

Fostering Ltd

Suite 8, New Hall Hey Business Centre, New Hall Hey Road, Rawtenstall, Rossendale
BB4 6HL

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency was registered in June 2015. The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short-term
- long-term
- respite.

At the time of this assurance visit, the agency had 21 fostering households caring for 38 children.

Visit dates: 6 to 7 October 2020

Previous inspection date: 12 August 2019

Previous inspection judgement: Inadequate

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred

practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Since the agency received a judgement of inadequate in August 2019, it has received two monitoring visits, prior to this assurance visit. The agency has been able to evidence progress at all of these visits.

Children have trusting and secure relationships with their foster carers. Many children are living in permanent placements, including under 'staying put' arrangements. Many children are also living alongside their brothers and sisters, with over 70% of children placed living with a sibling. This provides additional continuity and emotional support for children, increasing children's sense of security and stability. This is a strength of the agency, as they do their best to keep children together.

Foster carers work well with children's birth families, appreciating the significance of these relationships. One social work professional commented, 'The foster carers showed commitment to the children and also their mother, reassuring everyone that this was a good placement.'

Children's contact with their birth families is promoted and this commitment continued throughout lockdown. Foster carers utilised alternative ways to enable children to keep in touch, including online video calls, appreciating the importance of this contact for all parties.

While some children have continued to attend school during lockdown, others have been educated at home, with foster carers helping them with their school work. Some children have struggled with this, while others have thrived. The agency has recently sent out questionnaires to all foster carers and children, asking for feedback about how they managed during this difficult period. So far, returns suggest that everyone coped well, accepting the situation and trying to make the best of it. Foster carers report that they have spent more time with children doing activities such as baking, arts and crafts, playing games and going on long dog walks. They enjoyed this time together.

Improvements in monitoring now mean that foster carers have the information that they need to look after the children in their care. The agency now ensures that the local authority provides the necessary documentation, including health care plans and delegated authority promptly. An escalation policy has been introduced if the supervising social worker is struggling to access these important documents. This is proving to be effective.

The safety of children

The agency has no parent and child placements currently. Concerns about such placements resulted in the judgement of inadequate in August 2019. The agency is in the process of training their supervising social workers and a small group of foster carers, in a recognised programme of parenting assessment, so that they will be able to undertake these assessments in a robust manner. They will not be offering parent and child placements until they are confident that they can provide these safely, with the necessary level of support.

Children rarely engage in risk-taking behaviour. Children do not put themselves at risk by going missing from home, engaging in substance misuse or child exploitation. However, children do benefit from robust risk assessments, that highlight historic areas of concern and indicate to foster carers the best strategy for managing that behaviour. These assessments are updated when new information becomes known. This means that foster carers know what to do to keep children safe from harm. Serious safeguarding incidents are rare.

Some children do push boundaries and provide challenge, as they are in their teenage years. They are also trying to fit in with their peers and do not want to feel different. Foster carers have not attended training on internet safety. As a result, they can be anxious about letting children have access to the internet or online gaming. Children need to learn to manage their internet use safely, with the help of their foster carers, who in turn need to know how to monitor this. While some foster carers are confident in this area, others are not. They need support from the agency to allow children to access this medium safely.

Face-to-face visits to foster carers have continued throughout lockdown. These have been alternated with virtual discussions. Supervising social workers have also continued to undertake unannounced visits but have been more imaginative in how these are undertaken, such as meeting with foster carers in their garden. This helps to ensure that children are safe and gives foster carers the opportunity to discuss any emerging concerns.

Leaders and managers

The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She completed the registration process with Ofsted in April 2020. However, she is a director of the agency and was the registered manager previously, so knows the staff and foster carers well. A new team manager has also been appointed since the last monitoring visit. She brings a wealth of fostering experience and has been instrumental in introducing a number of new systems and improvements in practice over recent months.

Supervising social workers have welcomed the changes brought in by the team manager. These have challenged their practice, but they can see the positive change

they have made to their ability to provide effective support and challenge to foster carers. They feel well supported, receive regular reflective supervision and have all had an annual performance appraisal. Staff are feeling optimistic about the direction of the agency.

The fostering panel has continued to meet, albeit virtually, throughout the pandemic. The agency took advantage of the amendments allowed, reducing the number of panel members required to be quorate. However, there has been a misunderstanding in doing so, with panels meeting without a social work member in attendance, potentially resulting in less challenge from a practice perspective.

A number of monitoring and auditing systems have been introduced over recent months. A quality assurance officer is currently completing a file audit for all foster carers and children. If issues are identified, they are quickly rectified.

Foster carers' annual reviews are thorough. This helps to ensure that foster carers continue to provide good-quality care for children. The fostering panel considers these reviews, which provides an additional level of scrutiny. However, on some occasions, the panel has requested that the next review is held earlier than normal, especially when the foster carer has not completed their training, support and development standards (TSDS) in the required timescale. However, this has been overlooked by the agency, which illustrates that further improvements in monitoring need to be made. It has also allowed further drift in the foster carers' training completion.

Managers know their foster carers well. Foster carers spoken to as part of this assurance visit, as well as those who responded to the Ofsted survey earlier this year, said that they feel valued and supported by the agency. They say that they can always speak to someone they know, in the event of an emergency. The agency's annual picnic in the park was replaced this year by a virtual picnic, with foster carers receiving a hamper so that they could participate. Children were encouraged to dress up as a superhero and decorate a cake. It is pleasing to see such positive events continuing, even when adjustments have had to be made as a result of the pandemic.

The agency has acted to address the two requirements made at the last monitoring visit. These related to maintaining a clear chronology in the event of an allegation, and ensuring that foster carers have all the information they require about the children in their care. Furthermore, the majority of recommendations are assessed to have been met. This includes the development of a robust matching document and improvements in foster carer recording. One recommendation relating to management monitoring is repeated, as some systems still need to improve or become embedded.

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>Meetings of fostering panel</p> <p>No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel—</p> <p>either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs,</p> <p>one member who is a social worker who has at least three years’ relevant post qualifying experience, and</p> <p>one other independent person, and</p> <p>where the chair is not present and the vice chair who is present is not independent of the fostering service provider, at least one of the other panel members must be independent of the fostering service provider.</p> <p>(Regulation 24 (1)(i)(ii)(iii))</p> <p>(Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, as amended by The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020)</p>	<p>16/11/2020</p>

Recommendations

- Foster carers are able to evidence that the TSDS have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers). (National minimum standards 20.3)

- Support and training are 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. (National minimum standards 20.8)
In particular, training for foster carers on internet safety.
- The manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (National minimum standards 25.2)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC488290

Registered provider: Fostering Limited

Responsible individual: Najam Asghar

Registered manager: Caroline Larkin

Inspector

Mandy Williams, Social Care Inspector

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