

Choice Fostering Limited

19a Studio House Business Centre, Delamare Road, Waltham Cross EN8 9SH
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Choice Fostering was registered in November 2017. It is a small, independent agency. The office is based in Waltham Cross. Choice Fostering provides long-term, short-term, respite and emergency placements. The agency currently has seven fostering households with 14 children in placement.

Inspection dates: 29 October to 31 October 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	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children have good relationships with their carers. The children benefit from stable and long-lasting placements
- Children enjoy living with their carers and feel part of the family.
- The agency staff and carers place the children at the centre of their work.
- Good, experienced carers provide consistency and routine for children.
- The carers and the agency staff know and understand the children's needs.
- The service works effectively with other agencies.
- The carers value the support that they receive from the agency. They feel appreciated.
- The agency staff are experienced, knowledgeable and skilled.
- All carers have undertaken the training and development standards.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The panel chair has not provided quality assurance of the assessments of foster carers.
- The panel meeting minutes are not consistently accurate or clear.
- The carers do not receive training in some areas.
- The monitoring lacks depth and rigour.
- The children's risk assessments do not include enough information and are not updated.
- Some children's records lack clarity and clear chronology around decision-making.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 4.5)
This is with particular regard to ensuring that children's individual risk assessments are up-to-date and include all potential known risks to children.
- Ensure panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports presented to panel. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.2)
- Ensure the panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 14.7)
- Ensure support and training are 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. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.7)
This is with particular regard to ensuring that foster carers receive training to develop their understanding on all potential safeguarding concerns, such as county lines and exploitation of children.
- Ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 25.2)
In addition, ensure that the monitoring provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents and the children's placing authority.
- Ensure entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information and are signed and dated. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 26.5)
In particular, ensure that all records have the correct dates and explanations for decisions made.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency has been in operation since November 2017. Most of the foster carers registered with this agency have transferred, with children in placement, from other agencies. The management team has ensured that the values and objectives set out in the statement of purpose are embedded in the day-to-day operation of the agency.

Children spoke positively about their experience of living with their carers, and of the support from the staff at the agency. The children's comments about their experiences included:

- 'Calming. Where I live now has a better family vibe than where I was living before.'
- 'It is fun, interesting. I have fitted in well and feel part of the family.'

Children feel listened to and welcomed into carers' homes. The children make progress because carers are experienced, spend good-quality time with them, and support them. The agency has a strong child-centred approach, focusing on providing good-quality and positive experiences for children.

Carers support children to have contact with their own families when appropriate. The carers are aware of the emotional effect that this contact may have for some children. For one child, family contact has taken place abroad. This approach and flexibility supports children's emotional and cultural needs and helps to keep them in touch with their heritage.

Children make good educational progress; they attend school and achieve well. Some children engage in additional educational support outside school. There are, however, a few children who have no education placements and are receiving insufficient education through tutoring. The carer and agency staff have raised this concern and are waiting for responses from the placing authorities. Although this is outside of the control of the agency, lack of adequate education limits the progress for these children.

Some children access a variety of activities in their local community and/or with their carers. The children play musical instruments, attend cadets, enjoy swimming, go to the gym and go power walking. Children are learning to return home on time, significantly reducing challenging and inappropriate behaviours. For some children, alongside these achievements, the stability and care that they receive increases their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Children confirmed that they received information about their carers, or knew of their carers, before to their moving into the carers' home. This helps the children's transition into their foster placements. Placement requests from local authorities are

carefully considered, with good matching. This process ensures that children's needs are successfully met.

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

Children said that they feel safe in their foster placements. Placing social workers said that they have no concerns about the safe care of children. There have been no safeguarding issues. The staff and carers are clear about the process to follow in the event of a concern. This helps to protect children's welfare.

Most children do not go missing from their foster placements. On occasions, a small number of children come home later than they are permitted, or want to stay longer with their families. When this occurs, carers work with the agency and follow the placing authority's guidance to return children promptly.

The recruitment of staff includes appropriate employment checks, although the agency has had difficulty obtaining references from previous employers. When this has been the case, additional references have been sought. Recruitment and assessment focus on safeguarding and include a detailed assessment and suitability checks. The agency ensures that each panel is equipped to make competent recommendations and that all required information is received by panel members in sufficient time. Although panel minutes are not consistently accurate and clear, the agency decision-maker's conclusion on approval is based on the whole assessment and minutes.

All children have individual risk assessments to identify and reduce risks. However, these assessments are not consistently updated. One child's risk assessment has not been reviewed within the set timescales, and not all potential risks or mitigating actions are clear. Although the child's risk-taking behaviours have reduced, there is not enough awareness of the potential risks when the child is not at the carers' home.

The supervising social worker ensures that the health and safety checks of carers' homes are completed before children are placed there. These checks are part of the unannounced visits undertaken to ensure that children are being looked after safely. Unannounced visits, alongside monthly supervision visits, help to safeguard the children and ensure safe, suitable premises.

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

This new service is growing at a steady pace. The manager is experienced and qualified and has a wealth of knowledge in fostering. He is passionate about the service and fully upholds the ethos and values of the agency. The manager is supported by a small team that shares his enthusiasm and energy. The staff have a knowledgeable understanding of the children and the carers, enabling them to provide effective support.

The agency's statement of purpose informs carers, placing authorities and other

interested parties of the service and support that the agency offers. The manager has developed the document to include different formats and languages. The children's guide informs children about the services that they should receive.

Carers spoke enthusiastically about the manager and staff. They feel supported and appreciated in their roles. Carers' descriptions of the staff and agency included:

- 'Choice staff care about you. This helps you to care for the children.'
- 'I feel very supported and appreciated. [The staff] reassure me and recognise the job I am doing.'
- 'I see the agency and all of us as a family unit.'
- 'They have the balance just right regarding the support.'

A supervising social worker provides supervision for the carers. Monthly supervisions occur, and these sessions are well recorded, detailing discussions and actions to be taken. Carers receive monthly training, and all of the carers have undertaken their training and development standards. However, carers are lacking in knowledge around safeguarding in areas such as county lines and exploitation of children. This could mean that carers will miss signs when children could potentially be at risk.

The agency has a monitoring system in place. The information is easily accessible and well documented. Despite this, the manager has not fully implemented the system to evaluate and monitor the progress of the agency. The annual overview of the agency lacks details of actions required to improve the service and fails to incorporate the views of children, carers and placing authorities.

Children's records are meaningful. They provide the child, placing authority and the agency with a detailed overview of the child each month. The records demonstrate the child's progress and experience. However, some records are muddled, dates differ and decision-making is not recorded clearly. This could be confusing for a child who wanted to read their records.

Professionals from external agencies spoke positively about the agency and its carers. Social workers' comments about the carers and agency included:

- 'One of the best foster carers I know. She is brilliant. Very attentive to the young people.'
- 'The foster carer is able, keen and enthusiastic in her care of the children.'
- 'The manager always attends every meeting, without fail.'

The efficient work with other agencies helps the staff to meet the children's needs and ensures that all professionals receive the information that they require.

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: 1258890

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Inspector

Natalie Burton: social care inspector



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