

Family First Fostering Agency

Family First Fostering Limited

413 High Street, Stratford, London E15 4QZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Family First fostering agency is an independent fostering agency based in East London. The agency offers a wide range of placements, including short- and long-term placements, planned, emergency and respite care in London and the Midlands area. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 69 fostering households caring for 120 children.

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: 21 to 25 March 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 **good**

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

Date of last inspection: 20 November 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency supports fostering households who are diverse in culture, location and experience. Careful matching decisions result in children enjoying stability within their fostering families. This extends to young people over 18 years old, with the agency supporting a high number of staying put arrangements that allow children leaving care to remain living with their foster carers until they feel prepared to live more independently.

Children feel safe, cared for, and experience a sense of belonging within their fostering families. Foster carers offer homes that enable brothers and sisters to remain together. When needed, foster carers help children to mend and improve these important relationships. Foster carers are experienced in supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The agency places an emphasis on helping unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who have travelled together to stay together if this is their preference.

Skilled foster carers successfully support children who have needed to move on from previous fostering households due to their complex needs. Children enjoy close, nurturing relationships with foster carers within which they can share their feelings. Children said, 'My foster carer really cares about me', 'I can talk to [them] about any worries', 'when I need help, they help me'.

Children's physical and mental health needs are well understood by their foster carers. Foster carers ensure that children have access to the universal and specialist health services they need. When additional resources are needed, these are provided quickly by the agency.

Foster carers help children to improve their social skills and to make and sustain friendships. One child is now invited out by friends and, as a result, enjoys a greater sense of inclusion. When children use social media and gaming to keep in contact with friends, foster carers provide them with appropriate supervision and guidance on how to do this safely.

Foster carers understand the importance of establishing positive relationships with birth families. As a result, children feel able to talk about experiences and explore their identity without feeling conflicted. Foster carers help children to spend time with their families and to keep in touch with people who are important to them virtually.

Foster carers support children to make good progress in education. The agency is proactive in securing the education provision that meets children's specific academic and emotional needs. Foster carers maintain high levels of communication with children's schools and engage in multi-agency planning. This ensures that any issues that affect learning or children's experience of school are addressed quickly. One education professional reported that the support that foster carers have offered

children is 'astounding'. Children's aspirations are recognised and encouraged, such as playing musical instruments. Children are helped to apply to, and attend, university.

The agency places a strong emphasis on supporting children to prepare for independence. Agency staff lead workshops that help children to enhance their practical skills and ability to keep themselves safe. Children also attend training provided by the agency such as food hygiene and first aid where they can gain additional qualifications. Foster carers allow children to take age-appropriate risks. This includes children going out alone, managing their own money and using public transport. This increases children's confidence and self-care skills.

Foster carers are required to write monthly updates about any children they are caring for. However, foster carer recording is variable in frequency and quality and does not always provide a good enough overview of a child's experience.

Foster carers were highly complimentary about the support they receive from their supervising social workers and the management team. Foster carers reported that they feel valued and listened to, and they have recommended the agency to other foster carers based on their own positive experiences. Foster carer comments included 'I feel 100% supported', 'the agency has been consistently excellent in every area of support', 'staff are extremely experienced and supportive', 'we cannot praise them highly enough'.

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

Managers have established strong quality assurance processes that ensure assessments of prospective carers and annual reviews are comprehensive. Reports contain good analyses of foster carers' capabilities and availability to care for children and keep them safe. The fostering panel provides appropriate challenge when considering the suitability of foster carers.

The agency has had a low level of safeguarding incidents. When incidents do occur, these are managed well. The agency escalates concerns appropriately and works with relevant professionals to review the risks and update multi-agency risk assessments and plans. Supervising social workers increase supervision and support of foster carers at these times, providing an additional safeguard to children and foster carers.

Managers ensure that allegations against foster carers are reviewed comprehensively as agreed with the local authority designated officer. Any allegations against foster carers or standard of care concerns are reviewed by panel once the outcome of enquiries is concluded. This allows for further scrutiny of the issues raised.

