family.
- Good support from the organisation's therapist and a family support worker helps children to progress in foster care.
- Foster carers and placing authorities are positive about the impact of recent management and staffing changes.
- The agency recognises its weaknesses and has begun to plan and make improvements.

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>Ensure that the registered provider and the registered manager carry on and manage the fostering agency with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8(1)(b))</p> <p>Particularly, ensure the improvement and stable operation of the agency.</p>	31/01/2019
<p>Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a))</p> <p>Specifically, obtain all necessary documentation about children's care needs from the placing authority, and improve placement success and stability for children.</p>	31/01/2019
<p>Implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for–</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>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. (Regulation 12(1)(a)(b), (3)(b)(d)(e))</p>	31/01/2019
<p>Provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))</p>	31/01/2019

Ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. (Regulation 18(4))	31/01/2019
Where a person ("X") applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decide to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 26(1)) Particularly, ensure that only complete, good-quality assessments are presented to panel.	31/01/2019
Review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 28(1), (2)) Particularly, ensure the quality and timeliness of review and agency decisions, consultation in respect of all children placed in the preceding year, written notice to the foster carer and that foster carer agreements contain accurate terms of approval.	31/01/2019
Maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b), (3))	31/01/2019

Recommendations

- Ensure 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. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 1.7)
- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 4.5)
This relates to ensuring that documents are useful, up to date and consistent with family-based care.
- Ensure 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)

- Demonstrate, including from written records, that the registered person consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.2)
- 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. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 21.8)
- Ensure that any staff involved in assessing the suitability of persons to be foster carers are social workers, have experience of foster care and family placement work and are trained in assessment. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 23.6)
- Ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 23.12)

Inspection judgements

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

Too many children have moved foster homes after allegations, concerns about standards of foster care or a foster carer's inability to manage their behaviour or needs. Matching does not always take account of the existing children in the placement, their views or needs. It does not look closely at foster carers' skills and whether they have completed the agency's mandatory training or 'Skills to foster' to meet children's basic needs. There is not yet a formal system to draw intelligence from children's placement endings to improve future placement success and stability.

The child's voice is not strong in the records made by supervising social workers about children's progress and life with foster carers. The way that foster carers have implemented the placing authority's plan for the child's care is not clear in children's records or their monthly reports to the placing authority. Neither are the actions or tasks set at statutory reviews actively tracked.

Despite this, some children do experience stability in long-term placements and some children live with their brothers and sisters. Two children have successfully moved into independence and two more are heading for independence this year, closely supported by the foster carers. Therapeutic support provided by the agency helps foster carers to understand the needs of their foster children. A creative family support worker works with both foster carers and foster children, for example developing resources for promoting good health with children who have a learning difficulty.

Most carers promote education with their foster children and help them to achieve their potential. Similarly, most children lead healthy lifestyles which promote their good health. Children develop new interests and build confidence. They learn to drive, take up Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes, join Scouts and Girl Guides and attend after-school clubs. They join in ordinary family hobbies and activities.

The agency is instrumental in widening social circles for children who have found it hard to make friends. Fledgling friendships and sleepovers are building for two girls, who are both in foster care with the agency. A placing social worker told the inspector how important foster carers' contribution to birth family relationships had been to children's lives. She said, 'They promote contact in every way possible and work hard to ensure that the parents continue to play an active role in the children's lives and are kept fully informed of what is going on for the children, and the parents are always extremely grateful for this.' These actions build children's sense of identity and self-esteem.

Children have good information about their future foster homes in advance of the placement. In the days after children arrive, the family support worker visits to bring a welcome box, complete with personalised books and a 'snuggle quilt'. This warm

welcome helps them to feel comfortable. Foster carers also spoke positively of the support available during school holidays.

The agency makes sure that foster children and foster families participate in many group activities for fun. These activities are a focus for consultation and sharing experiences. The Children's Council has done some good work to promote the resilience of foster children in dealing with being in care.

Children have told their local authority, 'It's fine here, there's never a dull moment here. We have a good time. I can say what I think and feel. We have our ups and downs, just like a normal family. I like it.'

One placing authority said that their young person 'has progressed very well while in placement. The foster carers are brilliant. They are caring and supportive, and this has helped increase confidence.'

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

The standard of some foster care has replicated the experience of poor parenting that the children may have had in their families of origin.

There has been a high number of allegations and concerns about foster carer standards. Staff have failed to implement safeguarding procedures. A delay and a lack of professional curiosity meant that one child remained in placement after having made a disclosure, feeling vulnerable. Children's records omit crucial information on allegations or concerns about their care. There has been drift in following up the actions recommended by the local authority designated safeguarding officer or by the agency's decision-maker after allegations or concerns about care quality.

Risk assessments do not direct staff to consider risks of self-harm or how safe access to the internet will be managed. The agency did not assess the risk and suitability of the living arrangements for one child, in an unauthorised lean-to, or fully consider the impact of the extreme surveillance measures used to keep another foster family safe. Some children's placements and living conditions have had no formal risk assessment at all.

Records of safer recruitment still do not evidence a full and appropriate process. For example, recruitment records do not always contain proof of the applicant's identity and important references are not always available.

