

Regional Foster Placements (South West)

Regional Foster Placements Limited

3 Moorside Court, Yelverton Business Park, Crapstone, Yelverton, Devon PL20 7PE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Regional Foster Placements is a national independent fostering agency with a number of branches covering England and Wales. Regional Foster Placements (South West) is one of these branches and is based in Yelverton. This branch also has a small office in Exeter.

This service provides a range of fostering services such as short-term, long-term and emergency care for children and young people who may have complex needs. There are currently 37 foster carers in the South West peninsula area, looking after 59 children.

Inspection dates: 8 to 11 July 2019

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: 21 May 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Children have good relationships with their foster carers, whose philosophy is to help children feel part of their family and give them the positive experiences they deserve and need. However, the positive nature of these experiences is overshadowed by shortfalls in the agency's safeguarding and, in particular, leadership and management arrangements.

Few emergency placement breakdowns occur, but when they do, arrangements for children to meet with their foster carers again to say goodbye have not happened, despite this being an identified need. Furthermore, these outstanding arrangements are not escalated so that they are resolved. The agency has identified a need for training and support in how to deal with breakdowns, and plans are in place to address this imminently.

The system for foster carers to access emergency support during times of crisis is not consistently reliable. Although some foster carers report that they have received helpful and timely responses, others have not been able to get the advice they need in a timely manner or from a suitably qualified staff member.

A shortage of respite carers has meant that children (and foster carers) are often left not knowing until late on what arrangements, if any, are in place for their sleep-over – a term the agency uses for respite care, at the children's request. The lack of availability of carers also means that effective matching arrangements do not take place at the placement planning stage, when the need is identified at the start. Support workers in the agency, however, regularly spend time with children and take them out for activities for the day, where appropriate.

Many foster carers attend monthly support groups which they find useful; these are facilitated by the agency's therapist and/or a supervising social worker. Currently, children's support groups are not in place yet. However, staff have recently facilitated a children's and young people's forum to plan these groups. This was creatively and sensitively planned by staff with the agency's therapist. The forum helped children get to know and trust staff, so children can feel part of the agency, and express their views and needs. From this, staff have planned the groups for children, specific to their age and wishes, so that they can be supported to contribute to the agency and get the help they need. Children, including birth children, and foster carers also enjoy a variety of events that run throughout the year, so that everybody can have fun times together.

Children benefit from stable placements in this agency, with 76% of children living with their long-term foster carers for more than a year. The agency promotes 'staying put' arrangements, which gives children long-term security. Bespoke therapy is provided for foster carers when a child has particularly complex needs, and all but one child attend school on a full-time basis.

Supervising social workers ensure that they visit foster carers on a monthly basis, more if required, and they carry out unannounced visits. Although some foster carers have had a variety of supervising social workers allocated to them, others have had a more consistent experience. Foster carers find their supervising social workers very supportive and commented that they often 'go over and above'. Supervising social workers also make sure they speak to children who are in foster care and foster carers' birth children.

Local authority social workers have good communication with foster carers and staff at the agency. They receive prompt responses to any queries and written updates of children's progress.

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

When children come to live with foster carers, foster carers are expected to complete their own written safer caring agreements without their supervising social worker. This does not protect children or encourage safe practice; the outcome has led to the process being seen largely as a paperwork exercise to be completed rather than an opportunity to ensure safer caring. When risk assessments need to be discussed and carried out, they can lack clear assessment and guidance as to what needs to happen, for example, when a child goes missing.

In some instances, standards of care issues are not sufficiently addressed with foster carers, in part due to a lack of recognition or exploration of concerns. Good support is provided to foster carers. However, there is a need for foster carers to receive more robust and clear supervision from the agency's social workers, so that foster carers are fully appraised of all necessary issues, and for fostering panel and the agency decision-maker to re-enforce such an approach.

An allegation was made by a child which was not properly investigated, and other agencies were not challenged to ensure that the child's needs were met. This matter was addressed properly during the inspection. Safeguarding training is out of date for approximately 37% of staff and foster carers. This figure was higher earlier in the year, but the manager recognises that it must improve further.

Although foster carers rarely use physical intervention, the agency's procedures are not adhered to. All necessary professionals are informed, but the recording of such episodes does not give an accurate representation of what happened, or indicate whether the child has been spoken to. The management approach to this has not been robust. The manager is now urgently reviewing the implementation of physical intervention procedures.

The organisation has an effective whistleblowing policy which staff are confident to use and senior leaders respond to. Recruitment processes are now improved; people who work or contribute to the agency are vetted in line with safer recruitment procedures, and so a requirement made at the previous inspection is now met. The recruitment panel is made up of foster carers and young people, as well as

managers, so that all aspects of recruitment are considered. Staff did not previously receive an induction when they started work, but a new, comprehensive programme is now in place which staff undergo.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The registered manager left their post in November 2018. Following this unplanned departure, the responsible individual arranged for the team's assistant team manager to provide management cover until the current manager's appointment in early June 2019. The team worked hard while these interim arrangements were in place, to provide the necessary cover. However, this inevitably had an impact on quality assurance arrangements. The new experienced manager is about to submit her registration application to Ofsted.

The extent to which senior leaders and managers know the strengths and weaknesses of the agency is an evolving process. Management reporting in line with regulations and the national minimum standards is either out of date or insufficient in critically analysing the improvement of the quality of foster care. The new manager has started a development plan for the agency but this is in its infancy.

Lack of scrutiny at management level, of how policies and procedures are implemented, has led to aspects of the agency not functioning effectively. On one occasion, a foster carer placed on hold was asked to provide respite care to children. This was a confusing message and potentially does not safeguard children.

