

Compass Fostering Eastern Limited

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Main Office, Pean Hill Park, Pean Hill, Whitstable, Kent CT5 3BJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency has its head office in Whitstable, with additional offices situated in Gravesend and Felsted. The agency has plans for continuing expansion in relation to the development of the two current sub-offices. The agency provides emergency, short-, medium- and long-term, and permanent foster placements for children and young people. Other services include bridging or pre-adoption, parent-and-child and respite placements.

At the time of this inspection, 183 fostering households comprising 329 approved foster carers were looking after 203 children and young people.

The manager was registered with Ofsted on 20 December 2017.

Inspection dates: 17 to 21 February 2020

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **inadequate**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 20 November 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

Some children have experienced unnecessary and preventable disruptions in their lives. Poorly considered matching decisions have been a significant factor, resulting in abrupt and unplanned endings for some children.

Despite clear referral details, such as requests for foster carers with specific experience and skills, some children have been matched with very new and inexperienced foster carers. When challenges have arisen, these children have experienced rejection and further disruption on their journey to permanence.

Some children have been exposed to the likely or potential risk of harm and others have been exposed to risks that should have been foreseen and reduced but were not. Poor matching practice has, on occasions, failed to consider foster carers' lack of the necessary skills and experience by backfilling such gaps with the proposal to provide training after a child has gone to live with them.

In numerous examples, foster carers' supervision records fail to demonstrate that enough focus is placed on discussing and reviewing the progress and experiences of the child. Agency staff's own supervision records contain similar omissions. Consequently, it is difficult in some cases to understand and measure the progress that the children are making. Such practice is exacerbated by an example of the agency failing to challenge a poor-quality placement agreement, and its failure to chase a local authority when a child's review meetings were overdue.

Some children are enjoying longer-term stability. A successful example of such longevity has resulted in two brothers remaining with their foster carers into 'staying put' arrangements. Most of the foster carers spoken to during this inspection were able to describe their child's specific needs and talked about the children with fondness, warmth and affection.

In other examples, foster carers demonstrate commitment and tenacity in speaking up for the children in their care, for example by securing the improved support for a child at school. The organisation's own provision of education support services is starting to make a positive impact for some children. Foster carers are supported to navigate, and where necessary challenge education services and local authorities in the best interest of their child's educational needs.

Similarly, the in-house psychology service provides some foster carers with targeted support. This provision helps them to understand their child's emotional and mental health needs and how these can be nurtured.

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

Agency staff at all levels demonstrate a weak approach towards their safeguarding responsibilities. There are numerous examples of the staff and foster carers reacting to events and situations that have been harmful to children or placed them at risk of harm, when these could have been avoided.

There are examples when the agency staff could and should have been proactive in dealing with potential risks and welfare concerns, but they have not. In one example, the necessary protective action was taken by agency staff only when this was driven by the inspectors. Despite systems in place, such as the agency's 'high-risk register' and internal strategy meeting process, the escalating risks for this child did not receive the agency's urgent attention because these systems were not used effectively.

The risks for this child have steadily grown but the agency's response has not. This child's episodes of going missing have increased but safe care strategies have remained static. For some children, there have been no attempts from the agency to secure missing-from-home interviews to explore the push/pull factors for children who have gone missing.

This lack of urgency is sometimes mirrored by supervising social workers. For example, the supervision records of a foster carer identified that a child's risk assessment required updating in June 2019. In subsequent monthly supervision meetings, the need to complete this was repeated. However, this action was not recorded as complete until the foster carer's supervision meeting in September 2019.

In another example, the poor response to a child's self-harming incident resulted in a second episode. Following the second incident, the foster carer was advised to complete some online training. There has been no follow-up by the agency to test out this foster carer's learning and to be satisfied that this limited piece of training has had the desired impact.

Despite a comprehensive safeguarding training programme, some foster carers do not receive training in a coordinated or timely way. Therefore, some foster carers are doing their best to support children when they do not have the necessary skills and knowledge they need to keep the children safe.

Foster carers do not receive the guidance they need to take steps to ensure their own safety, as well as that of the children. One example includes the absence of guidance in relation to caring for children who have intimate personal care needs. Safer care guidance for this child's foster carers and respite carers is consequently lacking, risking potential harm to children and a lack of protection for foster carers, should they become subject to allegations.

Supervision records for foster carers show numerous examples of a lack of direction from the supervising social workers to help foster carers on their learning journey in relation to safeguarding. There is a request for foster carers to complete a targeted amount of training in their first year that is devoid of a systematic or needs-led

approach. Consequently, it is often up to the individual foster carer to identify their own skill deficits and to choose their training. Foster carers' supervision records show a lack of exploration by supervising social workers to determine the impact of any training attended.

Inexperienced foster carers do not always understand the need to report concerning events swiftly, for example not reporting a disclosure that a child made reduced the agency's ability to respond and take remedial action swiftly.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Senior leaders have failed to adequately plan and monitor the impact of the rapid growth of the agency that has occurred since the last inspection.

The staff team is newly formed. Some staff members are still in their induction and probation periods, and some supervising social workers are either newly qualified or very early in their careers. A middle layer of three operations managers is also new. Senior leaders have not sufficiently considered the impact of such significant expansion. A strong focus has instead been placed on foster carer recruitment.

