

Amber Fostering

Amber Fostering Limited

Suite 310, Olympic House, 28 to 42 Clements Road, Ilford IG1 1BA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency is based in Ilford, Essex. The service aims to provide short-term care, bridging placements, long-term care, respite care, emergency care and sibling placements. Additionally, the service aims to provide foster care for disabled children and parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had three approved fostering households with four children in placement. This is the fostering service's first inspection following its registration with Ofsted in April 2020.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 June 2021

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 **requires improvement to be good**

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Some children make steady progress from their starting points and their overall experiences are positive. However, this is not the case for all children. Weaknesses in the fostering service's matching process mean that some children's needs are not well met, and they do not have good experiences. For one child, this resulted in an unplanned ending a few weeks after the start of their placement.

Children do not benefit from a planned introduction to some placements designed to meet their needs. Care plans that outline placement objectives are not always in place and so the purpose of placements is not entirely clear. Gaps in meeting children's cultural and behavioural needs are not always well explored, which contributes to placement disruption.

One child told inspectors that she enjoys living with her foster family and doing fun activities with them. The child was clear that she would approach her foster mother if she had any concerns. However, not all children develop strong attachments to their foster families.

Children live healthy lifestyles. The fostering service encourages the children's physical, emotional and social well-being. However, the service is yet to devise and implement protocols and procedures that address the prevention of COVID-19. Children do not benefit from staff's failure to monitor foster carers' practice in preventing the spread of COVID-19. This is necessary to help keep children and others safe from infection.

Children's learning outcomes are positive. They attend school regularly and, generally, are making steady progress. Staff and foster carers consistently liaise with education professionals to promote children's learning.

Older children are supported to develop practical daily living skills, including completing household chores and attending to their own personal care needs. Foster carers support children to access appropriate college courses once they leave school.

Children engage in a wide range of physical, social and religious activities of their choosing. Typically, these include sports clubs, such as boxing, horse riding, swimming, and attendance at places of worship. Children also enjoy participating in family events and celebrations with their foster carers.

Children are treated with dignity and respect, and staff and foster carers ensure that their religious needs are well met. For example, one child is preparing to complete their First Holy Communion.

Children spend time with their brothers and sisters, family members and others when it is safe for them to do so. The fostering agency manages arrangements for

family time carefully. The service ensures that there is a consistent focus on children's best interests. Where children do not wish to meet with family members, their wishes are respected.

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

Children are protected from neglect, harm, abuse and bullying. However, the service does not ensure that foster carers are well prepared to manage the impact of abuse and neglect on children and the subsequent behavioural needs of children. Some foster carers fail to establish clear boundaries for children, and their strategies to combat challenging behaviour are not effective.

The fostering service does not devise risk assessments. Consequently, it does not identify known and anticipated risks and provide foster carers with plans that help them to manage and reduce risks.

Staff's and foster carers' records of children's experiences are cause for concern. Foster carers do not always maintain records of when children stay with them for respite. Records do not highlight children's progress effectively.

All staff and foster carers participate in child protection training. Jointly, they devise children's individual safe care policies. However, these do not consistently offer foster carers guidance about how to manage and reduce children's risk-taking behaviour. This does not demonstrate that foster carers are well supported to meet the needs of children in their care. Furthermore, it is not in children's best interests.

The assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers focus on child protection. However, managers, staff and foster carers do not sufficiently probe to explore all potential safeguarding issues. For example, in a recent incident, a foster carer and a member of staff accepted a child's explanation for when blood was found on his pillow. There was no further follow up in relation to the account given.

Gaps are noted in the safe vetting and recruitment of staff. For example, some personnel files do not evidence two written references, as required, and managers do not consistently verify written references. Managers do not explore discrepancies in the given names of staff, especially where there has been a change of name. This does not demonstrate that full and satisfactory recruitment checks are undertaken to ensure that only the most suitable staff are appointed.

There have been no incidents or risks associated with children offending, misusing drugs or alcohol, displaying self-harmful behaviour, going missing from care, being involved in child criminal exploitation or being sexually exploited. Foster carers support children to understand the risks posed to them by internet use and how to keep themselves safe while accessing social media.

Children receive clear information about how to complain and have good opportunities to speak with staff in private. The fostering service has received no complaints.

