

Futures for Children

Futures for Children Limited
The College Tower, College Road, Maidstone ME15 6YQ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is part of the wider organisation Futures for Children Limited, and is based in Maidstone, Kent.

At the time of this inspection, 24 fostering households were accommodating 26 children and young people, of whom 25 were placed on a long-term basis and one was in a short-term placement. The agency offers a range of placements which can include: long and short term, emergency, bridging, parent and child, respite and remand.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since November 2018.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 March 2019

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **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: 28 September 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The majority of children and young people are settled and thriving. They feel

loved, safe and nurtured.

- Foster carers demonstrate commitment, resilience, understanding and tolerance. They see the best in their children and advocate strongly on their behalf.
- Strong matching practice leads to stability and permanence for many children and young people.
- Senior leaders are ambitious for the children, young people, foster carers and staff team. A high number of staff and foster carers are long-serving and invested in the agency.
- Supervising social workers are supportive and appropriately challenging of foster carers. This creates and maintains a positive tension, resulting in respectful, professional relationships.
- Foster carers support each other well and are actively involved in the agency's recruitment strategy and 'Skills to Foster' programme. They are proud of, and loyal to the agency.
- Children and young people are learning to manage risks, in accordance with their age, understanding and unique circumstances.
- Foster carers and staff receive training that is up to date, regularly refreshed and relevant to their own professional and development needs.
- The registered manager has a good knowledge of the children and young people placed with the agency, and their care plans and progress.
- The agency listens and responds to the views of its foster carers, children and young people.
- Case recording is a strength; children and young people's journeys are accurately captured.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The quality of written risk assessments and safe care strategies is variable.
- On occasion, panel meeting minutes lack enough detail in respect of the conversations and debates held.
- The registered manager is developing improved monitoring systems.

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

- All foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and disputes. The fostering service has a clear written policy on managing behaviour, de-escalation of conflicts and discipline. The fostering service's policy is made clear to the responsible authority/placing authority, child and parent/s or carers before the placement begins, or in an emergency placement, at the time of the placement. (NMS 3.8)
In particular, use such updated policy guidance to reliably inform risk assessments and safer care guidance.

- There are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. (NMS 25.1)
In particular, ensure that educational arrangements and progress are effectively monitored.
- The panel chair ensures the 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. (NMS 14.7)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people are only offered placements based upon careful and considered matching. This strong practice is fully endorsed and mirrored by foster carers. One said, 'You may wait quite a while with a vacancy, but children can't afford for us to get it wrong, so we wait.' Consequently, children and young people begin their journey with this agency positively, and many remain with their foster carers until and beyond adulthood. Since the last inspection, 14 young people have remained with their families in 'staying put' arrangements.

Highly skilled, child-focused foster carers demonstrate a strong commitment to the children and young people in their care. They use training, professional supervision and their combined experience to be creative, resilient and resourceful when challenges arise. They see difficulties through. Consequently, children and young people learn to trust their foster carers over time and feel better about themselves and their future.

Children and young people with additional and complex care needs receive well-organised, thoughtfully planned care. Foster carers' partnership working with external agencies secures the support that children and young people need in order to thrive. The same high standard is adhered to by foster carers and agency staff with regard to building, nurturing and sustaining positive relationships with the birth-family members of the children and young people. The emotional and psychological well-being of children and young people is treasured by this agency.

Ambitious foster carers and agency staff advocate strongly for the children and young people. They question the roles and responsibilities of involved professionals in the very best interests of the children and young people. One foster carer has persevered with medication reviews, anxious that the side effects of the child's medication were stifling their personality and development. Following a successful reduction in their medication, this child was described by his delighted foster carers as 'bouncy and full of energy again'.

Most of the children and young people are attending school or further education. Foster carers take a keen interest in children's educational progress and promote positive learning environments at home. The agency does make appropriate challenges, including challenge of virtual schools when necessary'; however, for a small number of children, an element of drift in securing the specialist support they need has occurred, such as when children are struggling to attend or to reintegrate into mainstream school. The agency's own monitoring systems in respect of children and young people's educational attainment and progress need revision to ensure that there is a sharper focus on, and understanding of, all children and young people's educational needs and outcomes.

