

Foster Care Associates North West

Foster Care Associates Limited

Lincoln House, Foxhole Road, Ackhurst Park, Chorley, Lancashire PR7 1NY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is part of a large national company that recruits, assesses, approves, trains and supports foster carers. This particular registered provision offers a wide range of placements throughout the North West of England. At the time of this inspection, there were 238 children living with 173 foster families.

The manager registered with Ofsted in November 2021.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 January 2022

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

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

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

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 5 March 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children feel cared for and enjoy a sense of belonging with their foster carers. Foster carers help children to achieve good outcomes in all areas of their development. Foster carers' records for children are good quality and capture the child's experiences and progress.

The agency supports children to live with their brothers or sisters when possible. Foster carers are committed to helping children maintain relationships with family. This helps children develop a sense of identity.

Foster carers provide good support to children living alongside their parent in the fostering household. Supervising social workers have expertise in providing this type of support. This means they are able to effectively guide foster carers in their practice. The agency has developed specific support in response to parents' needs. This includes facilitating baby and toddler groups that parents living in foster care can attend together without the fear of appearing different.

Supervising social workers inform good matching decisions. The majority of children are settled and provided with care and stability in line with their plans. When foster carers are experiencing challenges with the child's behaviour, supervising social workers are proactive in bringing the child's social worker and other professionals together to coordinate support for the child and fostering household. Managers review all unplanned endings to identify any lessons that can be learned from these. This learning is shared with agency staff responsible for matching children with fostering families.

In one instance, foster carers did not have full details of the child's care plan from the local authority. The foster carers were not given appropriate guidance about their role in providing stability for a child with a plan of adoption. This meant that they were unable to plan effectively in the child's best interests.

The vast majority of foster carers say that they feel well supported and listened to by the agency. Foster carers also say that they feel the agency cares about the foster carers' own children. Foster carers said: 'I am proud to work for this agency'; 'our supervising social worker goes above and beyond'; and 'there is always someone to talk to'.

Foster carers receive regular supervision and there is an increase in support to foster carers when needed. This includes support from the agency's education worker and therapist to help foster carers meet children's individual needs and to progress children's plans. Foster carers are also encouraged to develop their own ideas for support groups. This includes the foster carer-led walking group.

Children receive excellent support with education and learning. One child is not in education due to a recent change in their college course. The foster carers are

proactive in identifying alternative options. Supervising social workers create additional learning opportunities for children to enjoy different experiences and gain new skills. These can lead to children gaining recognised qualifications.

The agency offers foster carers additional support to equip them with the skills and confidence they need to help children with their schoolwork and to access broader learning experiences. This was particularly important during periods of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. One child excelled with home learning, moving four levels up in their reading ability.

The agency provides a strong focus on assisting children to participate in community and agency-led events. This was maintained virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic with the agency providing groups such as story time and online film and drama school. When possible, the agency has arranged face-to-face events for children and foster carers, including the opportunity to attend the local radio broadcaster and take part in 'make Britain tidy'. These initiatives help children to contribute to the community and to gain confidence and self-esteem.

The agency provides children with accessible information about the fostering household they are moving to. The agency offers this in a range of languages and formats including audio and braille. This helps children to start to emotionally process their move. There is a specific handbook for parents living with their child in a fostering household, and the agency has developed a sensitive resource pack for parents moving on from foster care without their child. This ensures that parents have information on who they can contact for emotional support.

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

Children feel safe with their foster carers. Carers have been strong advocates for challenging bullying when this has occurred. Foster carers allow children to take age-appropriate risks in the community and at home, including accessing the internet. One child shared how they feel able to 'make mistakes and be given more chances'.

Supervising social workers and foster carers work well with other agencies to keep children safe. Managers notify Ofsted of any serious incidents. However, managers do not always update Ofsted in a timely way when a child protection enquiry ends.

In cases where children go missing from home, their plans are clear about what action foster carers should take. Supervising social workers follow up return home interviews and escalate the need for meetings in line with the agency's safeguarding procedures.

Supervising social workers facilitate good partnership working around managing children's behaviour. All incidents of children being physically held by their foster carers are reviewed by a senior manager and shared with the child's placing social worker. Children's views are routinely gathered following any incidents to help inform future plans. Supervising social workers make changes to children's risk assessments

that reflect multi-agency agreements about how foster carers will respond to behaviours that are difficult to manage.

