

Pilgrims Corner Fostering Limited

185 Sea Street, Herne Bay, Kent CT6 8JY

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency currently has 24 fostering households and offers short-term, long-term, respite, emergency, and parent and child placements.

There is no registered manager.

Visit dates: 10 to 12 February 2021

Previous inspection date: 29 October 2018

Previous inspection judgement: Good

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 off-site assurance visit.

The care of children

Over the past couple of months, the new manager and supervising social workers have been getting to know the children and the foster carers. In some instances, their plans to see them all face to face have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions. Some foster carers are very concerned about the risks that visitors pose to the children, so prefer to meet virtually. However, the manager has been clear with the agency staff about her expectation that children are still seen and spoken to where possible.

Foster carers described the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the children they look after, particularly on their education. Even before the current 'lockdown', some schools preferred children to study at home because the area was in a high tier and under strict local restrictions. However, while this has led to some children feeling bored, they have coped extremely well with the support they have received from important people around them.

Most children benefit from living in stable homes with experienced foster carers who are trained to meet their individual needs. However, some children's experiences have been impacted by gaps in their foster carers' training, particularly around behaviour management and first aid. This, together with gaps in the quality of supervision meetings and children's case records, means that children's needs, wishes and feelings are not consistently promoted.

The manager has adopted a hands-on approach to the role, particularly when children and foster carers have needed support out of hours. This approach has been well received by those involved, and has helped to further strengthen relationships and ensure that the children get the support they need.

The safety of children

The manager is working hard to create a safeguarding culture within the agency. All staff have recently attended safeguarding training and have been given clear guidance on how to identify, report and record concerns. Since the last monitoring visit, there has been a notable improvement in reporting incidents to the relevant agencies, including Ofsted, and appropriate follow-up action being taken.

Children rarely go missing or leave home without permission. On the occasions this does occur, the agency staff are actively involved in locating children and ensuring that they return home safely. The manager also oversees all incidents to ensure that the correct procedures are followed.

Children's plans, particularly risk assessments and individual safe care agreements, are in the process of being reviewed and updated. Documents that have already been revised provide helpful advice and guidance to enable children to be cared for safely.

The agency's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is thorough. All staff are tested regularly and adhere to the government guidelines. This approach means that if staff do need to visit children and foster carers in their homes, the risks are minimised.

Leaders and managers

There has been no registered manager in post since November 2020. This has not had a negative impact on the agency, as a new manager was appointed soon after. The manager has not yet applied to become the registered manager.

Since the last monitoring visit, in December 2020, the responsible individual and the manager have continued to work closely together to address the previously identified shortfalls and gaps in practice. As a result of this, six out of the seven requirements made at that visit have been met, and the progress made has been reflected in this report. The previous requirement, which is related to providing foster carers with relevant training, is repeated.

The managers, with support from the staff team, are committed to developing the agency. The responsible individual has invested, and continues to invest, in new staff to improve the overall service delivery. This includes the appointment of a panel administrator, an agency decision-maker, a locum supervising social worker and a relationship-based practitioner.

The manager has also introduced a range of systems to monitor the quality of the care provided. This, together with the review of the agency that was carried out by an external consultant and submitted to Ofsted, has helped to further identify areas for improvement and ensure that the original action plan remains on track.

The changes within the agency, including changes in the staffing arrangements, are already starting to have a positive impact. However, although they have not received any formal complaints, the responsible individual and the manager acknowledge that not all foster carers are happy or feel supported.

Based on the complaints and feedback received by Ofsted, some foster carers do not feel that their concerns will be welcomed, listened to and/or taken seriously. As a result of this, foster carers do not complain directly to the agency. This is a missed opportunity to address and resolve issues and concerns when they arise.

The responsible individual has carried out a quality review of the agency's assessments of its foster carers to ensure that they are thorough and explore all relevant issues. The outcome of these reviews is being used to address any gaps in

information and/or training. It is also helping the panel members to make informed recommendations about the reapproval of foster carers.

The fostering panel membership does not currently have the required range of expertise to carry out the panel's function sufficiently. For example, there is no specialist representation from education, health and access to legal advice. While this has not had any negative impact, the panel members were unclear about where this advice could be sought if required. The manager is aware of the gaps and has plans to increase the panel membership, to ensure that it is more diverse and covers the range of specialisms identified.

Minutes of the panel meetings show that assessments and reviews of foster carers are scrutinised effectively by the panel members. However, there is a need to ensure that panel members' personal knowledge of foster carers does not inform decision-making, and that panel roles are clear to all those involved, particularly the panel adviser.

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
The fostering service 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))	31 March 2021
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must establish a written procedure for considering complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency, and by foster parents approved by the agency, subject to paragraph (7). (Regulation 18 (1)) In particular, ensure that foster parents are listened to, supported and encouraged, to raise concerns with the agency in the first instance.	31 March 2021
In considering what recommendation to make under paragraph (1), the fostering panel must consider and take into account all of the information passed to it in accordance	31 March 2021

with regulation 26, 27 or 28 (as the case may be). (Regulation 25 (2)(a))	
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Recommendations

- Fostering panels have access to medical expertise and legal advice, as required. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 14.6)
- 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 that 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. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 21.8)
- 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. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 26.6)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC376060

Registered provider: Pilgrims Corner Fostering Limited

Responsible individual: Sarah Norman

Registered manager: Post vacant

Inspectors

Amanda Harvey, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Olliver, Social Care Inspector
Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector

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