Channels exist for foster carers to be involved in the direction and development of the agency, such as foster carer representatives who meet with leaders and managers to discuss issues raised by other foster carers. However, these systems are not well developed and so the impact has been minimal. Some areas of dissatisfaction for foster carers have not been recognised enough or understood by leaders and managers, for example the disorganised approach to respite care/sleep-overs and problems with the on-call system.

Complaints and concerns raised are not recorded transparently and collectively, with clear outcomes or conclusions of investigations. Complaints are not systematically reviewed so that practice is reviewed and positive learning is applied, where appropriate.

The agency's stance on expectations of foster carers and secondary foster carers, in relation to training and attending supervision, is not specific. This does not help foster carers and supervising social workers ensure that standards are adhered to; nor does it assist the fostering panel to make consistent recommendations to raise standards and deal with concerns. New procedures are in the process of being written to address this issue.

The quality of foster carer assessments is variable. The lack of scrutiny and attention to detail before submitting assessments to fostering panel means that, on too many occasions, members of the fostering panel are distracted by dealing with issues that could have been resolved before the fostering panel takes place.

The fostering panel does exercise a quality assurance function, but the minutes suggest a disorganised approach to covering questions and answers. This can result in some important detail getting lost in discussion. Additionally, the minutes could be worded better. On occasion, the child's voice or opinion is not sufficiently responded to. When placements end before they are supposed to, these situations are not presented to fostering panel, to allow objective scrutiny and consider any learning for the future. The minutes do not state the reason why some foster carers do not attend fostering panel, but meetings are held in the evenings, which is problematical for some foster carers. There is no systematic monitoring of attendance by foster carers and social workers. A system is not in place whereby the panel chair and the manager of the agency can share feedback with one another to support improvement.

The fostering panel chair has not received an appraisal by the agency decision-maker in the last year, which means that there has not been an opportunity to explore ways in which to improve fostering panel. However, the previous agency decision-maker did provide written feedback and advice to panel, in order to meet a recommendation made at the previous inspection. Training days for fostering panel have not occurred as frequently as necessary, so members, despite their expertise, have had little opportunity to extend their knowledge and keep up with practice developments.

Following fostering panel recommendations, agency decisions are made carefully, with recommendations, and generally within a timely manner. The agency decision-maker, who has recently been appointed, is an experienced registered manager of another fostering agency within the organisation.

Children are sent a paper questionnaire before foster carer annual reviews, although it is not always completed as some children have said they do not like doing it. Currently, there is limited opportunity for children's views to be heard and acknowledged formally. Annual reviews are carried out by the foster carer's own supervising social worker, and the reviews lack objectivity and challenge in some cases. All annual reviews are considered by panel in an attempt to provide extra scrutiny. Plans are in place for a reviewing officer to carry out annual reviews for all foster carers from August 2019.

Leaders and managers promote a family ethos, where every child counts. The responsible individual does not seek to promote growth of the agency until it is sufficiently stable. Very recent positive changes have been made in the organisation, such as the appointment of a safeguarding manager and a human resources manager. These changes have been made in recognition of areas identified that need to be addressed.

Staff are positive about their work and reported that they have manageable caseloads. They feel that their environment is supportive and improving. Regular team meetings are held to ensure that staff communicate regularly and are kept up to date.

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>Subject to paragraph (6), the fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose. (Regulation 3(5))</p> <p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that there is sufficient management scrutiny to effectively monitor the quality of foster care and that systems in place support the contribution of foster carers' and children's views to influence the development of the agency and inform care planning. ■ Develop systems for feedback so that practice issues can be shared between the fostering panel and the team. ■ Review the policy and implementation of respite care for children. 	21/10/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation (4)(a))</p> <p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that staff are provided with regular safeguarding training in line with the agency's policy. 	21/10/2019
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's— wishes and feelings (having regard to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 11(a)(b)(i))</p>	16/09/2018

<p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that safer caring agreements and risk assessments are fit for purpose. ■ Ensure that allegations are investigated thoroughly and in line with procedures. ■ Review policy and procedure in relation to physical intervention and ensure children's views are heard and recorded. ■ Ensure that supervising social workers effectively supervise foster carers' work and help them continue to develop their skills and competencies. ■ If foster carers are placed on hold, review this regularly and adhere to agreements that are made about placing children. ■ Consider whether placement breakdowns and disruptions should be reviewed by panel to support learning positively. ■ Escalate any outstanding issues so that children's needs are met to a sufficiently senior professional, where appropriate. 	
<p>The fostering service provider must 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 19(1))</p> <p>In particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ensure that foster carers are provided with regular safeguarding training in line with the agency's policy. ■ Review policies to ensure that expectations for all foster carers in relation to training and supervision are clear. ■ Consider the timing of fostering panel meetings, so every foster carer has the option to attend, should they wish to. 	21/10/2019
<p>The registered person must 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. The registered person must, on request, supply the Chief Inspector with a statement containing a summary of any complaints made during the preceding 12 months and the action taken in response. (Regulation 18(4)(6))</p>	16/08/2019
<p>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p>	21/10/2019

to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent, where it recommends approval of an application;

to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given;

to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent, and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate. (Regulation 25(1)(a)(b)(c))

In particular:

- Ensure that safeguarding issues are considered thoroughly and that this is clearly evidenced in panel discussions, with corresponding recommendations.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information. (NMS 13.7)
- Reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. (NMS 13.8)
- Ensure that the 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. (NMS 14.7)
- Each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's fostering staff. (NMS 23.9)
- Each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance. (NMS 23.11)
- The executive side of the local authority or the independent foster service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members:
 - a. receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every 3 months;
 - b. monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy

- themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;
- c. satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration. (NMS 25.7)

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: SC062999

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Responsible individual: Joann Catterall

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspector

Sarah Canto, social care inspector



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