The registered manager fails to lead and manage the agency with sufficient skill and expertise. These deficits are exacerbated by the failure of senior leaders to provide him with necessary practice-related professional supervision. He has not had a formal appraisal of his performance since the last inspection. His own contact with his line manager uses a 'regional performance review' tool. Since the last inspection, four of these meetings have occurred, only one of which has been recorded. The action-led focus of this record fails to place the agency's children at the centre of this process.

Quality assurance systems and processes are in place, but they are not sufficiently used and embedded to provide the necessary scrutiny and challenge of practice to promote practice improvement. Core areas of social work and safeguarding practice are not sufficiently tested. The hierarchy of the staff team, from supervising social workers, to operational managers, to the registered manager, provides ample opportunities for the needs, support and practice of foster carers to be explored and rigorously tested. Case tracking undertaken during this inspection demonstrated that in many situations, this does not occur.

Poor-quality foster carer supervision records completed by supervising social workers have not been challenged by the operational managers, and these deficits have not been identified or challenged by the registered manager. Senior leaders do not test out the information given to them about the quality of the care provided for children. There is a fundamental lack of professional curiosity threaded through the agency.

Agency records sampled showed gaps and omissions in relation to new staff's induction and probation periods. Agency staff are not following the agency's procedural guidance. For example, not all staff have received the prescribed number of supervision meetings during these periods. The records viewed for such meetings were scant and devoid of evidence of enough discussion and debate. Performance

monitoring records for staff were also poor. Consequently, staff do not receive the support that they need to ensure that their practice improves.

Foster carers' records were also sampled. One example contained negative language about a child over a sustained period and an example of the foster carer inappropriately sharing confidential information with a third party. Neither of these significant shortfalls were addressed in the foster carer's subsequent supervision meeting.

Some foster carers say that they do not feel adequately supported by the agency. In one example, a foster carer subject to an allegation did not receive timely contact to explore their support needs during this period. Another foster carer described their high levels of anxiety about managing risk. This was evident in the records viewed. However, the response from the agency has failed to provide the necessary support.

Senior leaders do not encourage or promote agency reflection and learning. For example, placement endings are counted, but these examples have not been evaluated to improve the matching process. The placement team is currently without clear management oversight, which exacerbates this issue.

One example of the risks associated with children's media use and access to electronic equipment has also lacked scrutiny and learning, following an incident. Although the foster carers took appropriate immediate action, managers have not fully explored how this incident occurred. Neither have they reviewed the agency's guidance for foster carers in relation to their keeping and use of photographs and videos of the children in their care.

Despite the significant changes to this agency, its statement of purpose remains largely unchanged and generic, with a focus on the wider organisation. The revision and update process has been a missed opportunity for leaders to focus on this specific branch, to encourage a real sense of ownership from the registered manager, the staff team and the foster carers.

A protective factor for this agency lies in the strength and quality of its independent panel. Omissions and shortfalls in respect of foster carers' training needs are picked up and challenged at first annual reviews. Panel members bring a wealth of diversity, professional backgrounds and sound knowledge of the fostering task. The panel chair was observed to ensure the active participation of every panel member, resulting in clear recommendations, achieved by rigorous debate. Through interviews and record sampling, the agency decision-maker demonstrated an added layer of challenge and scrutiny which has, on occasion, gone against the recommendations of the panel, or added additional actions. Such practice confirms that diligence, challenge and scrutiny are applied by every layer of the panel function.

This inspection concluded with a firm commitment from senior leaders to undertake an immediate, mid- and longer-term review and action plan of the serious omissions identified. By the time of the final feedback meeting, a focused action plan was

presented. The organisation is well resourced and financially viable; therefore, it is in a position to secure the required 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>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. (Regulation 11 (1)(a))</p>	23/04/2020
<p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p>	23/04/2020
<p>The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular, the fostering service provider must ensure that each child— is provided with guidance, support and advice on health, personal care and health promotion issues appropriate to the child's needs and wishes. (Regulation 15 (1)(2)(d))</p>	23/04/2020
<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 17 (1))</p>	23/04/2020
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to— the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it and,</p>	23/04/2020

the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 19(a)(b))	
The fostering service provider must— ensure that all permanent appointments are subject to the satisfactory completion of a period of probation. (Regulation 21 (1)(a))	23/04/2020
The registered person must 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. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b))	23/04/2020
The fostering service provider must— keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide. (Regulation 4(a))	23/04/2020

Recommendations

- Where children placed out of authority go missing, the manager of the fostering service follows the local RMFHC protocol. They also comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child’s care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child’s care. (National Minimum Standard 5.7)
- 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. (National Minimum Standard 15.1)
- The manager exercises effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. (National Minimum Standard 17.5)
- Foster carers’ personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. (National Minimum Standard 20.5)
- 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. The frequency of meetings for short break foster

carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. (National Minimum Standard 21.8)

- Assessment and appraisal of all staff involved in fostering work takes account of identified skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning skills needed for particular roles and is used to identify individuals' learning and development needs. (National Minimum Standard 23.5)
- Suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of the agency's registered person or manager of a local authority fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 24.3)
- All staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (National Minimum Standard 24.6)
- Information about individual children is kept confidential and only shared with those who have a legitimate and current need to know the information, and to those parts of a child's record or other information that they need to know. (National Minimum Standard 26.4)
- Information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. (National Minimum Standard 26.6)

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: SC036518

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Maria Lonergan, Social Care Inspector

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