Supervising social workers complete detailed risk assessments. However, risk assessments for individual children are not always updated following an incident or an increase in risk. Some pet risk assessments are not completed in line with the agency's own policy. As a result, the presenting risks, and the actions that should be taken to reduce these risks, have not been adequately considered.

Recruitment of new foster carers is thorough. The agency decision-maker offers clear and timely decisions about the suitability of foster carers.

Allegations against carers are well managed by the agency. The fostering panel routinely reviews a foster carer's suitability when there have been allegations or shortfalls identified in their practice. This provides an additional layer of scrutiny of foster carers' ability to meet children's needs safely. However, allegations against carers are not always clearly recorded in the foster carer's file. This could result in important information being difficult to find, or missed, in the future.

Safer recruitment checks are undertaken for all new staff. These are overseen by the registered manager. Supervising social workers receive regular supervision. However, the frequency of supervision is not always in line with the agency's own policy and the quality is variable. Panel member appraisals have not all taken place annually as required.

The agency provides foster carers with responsive out of hours support. This helps foster carers feel confident to manage emergency situations and allows concerns to be escalated to other professionals quickly.

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

The manager registered with Ofsted in November 2021, two months before the inspection. She is committed to completing the required qualification and was responsive to addressing issues as they were raised during the inspection.

Systems are in place to support management oversight of the agency. However, detailed oversight of case recording and practice is lacking. There are errors on children's files and a lack of clarity where recording should be held. Decision-making is not visible on carers' records. This makes it difficult for all staff to provide assistance if the allocated worker is not available.

The manager has established positive working relationships with commissioners. The agency has good communication with local authorities. Commissioners said the agency is creative in finding solutions to offer children foster care that meets their needs.

The fostering panel is diverse in experience and skills. The minutes of fostering panel's meetings are clear and evidence that the panel provides good challenge to the agency.

Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads. Agency staff feel supported in their practice and are complimentary of how the agency supported them with flexible working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The agency has received three complaints since the last inspection. Complaints are investigated thoroughly with an independent investigator appointed if appropriate. Managers reflect on any complaints or representations received and have implemented their learning in an updated complaints policy.

The agency offers foster carers a range of training. This was primarily delivered virtually or through e-learning during the COVID-19 lockdown period. Some foster carers find the online system inaccessible. The majority of foster carers have attended the training the agency identifies as mandatory. However, not all have updated their training within the timescales set by the agency. This includes first aid and safeguarding training.

The manager completes detailed annual reviews of the fostering service that effectively identify an action plan for continued development. These annual reviews have not been submitted to Ofsted in a timely way.

The manager has not met previous recommendations in relation to training and risk assessments. These shortfalls have been reinstated as requirements.

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. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>Specifically, that risk assessments for children are updated when needed to provide an accurate record of the presenting risks and the actions to be taken to minimise them; and that pet risk assessments are completed in line with the provider's policy.</p>	28 February 2022
<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, the provider should ensure that foster carers attend updates in the training that the agency has identified as mandatory, including first aid and safeguarding.</p>	30 March 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p> <p>In particular, staff should be supervised at the frequency outlined in the provider's policy; and panel members should receive an annual appraisal.</p>	30 March 2022
<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. (Regulation 35 (2))</p>	1 June 2022

Recommendations

- The registered provider should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. In particular, the provider should ensure that records are accurate, information about the child's care plan is clear and that important information about foster carers is contained within their files. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 50, paragraph 25.2)
- The registered provider should ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible. In particular, the provider should ensure that decision-making by managers is clearly recorded on children's and foster carers' files. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 52, paragraph 26.5)
- The registered provider should ensure that a system is in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. Specifically, the provider should ensure that they update Ofsted when child protection enquiries previously notified have closed. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 57, paragraph, 29.1)

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: SC040408

Registered provider: Foster Care Associates Limited

Registered provider address: Senate House, Saxon Business Park, Hanbury Road, Stoke Prior, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire B60 4AD

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Inspectors

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector
Dawn Parton, Social Care Inspector
Mandy Williams, Social Care Inspector
Sarah Oldham, Social Care Inspector

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