

Flowers Fostering Limited

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Ability House, 121 Brooker Road, Waltham Abbey, Essex EN9 1JH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency was registered in December 2019 and this is the first full inspection since registration. The privately owned agency provides long-term, short-term, emergency and parent-and-child placements. At the time of this visit, the agency had four fostering households and was providing foster placements for two children.

The registered manager's position has been vacant since 20 July 2020. A new manager took up the post on 1 June 2021 and has applied to register.

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.

We last visited this setting on 24 November 2020 to carry out an assurance visit. The report is published on our website.

Inspection dates: 16 to 20 August 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **inadequate**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **inadequate**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

New carers have not always been thoroughly assessed and effectively prepared to help them begin the fostering role. Assessments presented to panel are of poor quality and show a lack of professional curiosity.

This small agency has been successful in recruiting carers from minority backgrounds. This has enabled wider opportunities to match children with carers of similar heritage. However, the agency has not ensured that children are consistently well matched with carers. Children have been placed outside of the carers' specified terms of approval without a robust approach to properly exploring carers' parenting capacity before children move in. The agency has not always fully considered the experience and training needs of the carer or considered the effect of children or adults already living with the carer on children moving into the household. This undermines stability for children. Of the seven children who moved in to live with carers since August 2020, only two children remain.

Carers are not provided with targeted training to ensure that they are best equipped to meet the individual needs of the children who live with them. For example, carers who have children living with them who have a history self-harm, substance misuse or gang membership do not receive training in these areas. Carers have not received face-to-face first-aid training to ensure that they can deal effectively with medical emergencies if they arise.

Carers said that they feel well supported by the agency. However, some previous carers have left the agency due to a lack of support. The agency records do not demonstrate that sufficiently regular agency social worker visits take place. One carer had no recorded visits from the agency social worker between January and June 2021. There were no visits to another fostering family while a child was living with them. The visits that occur do not consistently demonstrate that appropriate actions are taken to address issues identified, such as carer training, and resolve questions regarding children's finances.

The children are not given introductory information about the carers before they move in with them. This means that potential opportunities to reduce children's anxiety are missed.

The carers support children's health and education needs. Despite the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, carers have tried to ensure that children have opportunities to have fun. Children participate in activities that they enjoy, such as playing football, gaming, spending time with friends and going to the cinema.

Children develop positive relaxed relationships with their carers. One social worker spoke about how the carer was able to persuade the child to engage with other professionals more positively.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: inadequate

Effective safeguarding is not fully embedded at the agency.

Vetting procedures for panel members and fostering agency staff are not consistently robust. Recruitment files do not consistently demonstrate that gaps in employment history are identified and explored, appropriate written references taken up and that qualifications and licence to practice are verified. Consequently, the ability of the agency to scrutinise an applicant's fitness effectively is limited because information that could affect suitability may not be identified.

Despite the basic safeguarding training that foster carers receive, they are not always clear about their roles and responsibilities should a child make a disclosure about a person in a position of trust. When a foster carer is also employed in a childcare position, agency staff are unclear when and how relevant safeguarding allegations should be shared with the employer. These shortfalls could mean that allegations of harm may not be appropriately managed.

No carers have had training in respect of preventing radicalisation. This is of particular concern when carers have limited awareness of technology or the ability to keep children safe online.

Information held by the agency does not consistently provide sufficient detail or clarity about incidents when children go missing from their foster homes. For example, details of the time that the child was last seen, actions taken by the carer and when the child returned are not clearly documented. This means that opportunities to understand patterns and trends and aspects of risk are missed.

Foster carers are not always aware of their responsibility to keep children safe or provided with clear guidance on imposing reasonable boundaries. For example, a foster carer took a 12-year-old child to a 15-rated cinema film. Furthermore, an annual review record states that a carer kept their doors locked so that the child could not enter or leave without permission. The agency has not explored these matters.

The agency does not hold suitably detailed information on health and safety arrangements at carers' homes. Household health and safety check records are not fully completed and important information is missing. Household safer care policies that are drawn up as part of the approval for each fostering household are focused on the foster carers; they do not consider all household members, neither are they regularly updated to reflect changes in the household. The household safer care policies refer to children's individual safer care assessments. However, no such assessments are in place. This does not promote the safety and welfare of children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The agency has been without a registered manager for over a year. Two different people have acted as manager during this time but neither has applied for registration. The responsible individual left the agency recently. Ineffective management arrangements have undermined the ability of the agency to operate to a suitable standard. The new acting manager has applied for registration.

Since the assurance visit, staff have been left without sufficient support, management guidance and direction. Staff have been left to undertake roles and responsibilities which are significantly outside of their professional remit and experience. Supervision of staff has not been sufficiently frequent. The agency social worker had only two supervisions in six months and other agency staff had none prior to the new manager taking up the post.

The assessment of potential carers has been poor and panel processes not sufficiently effective. Checks on applicants' previous fostering or adoption applications, qualifications, immigration status and relevant employment history have often not been taken up prior to presentation at panel. The new manager has recently reviewed and stopped the progress of some applications of concern. In most cases, panel has deferred these applications. However, some carers have been approved by the agency when information relating to suitability, such as immigration status or employment history, has not been fully explored. This does not promote the welfare and stability of children.

Panel members are not always provided with pre-panel paperwork in a timely way. This has the potential to undermine the ability of panel to fully consider the applications and identify pertinent questions. Panel minutes are of poor quality. They do not clearly demonstrate that the required minimum number of panel members were in attendance or demonstrate how suitability decisions were reached. The panel minutes are not always swiftly sent to the agency decision-maker. This undermines their ability to make timely decisions on applicants' suitability. The newly appointed agency decision-maker is not a trustee or director or employed as a senior manager in the fostering service. This undermines the accountability and effectiveness of the agency decision-maker's pivotal role.

