

Fusion Fostering South West

Fusion Fostering Limited

Fusion Fostering, Richmond House, Taunton TA3 6BY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The South West office of Fusion Fostering undertakes the recruitment, assessment, approval and training of foster carers who care for children aged 0 to 18 years in the South West region. The agency also operates offices in other regions of England.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 83 fostering households, who were caring for 95 children and young people.

The manager registered with Ofsted in July 2020.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 September 2022

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **inadequate**

There are serious and widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded, and the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 9 March 2020

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that the agency provides good enough care and support to all children, young people and foster carers.

Not all children and young people living with foster carers make sufficient progress and have good outcomes. Foster carers spoke warmly about the children they look after and gave examples of their progress, going to school and fun activities. However, too many children's placement's end in an unplanned way.

Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that all foster carers receive adequate levels of supervision and support. Inconsistencies in supervising social workers, and a lack of management oversight since the previous inspection, have contributed to the oversights in the quality of support given to foster carers. Inspectors found some evidence of well-written supervision notes, and some supporting social worker visits to foster carers taking place in a timely manner. However, alarmingly, a number of foster carers had failed to be visited in line with the national minimum standards, plans failed to provide foster carers with strategies to support the children when they are upset, and some foster carers spoke of not being sufficiently prepared and informed before a child is placed in their home.

Assessments of new foster carers are completed by independent assessors, but may lack depth. Inspectors found a heavy reliance on virtual visits during the assessment process, despite the lifting of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In one case, the entire assessment had been completed virtually. In this case, there was insufficient scrutiny of these applicants.

Foster carers reported mixed opinions of the support they receive and their experience since being approved as foster carers. While some carers spoke of good-quality support and training being available, too many carers reported feeling unsupported, a lack of communication, and repeated changes in their supervising social worker. Some foster carers say that they are considering leaving the agency as a direct result of their concerns.

Foster carers are provided with a range of training and learning opportunities that will remain virtual for the remainder of 2022. Foster carers described the training as being helpful. However, inspectors found that the registered manager failed to ensure that all foster carers complete mandatory training. In addition, foster carers who had raised concerns about children's internet safety, did not receive this training in a timely way.

The registered manager had failed to provide a sufficiently thorough and up-to- date package of learning for foster cares who are approved to provide care for parents and children/ babies. For example, these carers had not received any training in sudden infant death syndrome.

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

Since the previous inspection of the agency in March 2020, Ofsted has received a high volume of safeguarding notifications and standards of care investigations. Many of these relate to children making allegations against their foster carers. On request from Ofsted, the registered manager completed a review of the concerns. However, the inspectors found this analysis fell short of identifying why children were making allegations and what actions the agency would take to ensure that the children were safe.

A number of standards of care investigations remain ongoing. Those that have been completed have found that in some cases the allegations and concerns are substantiated. An independent investigation into a serious complaint raised by a child's local authority was finalised during the inspection. The substantiated findings aligned with those of the inspectors.

One serious incident since the previous inspection that placed a child at risk, this involved the practice of the supervising social worker. In this case, the foster carer failed to whistle-blow the concerns to the agency, and therefore there was delay in this concern coming to the attention of the agency. The agency has since taken appropriate action against this member of staff.

Assessments of risk, and safer care plans, are not always comprehensive or individualised, and lack detail about known risks and vulnerabilities. They do not provide foster carers with the strategies and guidance they need to safely manage risk and keep the children in their care safe; for example, with regard to the safe storage and administration of medication, and the dangers of the internet.

The agency cannot be assured that all children and young people are being kept safe and well cared for. This is in significant part because the inspectors found that not all foster carers have been visited in line with the national minimum standards. It was noted that there has been an overreliance on virtual visits since the ending of the restrictions of the pandemic.

Safer care plans and risk assessments for children placed in parent and child placements, too often fail to sufficiently focus on the needs of the babies. In one child's case, the registered manager accepted that the carer had not been provided with either document. In addition, this was compounded by the failure of the supervising social worker to visit the foster carer's home.

The fostering panel provides a layer of scrutiny and independence, but it is not consistently effective. On more than one occasion, the panel reapproved carers despite the minutes detailing comments from panel members that they felt they did not have enough information presented to them to make a well-informed decision. In addition, poor decision making by the ADM, placed one child at risk of possible harm. In this situation, the agency decision maker overruled the recommendation of panel not to approve potential carers due to serious concerns, including past criminal

activity. The carers have since been subjected to a standards of care investigation by the agency. As a result, the child that was placed with them had to move on to another home in an unplanned way.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Leaders and managers have failed to provide sufficient support, challenge and scrutiny to staff and carers to ensure that they are able to provide all children and young people with consistently safe, good-quality care.

