

Cornerstone North East Fostering Service

Cornerstone North East Fostering and Adoption Service 90 Coronation Street,
Sunderland SR1 2HE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Cornerstone North East Fostering Service is an independent fostering agency which has been registered with Ofsted since March 2006. The service operates from a registered office in Sunderland, with a supporting office in Doncaster.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including respite, permanent, long-term, short-term and parent and child arrangements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 18 fostering households that are caring for 16 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 27 February to 4 March 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: 13 July 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- The agency's recruitment and selection process for foster carers is not inclusive and it does not comply with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. The agency requires applicants to refrain from "homosexual behaviour" and in practice will only accept married heterosexual carers. It therefore discriminates against those who are not heterosexual contrary to article 14, read with article 8, of the European Convention on Human Rights (the ECHR).
- Although children experience some positive outcomes, including being placed in stable and nurturing homes, there are some aspects of the service that do not meet the standards of good.
- Monitoring systems are insufficient. Leaders have not reviewed the quality of care provided by the agency. Inconsistent record-keeping does not ensure that the developmental progress of children, including their education and health outcomes, can be readily monitored.
- Some children are known by their foster carers' surnames. While this can be an appropriate course of action to take in the best interests of the children, there is a lack of evidence of multi-agency decision-making and approval in this regard.
- The agency has not notified Ofsted of all significant and serious events in a timely manner. However, on all occasions, incidents have been managed safely and with appropriate multi-agency input.
- The panel chair has only had fostering experience in this agency and would benefit from a wider perspective of quality assurance processes.
- The agency does not consistently make a clear record of how foster carers can meet the needs of children at the point of placement.
- Foster carers have not been provided with restraint training swiftly enough when a need for this training has been identified. On occasions, record-keeping following restraint does not include sufficient detail to provide assurance to the agency about the appropriateness of the measure.
- Some unannounced visits to carers' homes have not taken place in a timely manner.
- Leaders do not sufficiently escalate concerns when information about children's plans is not provided in a timely way.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- The majority of children's cases seen at this inspection demonstrate that they live in good-quality, stable and permanent placements with foster carers from this agency.

- The agency provides a specialist faith-based support service to carers. Foster carers have reported enhanced levels of resilience and ability to care for children as a direct result of this support.
- Foster carers and supervising social workers receive regular supervision and have opportunities to reflect on their practice.
- The agency offers regular events, holidays and supportive forums for children, carers and social workers to share their experiences and to socialise. Service developments are well informed by children's feedback.
- Training for foster carers and social workers is research-based and sourced from a variety of external providers. This equips the staff and carers to safely meet the needs of the children in their care.
- Placing authorities and children have provided positive feedback about the quality of care offered by foster carers.

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, the 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 fostering service provider must promote the educational achievement of children placed with their foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>implement a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 16 (1)(2)(a))</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. (Regulation 23 (7))</p> <p>In particular, the panel chair should improve their experience of quality assurance processes.</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider may carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and whom they consider may be suitable to become a foster parent ('X'), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>The report referred to in paragraph (3) must include the following matters in relation to X—</p> <p>the information required by schedule 3 and any other information the fostering service provider considers relevant.</p> <p>Schedule 3 - Information as to prospective foster parent ('X') and other members of their household and family.</p> <p>The outcome of any request or application made by them or any other member of their household to foster or adopt children, or for registration as an early years provider or later years provider under part 3 of the Childcare Act 2006,</p>	31/07/2019

<p>including particulars of any previous approval relating to them or to any other member of the household. (Regulation 26 (2) and Schedule 3 (11))</p>	
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (1)(2)(3))</p>	<p>31/07/2019</p>
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36 (1)(2) and Schedule 7)</p>	<p>31/07/2019</p>
<p>An agency must be carried on in accordance with the relevant requirements.</p> <p>In this section “relevant requirements” means—</p> <p>the requirements of any other enactment which appear to the registration authority to be relevant.</p> <p>(Care Standards Act 2000, 14 (1)(c)(3)(b))</p> <p>In particular, to comply with the enactment, sections 13, 19 and 29 of the Equality Act 2010 and section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998 not to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation in the recruitment of foster carers.</p>	<p>31/07/2019</p>

Recommendations

- Ensure that children are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. (‘Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards’, 2.1)

In particular, when children and young people are placed, consent is obtained, and multi-agency agreement made about the child's best interests in terms of their surnames and how they refer to adults in the household.

- Ensure that children's health is promoted in accordance with their placement plan and foster carers are clear about what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them and where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 6.5)
- Ensure that records reflect that 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 that the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 15.1)
- Ensure that support and training is 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', 20.8)

In particular, ensure that training in safe holding techniques is readily available for carers with an assessed need.

- Ensure that 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. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 21.8)
- Ensure that 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)
- Ensure that the foster carer is given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service follows this up with the responsible authority. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 31.2)
- Ensure that the foster carer is supported to contribute effectively to the review of their care plan, which includes the placement plan. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 31.3)

Inspection judgements

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

Most children are placed with this agency with a view to achieving permanence and the agency is effective in the cases seen in supporting carers to deliver this. Many children have a plan for adoption and some have been adopted by carers from this agency, including large sibling groups and children who have complex needs. There are positive outcomes for these children.

Not all children are placed with essential care planning documentation being made available to the agency and the carers at the time of placement. Managers have not been sufficiently tenacious in securing this in a timely way. In these cases, this has resulted in a lack of clarity about the aims of a foster care placement and does not support foster carers to fully meet children's needs. In one instance, a placing authority reflected that this had led to a foster carer being confused about their contribution to the care planning review processes.