Children have been placed with carers outside of the carers' specified terms of approval. The agency has not carried out a formal review and therefore satisfied itself as to the carers' skills, suitability of accommodation or parenting capacity before placing children.

Carers are not provided with a personal development plan which sets out how they will be supported to undertake appropriate ongoing training and development. Some carers have provided care and support to children who are considered at risk of self-harm, have complex behavioural needs, a history of substance misuse or

have been linked with gangs. However, the agency has yet to identify and deliver training to carers in these areas. The agency has not supported and monitored carers to ensure that they complete their training and development standards within the first year of approval. This has the potential to affect carers' ability to meet individual children's needs and could undermine the stability of placement.

There is no effectively implemented strategy for maintaining and storing records. Consequently, staff do not always have access to accurate information. The records available do not sufficiently demonstrate the level of care provided to children or the support provided to carers as described by carers and staff. There is a lack of attention to detail. Important documents such as foster carer agreements are sometimes undated, unsigned or contain inaccurate information. As a result, the quality of the information provided in notifications of significant events is poor. Information held about children is not likely to help them understand their personal history should they wish to see this information in the future.

The agency statement of purpose contains out-of-date information and is not available on the agency's website. This means that carers, local authorities and Ofsted do not have access to accurate information about the agency.

Senior agency managers have failed to ensure sufficient oversight of the agency. The internal quality review did not seek feedback from children, foster carers or partner professionals. The review did not provide a clear action plan. The new manager and responsible individual are aware of areas for improvement at the agency and have begun to address some of the issues. However, this inspection identified widespread concerns and the planned improvements described by the new manager and responsible individual have yet to become embedded into practice.

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 fostering service provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service ("the statement of purpose") which consists of—</p> <p>a statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service,</p> <p>and a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector and place a copy on their website (if they have one). (Regulation 3 (1)(a)(b) (2))</p> | 20 September 2021 |
| <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose. (Regulation 3 (5))</p> <p>In particular, ensure consistent and appropriate management arrangements, monitoring and oversight.</p> | 27 December 2021 |
| <p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that all agency staff and foster carers understand their responsibilities and the processes that they should follow.</p> | 20 September 2021 |

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| <p>The fostering service provider 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))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that foster carers receive training in preventing radicalisation, first aid, and targeted training specifically relevant to the identified needs of children placed with them.</p> <p>This requirement was made at the assurance visit and is restated.</p> | <p>27 December 2021</p> |
| <p>The fostering service provider must not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless 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) (3))</p> | <p>20 September 2021</p> |
| <p>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p> <p>to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent, where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given. (Regulation 25 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>This specifically relates to agreeing and setting out the terms of approval for each fostering household, including the number of children, type of placement and age ranges that foster carers are approved for.</p> | <p>20 September 2021</p> |
| <p>Where a person ("X") applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decide to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <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</p> | <p>11 October 2021</p> |

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| <p>parent ("X"), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>Subject to paragraph (1B), the fostering service provider—</p> <p>must, as soon as reasonably practicable, obtain the information specified in Part 1 of Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family,</p> <p>Subject to paragraphs (2A) and (3), where the fostering service provider have obtained all the information set out in paragraph (1A) and have not given the notification in paragraph (1B), the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>prepare a written report on X which includes the following matters—</p> <p>the information required by Schedule 3 and any other information the fostering service provider consider relevant,</p> <p>the fostering service provider's assessment of X's suitability to be a foster parent, and</p> <p>the fostering service provider's proposals about any terms of approval, and</p> <p>notify X that the case is to be referred to the fostering panel, and give X a copy of the report prepared under subparagraph (c) inviting X to send any observations in writing to the fostering service provider within 10 working days beginning with the date on which the notification is sent.</p> <p>Having regard to the information obtained under paragraph (2), the fostering service provider must—</p> <p>prepare a written report on X which includes the matters set out in paragraph (4).</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 consider relevant. (Regulation 26 (1)(A)(a) (2)(c)(i)(ii)(iii)(d))</p> | |
| <p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> | <p>6 December 2021</p> |

monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and

improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.

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) (3))

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are supported to ensure that their homes are free of avoidable hazards, in keeping with family life. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4, paragraph 3.82)
- The registered person should ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. In particular, ensure that the potential risks to children are assessed and preventative measures are identified. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 4.5)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are aware of, and do not exceed, the measures that they can take to prevent a child leaving without permission under current legislation and government guidance. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 5.3)
- The registered person should ensure that written records kept by the fostering service when a child goes missing detail action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return, any reasons given by the child for running away from the foster home and any action taken in the light of those reasons. This information should be shared with the responsible authority and, when appropriate, the child's parents. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 5.10)
- The registered person should ensure that unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including, when appropriate, photographic information) that they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. Whenever possible, children should be able to visit the foster carer's home and talk with the foster carers in private prior to a placement decision being made. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 11.3)
- The registered person should ensure that all necessary information is provided to panel members at least five working days in advance of the panel meeting to

enable full and proper consideration. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 14.3)

- The panel chair should ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the main issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, when applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. In particular, ensure that panel minutes are sent to the agency decision-maker swiftly to allow them to make timely decisions. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 14.9)
- The registered person should ensure 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. When 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)
- 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 households may use the same evidence workbook. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 20.3)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 20.4)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service or is a trustee or director of the fostering service who is a social worker with at least three years' post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 23.12)
- The registered person should ensure that staff have access to support and advice and are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 24.4)
- The registered person should ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There should be a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-

keeping and take action when needed. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 26.2)

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: 2551006

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Inspector

Joanna Heller, Social Care Inspector

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