

## Worcestershire Children First Fostering

Worcestershire County Hall Campus, Spetchley Road, Worcester, Worcestershire  
WR5 2NP

# Assurance visit

### Information about this independent fostering agency

The independent fostering agency was registered on 1 October 2019. The agency was formerly part of Worcestershire County Council, which is now Worcestershire Children First. The agency offers mainstream short- and long-term emergency and 'connected persons' placements. There are 142 mainstream foster carers and 107 'connected persons' or 'kinship' carers. There are 361 children placed with the agency.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on Ofsted's inspection activity, the fostering agency has not yet had a full inspection. This assurance visit is a focussed review of the service and has not considered all elements of the fostering agency that would be covered in a full inspection.

There is a permanent registered manager in post. She is a qualified social worker.

**Visit dates:** 16 to 17 December 2020

**Previous inspection date:** Not previously inspected

**Previous inspection judgement:** Not previously inspected

### 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**

Children have trusting relationships with their foster carers. Foster carers and social workers told inspectors that the restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have provided them with valuable time to strengthen these relationships. This has helped children to feel safe and to continue making progress.

Foster carers have been creative in maintaining children's learning during national lockdowns. The fostering agency has provided additional support to enable foster carers to purchase specialist equipment when this has been required. This positive approach has ensured that children's education has been prioritised.

Despite the challenges faced by the COVID-19 pandemic, children have been supported to keep in touch with people who are important to them. Foster carers have used technology to maintain these links when face-to-face visits have not been possible, ensuring that children maintain a sense of identity.

Foster carers are well supported. The fostering agency has adapted well in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that this support continues. The fostering agency uses a combination of face-to-face and virtual support options on a risk assessed basis. This has ensured that the fostering agency has retained a level of oversight of fostering households during the pandemic.

Communication between the fostering agency and children's social workers is a strength. Partnership working in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has ensured that statutory visits have taken place while reducing the risks associated with multiple visitors to foster homes.

### **The safety of children**

Each child has an individual safe care plan that informs their day-to-day care. However, these plans do not always fully reflect the needs of the child. In addition, the plans are not consistently up to date to reflect children's changing needs. This leaves foster carers without all the essential information that they need to care for children safely. The manager is aware of this shortfall and has scheduled an audit of these plans for the new year.

The fostering agency responds quickly and effectively to safeguarding concerns. This includes reporting matters to children's social workers and safeguarding services. This ensures that children's welfare is protected.

The fostering agency operates a 'Placement Plus' scheme. This provides enhanced support and guidance for a small number of foster carers who are providing care to children with highly complex needs. This individualised approach equips foster carers to meet the demands of their role.

Managers have made some improvements with foster carers receiving training. Face-to-face training is supplemented with online options. This has enabled training to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic and can quickly be provided in response to emerging risks. However, this continues to be an area for development. In particular, managers are yet to address a historical delay in foster carers completing their training, support and development standards within the required timescale.

Managers have not ensured that all staff or panel members are safely recruited. Managers have not ensured that the reasons people have left previous roles with children or vulnerable adults have been verified, or that gaps in employment have been explored. This means that managers do not always know that people employed by the fostering agency are suitable to work with children.

## **Leaders and managers**

Managers have used the amendments to regulations due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Where these have been used the registered manager has maintained good oversight. The registered manager has also implemented flexible working arrangements. These actions have ensured that the agency's operations have been sustained.

Supervising social workers are well supported by managers. They receive regular supervision and relevant training and this has continued throughout the pandemic. This has ensured that staff have the necessary skills for their specialist role.

The fostering panel has continued to operate remotely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This has enabled the fostering agency to continue to approve and review foster carers. Panel minutes clearly reflect reasons for recommendations and subsequent decisions.

Managers have made changes to the arrangements for the agency decision-maker. This element of the service is currently under review by Ofsted and therefore does not form part of the reporting from this assurance visit, other than to note its operation.

Ofsted does not always receive notifications of significant events. This shortfall impacts on Ofsted's oversight of the service.

Systems to support management oversight of the fostering agency are not yet sufficient. This results in weaknesses in the review and monitoring of the service. A lack of coherent information impacts on the manager's ability to reflect on practice or inform service development.

## 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 provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p>the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and</p> <p>the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency,</p> <p>carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring that the agency's systems for review and monitoring are accurate to enable sufficient management oversight.</p>	31/03/2021
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring that the safe care plans and risk assessments contain all the relevant information and are updated to reflect changing needs and risks.</p>	31/03/2021
The fostering service provider must not—	29/01/2021

<p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or</p> <p>allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>This paragraph applies to any person who is employed, other than by the fostering service provider, in a position in which that person may in the course of their duties have regular contact with children placed by the fostering service.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is of integrity and good character,</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 1(a)(b) 2 3(a)(b)(c))</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. (Regulation 36 1)</p>	<p>31/03/2021</p>

## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval, or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 40, paragraph 20.3)

## Independent fostering agency details

**Unique reference number:** 2549696

**Registered provider:** Worcestershire Children First Fostering

**Registered provider address:** County Hall Campus, Spetchley Road, Worcester, Worcestershire WR5 2NP

**Responsible individual:** Adam Johnston

**Registered manager:** Laurie-Mo Gullachsen

## **Inspectors**

Tracey Cogan Greig, Social Care Inspector  
Suzanne Young, Social Care Inspector  
Sarah Berry, Social Care Inspector

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