The new manager has begun to act on these significant weaknesses. The manager and staff now exercise professional curiosity and challenge and review poor practice. The manager has reviewed all events and taken remedial action to establish a baseline for improvement.

The unsafe behaviour of some children has been supported well and is an example of close partnership working with statutory agencies and of proactive risk

management. For example, the work with children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation has been rigorous in recent months. The local authority safeguarding specialist gave good feedback about the quality of the protective work by the current team members, describing them as 'proactive and on the ball'.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

There has been an almost complete turnover of staff and three managers since the last inspection. The staffing instability in the organisation is now mirrored in the instability experienced by children with their foster parents. These changes have not provided consistency for foster families and children. Staff and foster carer retention is a target for improvement.

The management team has not yet fully resolved the issues raised at the last inspection. Only one of the five previous requirements are met.

Systems for the basic training of foster carers are still in development. While all foster carers have achieved the national induction standards within timescales, not all foster carers have achieved the mandatory training required by the agency. Despite managerial efforts and discussions at panel, the agency is not systematically showing improvement in training take-up. Current foster carers do not have the skills or training to offer care for children in need of adoption or at risk of exploitation or for parent and child placements. Those foster carers who do engage with the training on offer described it as 'Brilliant with the training – face to face and online.'

Managers and staff are improving systems to obtain documents from children's social workers. However, despite this, placing authority care planning, delegated authority and children's statutory health assessments are not always in place to give foster carers the most relevant information and permissions to help them to meet children's needs.

The agency has not fulfilled its responsibilities to manage the placement with foster carers of children over the usual number. The agency has reported that there have been several unapproved or refused 'exemptions', possibly arranged by foster carers themselves as informal respite. Those arranged by the agency more recently have not been thorough. They have not obtained the views of placing authorities, reflected the children's views or understood government guidance about making exemptions in an emergency.

Previous poor managerial arrangements have meant that the agency failed to recognise or respond to a formal complaint by a local authority. This was a missed opportunity to focus support and improve care for two children in placement, who later experienced an unplanned ending following an allegation.

The fostering panel, based in Manchester, provides a robust and rigorous gatekeeping function in respect of foster carer assessment and first review. The agency decision-maker makes timely decisions, once information is presented to

him, and applies professional rigour to his decisions. However, he not a senior person within the fostering agency, nor is he a director or a trustee. Therefore, the opportunity for him to influence good practice within the agency is minimal. The agency has plans to rectify this and to establish a panel local to the Worcestershire office.

Assessments of new foster carers, carried out by 'independent assessors', are not consistently thorough. The same is true of second and subsequent reviews. Some assessments have been presented to panel incomplete and of inadequate quality to enable a safe recommendation, for example omitting a current partner. It is not clear how the agency establishes whether the independent assessors have the skills and training in assessment.

Second and subsequent foster carer reviews may omit key information about consultation or the learning after significant events, or not report accurately the number of children whom foster carers have looked after during the year. Review recommendations do not follow agency policy about foster carers who smoke. Reviews are sometimes delayed, and the gap between review and decision can be significantly delayed. Early reviews, after allegations or concerns about the quality of care, have drifted. Foster carers have not always been notified of the decision to continue their approval, and the foster care agreement does not always reflect current approval categories.

Some foster carers have not received consistent or regular supervision to enable them to reflect on and develop their practice. There has been drift in following up training and practice issues, including those subject to investigations, sometimes because of the supervising social worker's turnover. Unannounced visits to foster homes do not always happen once a year, and children are not always seen then. The agency has lost track of the quality of foster care and home life experienced by some children.

However, there are signs of improvement. The agency has invested in additional staffing to improve matching and the way it assesses and deals with referrals. New social work and support staff say that they love working for the agency. They report regular and reflective professional supervision and induction. They describe a supportive team in which they feel confident in asking for and receiving advice. They feel that they have the time to develop.

Foster carers have confidence in the new team. A foster carer said, 'Since the manager has come, things have changed. She does what she says she is going to do.' Another said, 'This agency has moved on – a lot more professional.' Foster carers told Ofsted about their satisfaction with fostering. One said: 'The kids bring the house alive. They keep us young.'

The agency is investing in independent exit reviews for the significant number of departing foster carers. They know that the key to satisfaction is quality support.

The new office is child friendly. The agency now gives a more appropriate response when there are concerns. One placing authority said, 'The communication is

excellent. They keep me updated informed, as I would expect.'

Systems for annual quality review do not include consultation and feedback to children, foster carers and placing authorities. However, transparent coverage of historical issues and clear planning to rectify weakness in quarterly reporting to Ofsted mean that the agency has demonstrated its commitment to improvement.

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 difference 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: SC384460

Registered provider: Family Fostercare Limited

Registered provider address: Unit 7, Top Barn Business Centre, Worcester Road,
Holt Heath, Worcester WR6 6NH

Responsible individual: Martin Rae

Registered manager: Sharon Batchelor

Telephone number: 01905 676890

Email address: enquiries@familyfostercare.co.uk

Inspector

Christy Wannop, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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