

# Foster Care Solutions

Foster Care Solutions Limited

8 Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, Chester le Street, County Durham DH2 1AN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Solutions is an independent fostering agency based in County Durham. It is part of the Futures for Children group, whose head office is in Maidstone, Kent.

Foster Care Solutions provides placements on an emergency, respite, short-term and long-term basis, including parent and child placements.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 28 fostering households and 44 children and young people placed with its families. Six young people were accommodated under 'staying put' arrangements. These are arrangements that enable children over the age of 18 years to remain living with their foster carers.

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: 7 to 11 February 2022

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

**Date of last inspection:** 5 February 2018

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

Children thrive in their fostering families because the agency matches the bespoke and diverse needs of the children to their foster carers extremely well before the children are placed. There is a high ratio of long-term and permanent placements, where children with often complex needs are embraced into the fostering family. As a result, children settle and, in some cases, make outstanding progress.

Children are involved in the development of the agency. Their views and opinions have led to significant changes in the initial introduction stages for children in finding and supporting positive matches to fostering families. Children have developed questions for their foster carers to get to know them better. These are in the form of documents referred to as 'Meet the family' and 'All about us'.

Children are greeted warmly when they move in with their fostering families. They are provided with a welcoming gift box full of essential information and practical goodies, which helps to smooth their transition into their new home. This results in children being supported at every stage of their journey to ensure that their physical and emotional needs are met.

Children of all abilities engage in a range of positive family activities. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions have allowed, family activity days have been enjoyed by the whole fostering family. Foster carers and children said that they had 'a wonderful day' on a trip to a local country park with a lake. During this trip, a range of water-based activities took place, involving everyone. A climbing wall activity was also spoken about positively. These family-based activities help the foster carers, the children and the agency to build positive relationships and have fun together through challenging times.

Children's health needs are met extremely well. Fostering families benefit from a clinical psychologist who is commissioned by the agency. Consultations support the foster carer in meeting the child's emotional well-being. The agency advocates well for children who need additional bespoke help and support from their placing local authority. This supports placement stability, and helps to ensure that the children's emotional and social well-being is addressed and maintained.

Children make exceptional progress in their education and learning. Team Around the Child relationships are very strong. A lot of the children continued to attend school during the national lockdowns, which supported them to maintain good routines. Children's achievements are recognised and celebrated. A professional said:

'The agency is very child-focused, not only in the procedures and policies which are in place but in the very heart of the culture of the agency. Examples of this is recognition for young people when they achieve – certificates and vouchers as well as shout-outs on Facebook, which really

appeals to our children and young people. The social workers in the team will often share positive stories and achievements of the young people so they are celebrated by the whole agency and not just their own supervising social worker. Children are made to feel valued and respected in the agency and we learn about the children even if we do not directly work with them.'

A 'Meeting of Minds' group involves the fostering agency staff, management and foster carers in regular group discussions. They share business updates and review potential ideas for development of the service. These meetings are highly valued by all who attend. In addition, regular online foster carer support groups take place, which help the carers to engage in virtual coffee meetings. Foster carers commented on the value of these in helping them stay connected with each other.

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

Children's risks are identified and explored through the matching process initially, and then subsequently through regular foster care supervisions. The agency is thorough, and advocates strongly to ensure that it is provided with all the child's information, including their known risks, before the child is placed. This supports the appropriateness of the match and ensures that there are appropriate safeguarding measures in place to meet the child's needs. As a result, information shared by the care team helps children become increasingly safe in their fostering families.

Children are supported by a committed staff team in the agency, which includes the supervising social worker, administrative support staff and management. Collectively, they ensure that the children are seen independently from their foster carers on a regular basis. Children are given information booklets that provide them with relevant phone numbers of independent people they can contact if they are worried about anything or if they wish to make a complaint.

Children placed with the agency's foster carers are very settled. Children rarely go missing from home and all the carers understand the procedures to follow if they do. The foster carers receive training in specific safeguarding areas, such as sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, radicalisation and county lines. This forms an important part of the online training that is then explored in supervision and reflected on in foster carers' logs. This process ensures that the foster carers have a good understanding and awareness of the potential dangers children are subject to, and can take the necessary steps if concerns arise.