Managers have identified that referral information is limited for children who have just arrived in the country. In response, the agency has implemented standard practices that offer guidance to carers and keep children safe while they settle into their new homes.

The agency responded quickly to concerns about a child's vulnerability to radicalisation. Managers ensured that learning from this incident was captured to improve safety planning and responses to children going missing from their foster homes.

Foster carers demonstrate commitment to children who present with verbal or physical aggression. Supervising social workers help foster carers to implement clear boundaries and natural consequences. Training in de-escalation and consultation with the agency psychotherapist help foster carers to understand what children are trying to communicate through their behaviour. When needed, the agency is proactive in identifying external organisations who provide expert advice and work directly with children, to help educate children and reduce risks about violence in the community.

Foster carers have up-to-date personal development plans that identify training relevant to meeting the individual needs of the children they are caring for. The agency requires foster carers to attend mandatory training that includes first aid, safeguarding and PREVENT. There are good examples of supervising social workers and managers helping foster carers reflect and learn from serious incidents.

The agency completes all required checks on employed staff. However, the verification of why applicants have left previous roles working with children or vulnerable adults has not been undertaken for new panel members. Checks on staff that had lived overseas had not been viewed prior to staff commencing work at the agency. Managers updated the safer recruitment policy during the inspection to clarify what checks the agency will carry out for staff who have lived outside of the UK.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

This is a family-run agency that is committed to the success of the service. The management team is organised, hard-working and dedicated to maintaining links with all of its foster carers. As a result, foster carers feel well supported by all levels of the team and are able to contact the managers with any issues.

Good management oversight of cases ensures that additional help is quickly provided when needed. One carer reported that the support they received from the agency when they experienced a difficult time fostering ensured that they did not 'just cope, but enjoyed caring for the children'. This resulted in the children moving on as planned to their permanent care arrangements.

The agency is growing and increased by 18 fostering households in a 12-month period. A high number of new foster carers chose the agency following recommendations from existing foster carers. This is further evidence of the high level of satisfaction amongst foster carers.

Supervising social workers' caseloads are manageable and allow time for building relationships with children in their fostering households. Staff receive regular, good-quality case supervision with their line manager. This is supplemented with reflective group supervision with their peers and, when needed, with the agency's psychotherapist. In turn, foster carers receive guidance from knowledgeable, informed supervising social workers who understand the fostering household's support needs.

Staff feel well supported in their roles and encouraged with their continuing professional development. Many staff have gained additional qualifications since working at the agency. The agency also affords staff time back from their working hours to support a charity of their choice.

Managers ensure that complaints are investigated fully. The children's champion develops ways for children to share their views and feelings about the agency.

The agency is a learning organisation that responds quickly to rectify areas of improvement. Managers implemented effective strategies for maintaining oversight of children's and carers' well-being during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Managers undertake detailed annual reviews of their service which is informed by feedback from children, foster carers and other professionals. An up-to-date development plan is in place, which includes the requirement to improve the clarity of information sent to Ofsted following a serious incident. The agency has addressed all recommendations made at the last inspection.

Managers have established effective, positive working relationships with commissioners. The agency has developed its recruitment strategy based on needs of referrals.

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 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 that person—</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, 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) (3)(c)</p> <p>In particular, the fostering provider should ensure that panel members are subject to all checks outlined in schedule 1. They should also ensure that checks on individuals who have lived overseas are consistently obtained in line with the fostering provider’s own safe recruitment policy.</p>	<p>6 May 2022</p>

Recommendations

- Information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. (‘Fostering services: national minimum standards’, page 52, paragraph 26.6)

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: SC453181

Registered provider: Family First Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Family First Fostering Ltd, Unit 4, 17 Plumbers Row, London E1 1EQ

Responsible individual: Geeta Hasmat-Ali

Registered manager: Noor Hasmat-Ali

Telephone number: 02034574249

Email address: noor@familyfostering.co.uk

Inspector

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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Store Street
Manchester
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