Staff carry out checks to ensure that foster carers' homes are well maintained and comfortable, and that there are no health and safety concerns. This ensures that children live in homes that are safe and secure.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The leadership and management of the fostering service are not strong. Leaders of the service are ambitious for change. However, the appointment of two managers since the service's registration and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have hampered service development. This is particularly the case for the fostering service's ability to recruit foster carers.

The manager is a qualified, experienced social worker who is in the process of being registered with Ofsted. The manager is based a significant distance away from the location of the service. Therefore, much of her work has been conducted remotely. Consequently, tasks that require a local presence are designated to other leaders. For example, the director is responsible for the service's out-of-hours service and has been called on to be present for children's introductory visits to their foster carers. This does not demonstrate that the manager is able to manage the service effectively on a day-to-day basis.

The roles of the fostering service's leaders and managers are not clearly defined, and the agency's resources are not maximised to best meet children's needs. In one instance, foster carers appear to have largely coordinated arrangements for children's respite among themselves. Therefore, leaders and managers do not have sufficient involvement and oversight of the arrangements in place for the care of children.

Managers continue to develop monitoring systems. These are not yet effective or efficient. For example, the service's review of the quality of care document does not highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Document reviews do not ensure that foster carer agreements accurately reflect the terms of their approval as ratified by the agency decision-maker.

The fostering agency is generally meeting its aims and objectives as outlined in its statement of purpose. However, the statement of purpose does not include accurate and up-to-date information. The fostering agency has two children's guides. One is for younger children and the other is for older children. Both children's guides provide useful information to children about the services offered by the fostering agency.

Leaders and managers provide foster carers and staff with good support and supervision. A foster carer said: 'Support and supervision is very good. Every

Monday, my social worker will call, I appreciate her efforts. All managers are available for home visits; these happen every four weeks.' A member of staff said, 'It's been interesting, exciting, with good-quality professional leadership.'

Foster carers' and staff's training has continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, and there is a training programme in place. This supports staff and foster carers to provide safe, nurturing foster care placements.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively. However, the central list does not yet include a representative from the field of education. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work that is presented at panel meetings. The administration of the fostering panel is effective, and panel meeting minutes are sufficiently detailed. Foster carer assessments are thorough.

Children benefit from the good partnership working between their foster carers, fostering service staff and other professionals. Communication is regular and effective. This supports the coordination of children's care. A local authority social worker said, '[Name of staff member] is very easy to get hold of and flexible around my availability. She is clearly committed to making things go as smoothly for the children as possible.'

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—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times, and</p> <p>before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child’s—</p> <p>wishes and feelings (having regard to the child’s age and understanding), and</p> <p>religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(i)(ii))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that the fostering service develops a robust matching process and that care plans are in place. The changing circumstances of foster carers must be carefully monitored.</p>	1 October 2021
<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—</p> <p>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> <p>In particular, the registered provider must develop and implement COVID-19 protocols and provide appropriate support and guidance to foster carers and children to safely prevent the spread of COVID-19.</p>	1 October 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>In particular, the registered provider must ensure that children’s risk assessments are completed and that safe care policies offer foster carers guidance and strategies to manage risks to children and to control challenging behaviour.</p>	<p>1 October 2021</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 (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	<p>1 October 2021</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.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))</p>	<p>1 October 2021</p>

<p>If a fostering service provider decide to approve X as a foster parent they must—</p> <p>give X notice in writing specifying any terms on which the approval is given, and</p> <p>enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the "foster care agreement"). (Regulation 27 (5)(a)(b))</p>	<p>1 October 2021</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose.</p> <p>notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 (a)(b))</p>	<p>1 October 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that managers, staff, volunteers and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and lines of accountability, should be clearly defined. (National minimum standard 25.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, identify any concerns about specific incidents, and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. In particular, the registered person should ensure that foster carers complete a record of placement activity. (National minimum standard 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient. This will enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature and carers that the service caters for. The registered provider should consider recruiting a panel member who has expertise in education. (National minimum standard 14.8)

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: 2559288

Registered provider: Amber Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Lilybell, Colchester Road, Colchester CO5 0EU

Responsible individual: William Neilson

Registered manager: Position vacant

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Inspectors

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, Social Care Regulatory Inspector
Jayshree Pillay, Social Care Regulatory Inspector

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