The registered manager and staff work well with other safeguarding professionals. This enables any safeguarding concerns to be investigated openly and in a timely manner. Investigations are comprehensively undertaken and all reports presented to the fostering panel with a recommendation. These are reviewed by the agency decision-maker. Final outcomes that may highlight deficits in practice are addressed with the foster carer to ensure that the children are kept safe from potential harm.

## **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The registered manager is confident, and has a clear vision for the service and is extremely motivated to achieve this. Leadership is highly effective and shows a commitment to providing a child-focused service at the heart of everything the agency does. This was illustrated during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic through the excellent communication that the registered manager, leaders and staff maintained with the foster carers and the children. This has helped and supported relationships for children and their fostering families.

A senior leader in the agency created an illustrated book about the COVID-19 pandemic. This book was given to all foster carers in the agency to share with the children. It supports conversations that help the children with their understanding of the changing set of circumstances that have affected everyone during the pandemic. Leaders and managers of the agency have used this difficult period to inspire and educate children and their carers, focusing on their well-being.

The registered manager is diligent and central to the smooth running of the service. She monitors and reviews all aspects of the service, such as signing-off all of the children and foster carers' case records to ensure that these are completed correctly, quickly and to a high standard.

Children are helped and supported to be involved in recording and retaining their childhood experiences and achievements through improved care-planning documents. The records, which are written to the children instead of about them, are completed and maintained to a high standard by the children's foster carers and supervising social workers. These records were redesigned following consultation and review by the children and the 'Meeting of Minds' group of foster carers and staff. After a successful pilot using these records, this practice has now been rolled out across the provider's other services. These child-centred recordings value and respect the child, creating a life-story record of their journey in care with their fostering family.

The staff are provided with monthly supervision that is comprehensive and supportive. Staff and foster carers spoke clearly about the purposeful and high-quality training that is provided by the agency. Foster carers gain qualifications that are accredited, which supports them in providing children with high-quality care. In some examples shared by foster carers, qualifications have led to them gaining further employment outside their fostering role.

The agency ensures that potential foster carers are suitably assessed to care for the children. The assessment process is precise and ensures that the relevant checks are completed. In addition, an evaluation of an applicant's potential is fully explored. This helps to ensure that the children are cared for by suitable adults with the relevant skills and experience. However, a shortfall was identified in that one assessment was not presented to the panel in a timely manner. This has the potential to delay a placement being available for a child in need of care.

Foster carers were unanimous in their positive comments about the quality of the support they receive. One carer said:

'This agency is more about family than agency, not just for us adults but more importantly for all the children. Everyone at [Name] is fantastic. That is why we are very happy being part of one big happy family! Amazing team.'

The registered manager and leadership team are accessible to staff, foster carers and children. The registered manager has extensive and highly efficient monitoring systems in place. Consequently, she has a thorough understanding of what is happening in the agency and what progress the children are making at any given time. Children's outcome trackers are professionally written and detail their development in all areas of social and physical growth. The systems in place support the registered manager in developing a highly efficient service for children. She knows the service's strengths and areas for development.

An experienced and well-qualified professional chairs the fostering panel. The quality-assurance processes are thorough, and the panel administrator ensures that the minutes are recorded in a professional manner. These minutes demonstrate a clear appraisal of panel business, which enables the agency decision-maker to make well-informed decisions. However, an isolated event led to a delay in informing a fostering family of a decision. This is being addressed by the agency.

## **What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?**

### **Recommendations**

- The registered person should ensure that there is a current and up-to-date pathway plan for an “eligible” child and work collaboratively with the child’s social worker in implementing and reviewing the plan. (‘Fostering services: national minimum standards’, 12.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering panel makes its recommendation on the suitability of a prospective foster carer within eight months of receipt of the prospective foster carer’s application to be assessed. (‘Fostering services: national minimum standards’, 14.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service provider’s decision-maker makes a considered decision within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. (‘Fostering Services: national minimum standards’, 14.9)

### **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:** SC413428

**Registered provider:** Foster Care Solutions Limited

**Registered provider address:** Futures for Children, The Masters House, College Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6YQ

**Responsible individual:** Nicholas Barnsby

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## **Inspector**

Michael Dack, Social Care Inspector

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