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

Since her appointment in June 2018, the registered manager has steadfastly reviewed the agency's safeguarding policies, procedures and practices in the widest sense. Through diligent auditing and sampling, gaps and potential shortfalls have been pragmatically targeted for immediate, mid-term and longer-term action. All of the senior leaders are invested in learning from safeguarding incidents, such as allegations and the instigation of child protection procedures. This inquisitive agency holds itself to account and keeps its safeguarding practice under constant review.

An historical failure of external safeguarding agencies to take appropriate action in response to a serious incident for a young person resulted in strong challenge from the agency. Improved intervention and support for this young person have occurred as a direct result.

The registered manager's approach to upskilling has resulted in additional level 3 safeguarding training for supervising social workers. The wider training programme for staff and foster carers is systematically targeting core topics. Training in 'Prevent' duty, exploitation, gangs and county lines is being rolled out, alongside the continued provision of training in aspects of safeguarding that are relevant for specific fostering households, such as the vulnerabilities of disabled children.

The current emphasis on internet safety serves to educate foster carers, children and young people. Agency staff and foster carers are challenged and supported in equal measure to honestly review and appraise their own understanding, so that training and guidance are continually refreshed through the agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection ambassador.

The strong recruitment practice of staff and foster carers is embedded. Checks and references are scrutinised and explored in detail. Staff responsible for recruitment are suitably trained. They maintain records that demonstrate a diligent approach to safer recruitment.

Issues of concern are readily presented to the panel. Its safeguarding function provides leaders and managers with clear recommendations that are focused on the welfare and safety of the children and young people. Foster carers' approval statuses are reviewed and amended where necessary.

Foster carers understand the specific risks for their children; however, the agency recognises that some of the written guidance for a small number of foster carers needs to be improved. Specifically, a small number of safer care plans and risk assessments need greater detail and clarity regarding the specific strategies for foster carers to implement. This is particularly relevant in the context of the use of physical restraint. Although physical restraint is very rarely used in practice, the current policy and individual guidance are not explicitly clear.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager has embraced her new role with energy and an appetite for improvement. Leaders and managers have set about completing a wide and comprehensive review of all the agency's core business.

Recent developments include the transfer of foster carers from another agency that voluntarily closed. Foster carers commended this smooth transition, which has included the previous director of the smaller agency becoming the decision-maker. These significant changes, combined with the tremendous success of 'staying put' arrangements, are clearly factored into the continuing development of the agency. Leaders and managers are mindful of continual financial viability; therefore, they are strongly focused on the recruitment of more foster carers. Central to the agency's recruitment strategy is the nature and type of referrals it receives. Consequently, foster carers from diverse backgrounds are actively being sought.

The agency's strong culture of valuing children and young people as unique individuals permeates through all of its practice. This starts with the Skills to Foster training which was observed by inspectors to be enriching, challenging and realistic. The agency sets high standards for its foster carers. A high number of foster carer applicants do not complete the assessment stage.

Children, young people and foster carers know how to raise concerns and to make complaints. Such instances are rare, but they receive a thorough response. Outcomes of such events are effectively used by leaders and managers to scrutinise everyone's practice, learn lessons and seek to improve.

Reflective, supportive and challenging supervision is regularly provided for staff and foster carers. High-quality records maintained by foster carers and staff provide a detailed chronology of placements which will help children and young people to understand their time spent with the agency. This information is also well used to define and hone the training and development pathways for foster carers and staff, which are attuned to the needs of the children and young people. One example includes additional Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) training for one staff member to enable her focus on consultation with children with communication difficulties.

The panel is comprised of independent members who bring a wealth and breadth of diverse backgrounds and experience. Recommendations regarding a range of practice issues, as well as approvals and reviews, are swiftly made to the agency decision-maker. However, the actual records of these meetings are of variable quality. The agency decision-maker has already identified this shortfall and additional training for minute-takers is scheduled.

The registered manager is mindful that the recent and ongoing period of rapid development and action creates its own risks. For example, leaders and managers have identified that some of the agency's monitoring tools and systems are not sophisticated or targeted enough to capture all aspects of the children and young

people's outcomes and experiences. The registered manager's close working relationship with the assistant director and other registered managers is actively being used to address this next phase of the agency's journey.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC036638

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