

Worcestershire Children First Fostering

Worcestershire Children First

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

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

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 or kinship placements. The agency provides placements to children placed by Worcestershire Children First only. At the time of this inspection, there were 121 mainstream foster carers and 136 connected persons carers. There were 356 children placed with the fostering agency.

There is a permanent registered manager in post. She is a qualified social worker. She was not in day-to-day charge of the fostering agency during the inspection.

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 16 and 17 December 2020 to carry out a assurance visit. The report is published on the Ofsted website.

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 September 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	inadequate
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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: not applicable

Inspection judgements

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

This is the first inspection of the fostering agency since it was established in October 2019. Managers have not yet adapted to operating as a fostering agency. This has an impact on the quality of care that children receive. Specifically, there is a lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the staff who work for the fostering agency. Fundamentally, agency staff do not advocate for children or foster carers to progress issues relating to the child's care plan, as they believe that this is the role of the child's social worker. This lack of partnership working has resulted in unnecessary delays for children in areas such as health or family visits.

Managers have made some positive links with wider professionals. The virtual school provides foster carers with access to a range of training and resources. This supports foster carers' understanding of education issues for the children in their care. However, this approach is not consistent. For example, managers have yet to develop links with health professionals to assist foster carers in managing children's health needs.

Managers do not ensure that sufficient attention is given to the matching of children and foster carers. Records lack detail. As a result, it is not clear why foster carers are considered able to meet children's needs or how gaps will be addressed.

Children's long-term care is supported into adulthood through staying put arrangements. This ensures that children experience stability as they move through this important stage of their life.

Foster carers' experience of support and supervision from the fostering agency is mixed. Some foster carers feel well supported by staff, through training and regular supervision. However, some foster carers feel that the fostering agency's communication is poor and that they do not receive support that is beneficial to them or the children. This leaves some foster carers feeling isolated.

The fostering agency has some children placed with foster carers at distance. Managers do not give sufficient attention to the planning of these arrangements. In particular, a lack of thought to long-term support needs means that the agency is unable to respond quickly at times of crisis. This leaves foster carers vulnerable during challenging times.

Managers were not aware of many of the issues arising during this inspection. In part, this is due to a lack of service-specific consultation with children or foster carers. Because of this lack of insight, managers are without the information that they need to strengthen and develop the service.

Children receive a children's guide to the service when they come to live with foster carers. This document is not up to date and as a result the information given to children about advocacy and support services is inaccurate.

Despite the shortfalls identified, children are making progress. This is because of the care and commitment of their foster carers, who ensure that children make progress in all areas of their life. Children feel part of their foster family. They are happy and settled, they enjoy a range of activities and have positive experiences of family life.

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

Since the monitoring visit in December 2020, managers have overseen an audit of safe care plans and risk assessments for children. However, this has not yet gone far enough. As a result, these plans remain inconsistent in quality and content. This leaves foster carers without up-to-date information to enable them to keep children safe.

Foster carers have access to a range of training. This includes training to support their understanding of a range of safeguarding themes. There continues to be a group of foster carers who do not access this training. Managers have plans to address this, supported by a specific staff member who has oversight of training and development for foster carers. As a result, this is an improving picture.

Managers have established strong systems for working in partnership with the designated officer in the case of an allegation against staff or foster carers. This means that concerns are shared in a timely way. However, once the designated officer has concluded their involvement, managers do not have clear systems in place to follow up on these matters. This means managers are not clear that all tasks have been concluded. This confusion has the potential to place children at risk of harm.

Managers do not have oversight of unannounced visits to foster carers. A lack of monitoring of this element of practice means that managers do not know when these visits last occurred. This omission fails to promote a safeguarding culture within the fostering agency.

There continue to be omissions in the safe recruitment of staff. Managers do not have clear oversight of recruitment arrangements. In addition, the use of a number of different recording systems means that the agency does not have access to their own recruitment records. Because of this, managers do not know that all staff employed by the fostering agency are safe to work with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Managers rely heavily on systems established during the previous operating model of the fostering service. This significantly restricts managers' oversight of the

fostering service at all levels. For this reason, four of the requirements raised at the assurance visit have not been met. Many of the findings of this inspection were not known to managers previously. In addition, managers were unable to provide inspectors with basic service data. As a result of the findings of this inspection, senior managers have reviewed the service. This is aimed at supporting the necessary improvements. The outcome has included implementing increased management capacity and changing some management roles and responsibilities in order to begin to address the shortfalls identified.

Managers have yet to implement fundamental regulatory systems. For example, the fostering agency does not have a foster carer register. Managers began development of this during the inspection. In addition, managers have not ensured that the foster carer agreement complies with regulation. These basic omissions further demonstrate that managers do not fully understand the requirements of operating a regulated service.

Managers do not undertake a comprehensive review following a placement disruption, complaint or an allegation against a foster carer. This means managers do not understand emerging trends or have plans to respond to these.