The agency cannot be assured that children's developmental needs are being consistently well met. The inspector saw individual cases where children are experiencing some positive outcomes and foster carers and social workers can articulate the progress that children are making in their placements. However, records about children's progress are not systematically kept and this makes it difficult to monitor and evaluate progress from children's starting points, including health and education outcomes and those relating to children's diverse needs. The agency has introduced a new form to assist in the monitoring and evaluation of this, but it is too soon in its implementation to measure its impact.

A small number of children have experienced an unplanned move. The agency made arrangements to move two children to other carers in the agency. One child has had three placements in this regard. There is an absence of formal matching considerations being recorded to provide confidence that the agency considers the compatibility of the needs and risks of all children in carers' homes.

The agency works with placing authorities and other agencies to provide specialist therapeutic support for children and young people. This agency offers a faith-based support service for its foster carers. Foster carers feel that this is highly beneficial to them and in turn the children that they care for, as they feel that it offers them enhanced support through Christian prayer, for example, and from individuals who share their perspectives and values.

The agency's recruitment policy is discriminatory, in that it excludes prospective carers who are not heterosexuals. Although this had not directly impacted on the experience and progress of children and young people in the cases seen, it does not ensure that prospective carers are considered without prejudice and with appropriate emphasis on their capacity to care for children. This is not compliant with the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998.

Foster carers are provided with appropriate preparation to undertake the fostering task. Foster carers receive regular, qualitative supervision, which provides them with opportunities to reflect on their practice and ensures that children have positive experiences and receive good-quality care. Foster carers are highly complimentary about the support received from the agency and the events and holidays that the agency offers.

Some children have been placed with foster carers and are known by their carers' surnames. There is insufficient evidence of multi-agency decision-making and consent to ensure that the names that children and carers use are in the best interests of the child. These arrangements could contribute to confusion and misunderstanding for children about their heritage and it has the potential to have an adverse impact on their emotional health and well-being should the plan for the child not be adoption.

Children are supported to have leisure interests and hobbies. Foster carers take children on holiday and to activities, such as swimming and Brownies. Children and young people are asked to contribute their views for carers' annual reviews. The agency provides a children's guide to the service, which includes details about their rights and how to complain. The agency has responded to the views of children and young people by creating separate activity groups for teenagers.

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

The registered manager has taken appropriate action to manage safeguarding matters effectively. This includes referring an allegation to the local authority and ensuring that subsequent standards of care proceedings were initiated appropriately.

The annual unannounced visit to foster carers has been carried out in some, but not all, cases. A minority of visits have been delayed in this respect. This is a necessary safeguarding measure to ensure that children are cared for in a safe environment.

Staff and carers are subject to appropriate background checks and vetting procedures to ensure that only those suitable can work with and care for children. Assessments of foster carers are mainly thorough and comprehensive. However, in one case, the agency failed to conduct a full check with Ofsted in relation to a prospective carer who registered as an early years provider. The agency had sought information that was available for public view and felt satisfied with this information.

Carers are provided with behaviour management training that provides foster carers with appropriate therapeutic approaches to de-escalate challenging behaviour. However, it does not routinely provide carers with techniques or strategies to prevent injury to children and themselves should they need to physically intervene. In some cases, there has been an assessed need for this training and it was not made accessible to these carers without delay. In some cases, record-keeping when a child has been restrained is insufficient to provide assurance to the agency about the appropriateness of the measure. In these instances, records were not sufficiently

detailed to ensure that carers and children are protected from allegations or physical harm.

The agency completes risk assessments for each child that identify their needs and risks effectively. Risk assessments contain appropriate strategies for carers to assist them in managing challenging behaviour. Leaders and social workers reflect on incidents with a view to preventing recurrence. Incidents are evaluated and there is a focus on learning from incidents.

Carers' homes are checked annually for physical hazards. Carers complete an annual fire safety plan and regularly revise their safer caring policy for their household. Pets in the home are suitably risk assessed. Foster carers receive internal and external safeguarding training and are trained to administer paediatric first aid. All of which contributes to ensuring that children and young people are living in environments with minimal hazards.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The agency's recruitment and selection process does not comply with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 or the Human Rights Act 1998. The agency only recruits foster carers in heterosexual marriages. The agency's policy on recruitment discriminates against potential carers of a different sexual orientation.

Internal and external scrutiny of this agency is not sufficiently robust. Leaders have conducted a review of the quality of care, but this is limited in scope and does not meet the criteria set out in regulation 35. The agency has not sent a copy of the report to Ofsted and as such the regulator's oversight and ability to monitor quality is reduced.

The registered manager is appropriately qualified and has considerable experience of working in a variety of leadership roles in social care environments. The manager registered with Ofsted in 2014.

The mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing progress in relation to children's and young people's health and education are inconsistently used. Although social workers' and foster carers' supervision, and care planning reviews, demonstrate that these matters are discussed broadly, there is not a systematic way of capturing this information clearly. Recommendations are made to ensure consistency in record-keeping to allow leaders to engage in routine monitoring practice with greater ease.

The minutes of meetings and panels are clear, comprehensive and provide an accurate account of the discussions to inform of decisions and next steps. However, some important information about children's care planning is not always provided by placing authorities. While the manager has requested this, she has not escalated her concerns sufficiently in all cases and a lack of information about some children remains. Not all children have reviews of their care or placement meetings in a timely manner. A recommendation is made to ensure that a more assertive approach is taken to secure the necessary information.

The panel chair has had no experience of fostering matters outside of this agency, although he was an experienced panel member prior to becoming panel chair. The minutes of panel demonstrate that the panel chair is effective in performing his role and function and there is robust questioning of applicants and social workers. However, a requirement is made to ensure that the panel chair engages with external forums and development opportunities to gain wider perspective and understanding of the fostering task.

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: SC066812

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Inspector

Nicola Thomas: social care inspector



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