

Foster Care Associates North East

Foster Care Associates Limited

Foster Care Associates, Ground Floor, Shannon House, Belmont, Durham DH1 1TH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Associates North East is a fostering service, which is part of a national organisation. The agency assesses and supports foster parents to provide a range of placements for children. The agency provides long-term and short-term care for children with a range of needs.

A management team of four lead a team of several social workers, placement officers, a participation worker and an administration team. At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing care for 130 children placed in 90 fostering families.

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: 4 to 8 July 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: 22 August 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive good-quality care and they are well matched with their foster families. The agency works well with a number of professionals and agencies to support foster families to provide consistent care and support to children. Feedback from professionals about the agency is complimentary. One professional said:

'I think the biggest strength of this agency is that they really do support their foster parents. Having the right level of emotional and practical support can make the difference. They also include the children with the different events and activities that are available. This is a very good agency.'

Children make good progress in relation to their health, education, social and emotional well-being. However, the systems used to track children's progress do not provide sufficient evaluation to capture the children's progress in detail. Different documents provide a different account of the child's journey. This is not helpful for children to see how they make progress in line with their set targets.

Participation of children and foster families is good. A participation officer works effectively with foster families. This helps to ensure that activities and support to foster families is meaningful and fun. Some activities help the children to develop additional skills through life-skills work and other accredited courses, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award. For one child, through the support of the agency, they have used the knowledge they have gained from their accredited course work to help them secure their own tenancy.

Children's views, including the views of the foster parents' birth children are recognised, understood and taken into account. However, children are not consistently kept informed of the outcome of their complaint. In addition, the provider has failed to work in line with their own policy, as they do not consistently seek the children's views after they have been physically held by their foster carer. This oversight prevents the children from having the opportunity to speak to an independent person, and hinders the agency from having a mechanism in place to assure themselves that this practice is appropriate and safe.

Children's day-to-day experiences are enhanced because the agency matches the children with their foster families effectively. Consequently, children's cultural and diverse needs continue to be met to a very good standard.

Children benefit from living with skilled foster parents, who receive suitable training and undertake an annual review by the agency. Good-quality assessments help the decision-makers to provide clear recommendations. Therefore, only suitable adults are approved to care for children. There are thorough processes in place to review and assess the suitability of foster parents on a continued basis.

The agency continually looks to improve children's experiences as they use research around the 'Language that Cares' charter. One child provided inspectors with feedback about their personal experience of how the use of language has impacted on them personally and how the agency's practice is 'a fantastic step in the right direction'.

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

Children are better protected because of the safeguarding systems that the agency has in place. This is effective as children spoken to say that they feel safe.

Children's risks are identified, and foster parents receive support and training to help them understand and manage the risks to children. When incidents happen, the staff in the agency follow their safeguarding procedures. There is clear management oversight of significant incidents, and the staff are proactive in working with the children's placing local authorities. Action plans are put in place to address new risks to children. However, there is an inconsistent approach to the quality of children's individual risk assessments, the safer caring policies and children's behaviour management plans. This means that foster families are not provided with consistent clear guidance on how to manage all of the known risks to children.

Missing-from-home incidents for children are infrequent. The agency follow the Philomena Protocol and provide training to the foster families, which supports and prepares them well so that they know how to respond if a child goes missing from home. Foster parents understand the procedure that they need to follow when children go missing from the home. Missing-from-home incident reports are completed by the supervising social worker and the foster parents. When the children are found, return-home interviews are completed, and unannounced home visits take place. Children's risk assessments are updated, which helps to improve the children's safety.

The agency provides suitable training for the foster families and staff. Foster families access additional therapeutic support to help them discuss and reflect on how best to respond to the children's presenting behaviours. Foster families say that this is beneficial, as are the regular supervision sessions that they have with their supervising social workers.

When children make a complaint, the agency responds quickly and appropriately. The agency works effectively with external agencies, such as the police and the designated officer in the local authority. The agency act on advice and recommendations given by these external professionals. Internal investigations are held and, where necessary, foster parent reviews are brought forward. Appropriate recommendations are made about ongoing approval, training and development needs for foster parents. This supports ongoing service development.

When serious incidents occur, the agency appropriately notifies Ofsted. However, there has been a delay in the agency notifying Ofsted. This means that Ofsted is unable to scrutinise the information in a timely manner to ensure that arrangements

for children are safe. Inspectors reviewed the actions taken by the agency to be satisfactory. However, delays in notifying matters under schedule 6 and 7 is not in line with regulation.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager registered with Ofsted in December 2021. She demonstrates an ambitious vision for developing the service. She works effectively with senior leaders to provide a good level of support to children, foster families and staff. Leaders and managers consider innovative ideas that are creative, which seek to improve outcomes for children. This supports the good progress that children make.

The agency continually looks to ensure that it promotes equality and diversity in a meaningful way. There have been changes to the panel recently, which has altered the mix of the panel members. The panel continues to function with a good mix of panel members who have a range of experience, which includes social care, education, adults who have previously been cared for and health professionals. The agency continues to recruit panel members from a range of backgrounds to ensure that panel members are equipped to understand the diverse needs of children.

Staff and foster families speak positively about the supportive environment that the agency creates. Regular supervisions, training and access to support during office hours and out of hours ensures that the foster families can speak to someone in the agency if there is a crisis. A small minority of carers criticised the ethos of the agency, other carers have provided an opposing and positive view of the service, but the registered manager has already taken appropriate steps to address any criticism. The manager promotes a positive culture for learning in the agency. Foster families spoken to say that there is a positive shift, and the manager's interventions are effective.

The agency's escalation processes are not embedded in practice and therefore not effective. Some statutory documents for children are not consistently held on the children's records and these have not been received. The agency does make a request for them to be sent. However, the agency does not effectively challenge the child's placing local authority using their escalation system to ensure that all statutory documents are received in a timely manner. In addition, some staff are unclear of the escalation policy. This means that some children's files are incomplete as they do not contain all of the documents that are important to children.

There are systems in place to monitor practice, which includes file audits. Additionally, weekly team meetings ensure that managers and the staff are able to discuss matters that are important to children. However, monitoring systems that the managers use are not consistently effective. This has resulted in the shortfalls that the inspectors found.

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>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.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36)</p>	8 August 2022

Recommendations

- The registered provider should ensure that there are effective processes in place to ensure that managers, staff and foster parents are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and the lines of accountability, are clearly defined. In particular, ensure that the agency follows their own escalation policy and process. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.4)
- The registered provider should ensure that information about a 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. In particular, ensure that when tracking children's progress, there is a clear evaluation of the progress they make from their starting points. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.6)
- The registered provider should ensure that they implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. In particular, ensure that children's individual risk assessments are reflective of their emerging needs and known risks. Risk assessments should explicitly provide guidance for foster parents to follow. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- The registered provider should ensure that leaders and managers regularly monitor 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. Ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring visit. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.2)

- The registered provider should ensure that children can communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 1.3)

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: SC037579

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Inspectors

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