The arrangements for managers to review and understand the quality of care provided are still in development. For example, despite the improvements made to the arrangements for foster carer training, managers have yet to undertake any evaluation of the impact of these. This further restricts managers' understanding of the fostering service.

Managers have still not implemented a system that enables them to consistently monitor serious incidents or report these to Ofsted in a timely way. These systemic omissions prevent Ofsted from having the necessary oversight of the fostering agency.

Staff feel well supported by managers and have manageable caseloads. Staff receive regular supervision that enables them to reflect on their practice. However, managers have not ensured that all staff have received the training that they require. For example, managers do not know which staff have had training in undertaking assessments or supervising foster carers. This is despite staff undertaking these tasks. This means staff are without the essential skills and knowledge that they require for their specialist role.

The agency has received nine complaints since the assurance visit in Dec 2020. These have all been investigated independently to ensure impartiality in this process. However, management oversight of complaints is not consistent and records do not include details of all of the complaints. This lack of complete information prevents managers from reviewing and learning from these matters.

Managers have yet to develop a recruitment strategy for the fostering service. This is despite managers knowing that the agency is unable to meet the sufficiency needs

of Worcestershire Children First. The recent introduction of a specialist recruitment officer is aimed at improving this area of the service.

Managers ensure that the assessments of prospective foster carers are sufficiently detailed. This enables the fostering panel to make a recommendation of suitability.

Managers have failed to identify some omissions in the agency decision-maker processes. The fostering service currently has 13 agency decision-makers who are employed by Worcestershire Children First. This group works on a rotating basis to consider panel matters. However, there have been some occasions when decisions have not been made or communicated in a timely manner. In addition, the agency decision-makers do not consistently observe panel or contribute to panel chair appraisal. Managers have plans to address these omissions.

Managers have not provided Ofsted with a current statement of purpose. This leaves the regulator without accurate information about the service that is provided.

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, and</p> <p>a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service.</p> <p>(Regulation 3 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>This refers specifically to managers ensuring that the statement of purpose is up to date and is an accurate reflection of the fostering service.</p>	28 November 2021
<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.</p> <p>(Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring that the agency's systems for review and monitoring are accurate, to enable sufficient management oversight.</p>	28 November 2021

<p>Also, to ensuring that the managers implement processes to support them in learning from disruptions or allegations.</p> <p>Also, to ensuring that agency processes support agency decision-maker decisions being made and communicated in a timely way.</p> <p>Also, to ensuring that the agency advocates for foster carers and children and that staff understand their roles and responsibilities in this respect.</p>	
<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 requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring the safer caring plans and risk assessments contain all relevant information and are updated to reflect changing needs and risks. Also, that children's plans and risk assessments contain clear strategies to support foster carers in managing risk.</p> <p>Also, to ensuring that the fostering service has systems in place to follow up allegations against foster carers after the designated officer has concluded their process.</p>	28 November 2021
<p>The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. (Regulation 18 (4))</p> <p>This specifically refers to ensuring that managers hold an accurate, up-to-date record of complaints.</p>	28 November 2021
<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, 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>	28 November 2021

<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>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring that full recruitment checks are undertaken by the fostering service for staff and panel members and that the fostering service has access to these records.</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>This specifically refers to ensuring that the foster carer agreement provided to foster carers by the fostering service meets regulation.</p>	28 November 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must maintain a register (a "register of foster parents") and enter in it the following particulars in relation to each foster parent—</p>	28 November 2021

<p>name, address, date of birth and sex of each foster parent and, in the case of a local authority fostering service, of each person with whom it has placed a child under regulation 24 or regulation 25A of the Care Planning Regulations,</p> <p>the date of approval and of each review of approval (as the case may be), and</p> <p>the current terms of approval (if any). (Regulation 31 (a)(b)(c))</p> <p>This refers specifically to ensuring that the agency has a register of foster parents.</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>This refers specifically to implementing systems within the fostering service that enable consultation with children about the care that they receive.</p>	28 November 2021
<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>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	28 November 2021

<p>This refers specifically to ensuring that matters listed under schedule 7 are notified to Ofsted and that, when matters have concluded, an update is also provided to the regulator.</p>	
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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that fostering service devises and implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 28, paragraph 13.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the matching processes in the fostering service clearly demonstrate how the foster carer will meet the child's assessed needs and that the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified the fostering service should define what training, resources or support will be implemented to support the foster carers in meeting the child's needs. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 32, paragraph 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the children's guide is up to date and accurate. This includes ensuring that names and contact details for external bodies are correct. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 33, paragraph 16.4)
- The registered person should ensure that, where foster carers live at a distance from the fostering service, there is clear planning undertaken before the placement is made to ensure that the foster carers support needs can be met and the fostering services' regulatory responsibilities can be adhered to. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 42, paragraph 21.1)

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: 2549696

Registered provider: Worcestershire Children First

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

Responsible individual: Adam Johnston

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