

Foster Care Associates Midlands

Foster Care Associates Limited

Senate House, Saxon Business Park, Hanbury Road, Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove,
Worcestershire B60 4AD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency was registered in 2004. It is part of a large, privately owned national organisation. It offers a wide range of placements: emergency, respite, bridging, and 'step-down' from residential, long- and short-term, parent and child, unaccompanied children and for young adults 'staying put'. At the time of the inspection, there were 233 children living in 170 fostering households. The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced.

Inspection dates: 14 to 18 October 2019

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	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 12 March 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: good

Foster carers are committed to meeting the individual needs of children. As a result, children are making good progress in their foster families in all areas of their development.

Children make good progress with their education. The agency has developed a 'raising achievement plan' for each child who is in Year 11, to look at how they can be supported to reach their maximum potential. This has led to some marked successes in GCSE examination results, equipping children with the qualifications they will need later in life.

Foster carers advocate well for those children who are not in mainstream education, to enable them to experience a range of educational opportunities. They feel confident to challenge schools to ensure that support is given to children when this has been identified as a need. For example, one foster carer advocated effectively to use the pupil premium to fund a private tutor for the child she was caring for. Effective support and challenge by foster carers and the agency help to ensure that all children, irrespective of ability, are able to have their educational needs met.

Children who self-harm are supported well by their foster carers and by the agency. Foster carers attend workshops to raise their awareness in this area. Children also attend workshops to boost their self-esteem and support their emotional health. Children and their carers can easily access the agency's own therapist for specialist support. As a result, children are able to better regulate their emotions.

Children are supported and encouraged by their foster carers to develop independence skills. When appropriate, they stay with their foster families post-18. This ensures that young adults with complex care needs can stay with their long-term carers into adulthood. For others, this means that they can remain living with their younger siblings or have a home to return to while studying at university. As a result, young people are fully supported to succeed in adult life and develop a sense of belonging in their foster families.

Children have well-planned introductions to their foster families. However, some children leave placements in an unplanned way without having a full understanding of the reasons why. This is likely to have a negative impact on their emotional well-being.

Although the number of unplanned endings for children are still relatively high, this is an improving picture. More focused matching of children, together with increased support to foster carers, has meant that placement stability has improved. However, this is not yet consistently good. For example, children's diverse needs and the impact on children already in the fostering household are not systematically addressed when matching children to foster families. Consequently, not all children living in the fostering household may be having their needs fully met.

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

Children are supported well by their foster carers to be safe. When there are concerns, support for them is quickly established. For example, one child was able to access counselling without delay to prevent her self-harming.

Foster carers have all the information that the agency has in respect of children they care for. Managers and supervising social workers actively challenge local authorities when information has not been forthcoming. As a result, foster carers are well informed and well prepared for children coming to live with them.

Foster carers receive a wide range of safeguarding training to ensure that children are kept safe and that positive parenting is promoted. Training includes information on county lines, knife crime and online safety. This ensures that foster carers have the skills they need to care for children well and to keep them safe.

Systems to promote the safety and well-being of children have been strengthened. Risks are well identified and understood by all concerned. Safe care plans are updated after each incident. These ensure that carers and staff are knowledgeable about the concerns that may pose a risk to children.

Foster carers and the agency respond well to children who go missing from home. Return home interviews are requested and if they do not occur promptly managers and supervising social workers escalate this with the child's placing authority. When children are frequently going missing, supervising social workers and foster carers work collaboratively with the police and placing social workers to try to reduce the level of risk. This ensures that children's welfare is placed at the forefront of everyone's practice.

The agency acts swiftly and takes appropriate action following any safeguarding concerns. Managers conduct learning reviews following any incidents of allegations against foster carers and this is disseminated into social work practice forums. This informs and develops social work practice and improves the quality of care for children.

Recruitment of staff, panel members and foster carers is thorough. This ensures that they are all safe to work with children. Children are involved in the recruitment of staff. This shows that children have a voice in the development of the agency

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Managers and staff are appropriately qualified to deliver a high level of service to foster carers and children. Leaders and managers show an ambitious vision for the agency. There is a clear governance. Recent initiatives, such as reflective practice support groups, demonstrate a determination by managers to develop and improve. These are beginning to have a positive impact on the outcomes and experiences for children.

Since the last inspection, managers have strengthened their monitoring processes. These ensure that when there are any concerns regarding children, patterns and trends are quickly identified. Managers have good oversight of the progress children are making to maintain positive outcomes for them.

Learning from thematic studies and case reviews is undertaken to improve practice and increase understanding. These are disseminated to supervising social workers. Analysis from case reviews is yet to be fully embedded in practice and this work is ongoing.

The voice of the child is very strong throughout the agency. The agency actively engages with children to hear their voices and there is a clear vision about how the service wants to incorporate children's voices into the running of the agency. This ensures that children feel their views and opinions are listened to and respected.

Foster carers feel well supported by consistent staff and understand that they are an integral part of the agency. One foster carer commented, 'I feel like we are a cog in the agency rather than an appendage.'

There is a strong focus placed on training for foster carers that is responsive to the needs of children. The development of online as well as face-to-face training has meant easier access for carers. This has resulted in a significant increase in foster carers completing mandatory training to ensure that they are fully able to meet the needs of the children they care for.

Supervising social workers receive regular supervision and feel supported by their managers. There is wide range of training that is available for staff and panel members, demonstrating good commitment to the continued development of staff.

The quality of foster carers' assessments is good. The agency decision-maker makes reasoned decisions, with clear qualifying determinations. This is supported by the fostering panel, which is effective and promotes safe and secure placements. As a result, the agency is benefiting from strong independent oversight.

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

Recommendations

- Where children are leaving the foster family, they are helped to understand the reasons why they are leaving. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 24, paragraph 11.5)
- 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 the 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, page 32, paragraph 15.1)

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: SC045338

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