Since the previous inspection in March 2020, there has been a change in the model of care and support operated by the agency. Following the implementation of this change, a high number of supervising social workers leaving. Recruitment has been positive and there are currently no vacancies. Nonetheless, foster carers have experienced repeated changes to their support, and supervising social workers have at times had high caseloads.

Supervising social workers spoke of receiving good-quality, regular supervision. However, despite this, leaders and managers failed to identify the repeatedly poor practice of some supervising social workers.

Systems to audit the quality of the service are inadequate. Audits fail to identify the shortfalls found by the inspectors. These include visits not taking place, overly generic risk assessments and safer care plans, and in one case, neither of these documents had not been completed during the period that the child and parent were in placement.

Leaders and managers consistently share information and progress updates with the local authority social workers. However, they do not always notify Ofsted of all significant incidents of concern. Examples of these incidents include when the police return children who the agency have reported as missing from a foster home, and when children have been assaulted in the community and require medical attention.

Six requirements and 15 recommendations are made because of the serious and significant shortfalls identified at this inspection. At the end of the inspection, leaders and managers took immediate action to secure the management of the agency. They have provided Ofsted with assurances of how they will rectify the shortfalls. Ofsted will continue to monitor the progress of the agency.

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
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))	18 November 2022
<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 specifically relates to leaders and managers making sure that no child is harmed and/or neglected by a foster carer, visit all fostering households within two weeks of the date of this inspection</p>	30 September November 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide,</p> <p>notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 (a)(b))</p>	18 November 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.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3).</p>	18 November 2022

<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations (Regulation 17 (1) (2) (3))</p> <p>This specifically relates to leaders and managers ensuring that all foster carers complete mandatory training, including safeguarding, medication administration, internet safety and researched-based learning relevant to caring for and supporting babies.</p> <p>Leaders and managers must ensure that all foster carers have the most up-to-date plans and assessments to enable them to support children safely.</p>	
<p>A fostering service provider must not approve X as a foster parent unless—</p> <p>they have completed their assessment of X's suitability, and the fostering panel has considered the application.</p> <p>A fostering service provider must, in deciding whether to approve X as a foster parent and as to the terms of any approval, take into account the recommendation of the fostering panel (Regulation 27 (2)(a)b (3))</p> <p>This specifically relates to leaders and managers ensuring that decisions by the agency decision-maker at the approval stage of an application are informed and safe.</p>	18 November 2022
<p>A person must not manage a fostering agency unless they are fit to do so.</p> <p>A person is not fit to manage a fostering agency unless that person—</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for managing the fostering agency. (Regulation 7 (1) (2)(i))</p> <p>This specifically relates to the leaders of the agency ensuring that the registered manager demonstrates effective and strategic management of the agency.</p>	18 November 2022

Recommendations

- The manager should ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 31, paragraph 14.9)
- The manager should ensure that prior to the placement of each child, the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively. The information is provided in a clear, comprehensive written form and includes the support that will be available to the foster carer. The fostering service follows up with the responsible authority any gaps in the information provided to them on the child or the child's family, which may hinder the foster carer in providing a safe, caring environment that meets the child's needs and enables them to keep the child, other children in the fostering household and the foster carer him/herself safe. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 32, paragraph 15.2)
- The manager should exercise effective leadership of the staff and operation, such that the fostering service is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible childcare that meets the individual needs of each fostered child and of foster carers. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 35, paragraph 17.5)
- The manager should ensure that all foster carers are trained in appropriate safer-care practice, including skills to care for children who have been abused. For foster carers who offer placements to disabled children, this includes training specifically on issues affecting disabled children. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 14, paragraph 4.6)
- The manager should ensure that medicines kept in the foster home are stored safely and are accessible only by those for whom they are intended. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 16, paragraph 6.9)
- The manager should ensure that all foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication. Prescribed medication is only given to the child for whom it was prescribed, and in accordance with the prescription. Children who wish to, and who can safely keep and take their own medication, do so. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 16, paragraph 6.10)
- The manager should ensure that all foster carers keep a written record of all medication, treatment and first aid given to children during their placement. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 16, paragraph 6.11)
- The manager should ensure that prospective foster carers are considered in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way that meets the child's development needs. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 28, paragraph 13.6)

- The manager should ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 29, paragraph 13.8)
- The manager should ensure that support and training are made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 41, paragraph 20.8)
- The manager should ensure that appropriate training on safer caring is provided for all members of the foster household, including young people of sufficient age and understanding, and ensures that foster carers understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 41, paragraph 20.9)
- The manager should ensure that the fostering service supports its foster carers to ensure that they provide foster children with care that reasonably meets those children's needs, takes the children's wishes and feelings into account, actively promotes individual care and supports the children's safety, health, enjoyment, education and preparation for the future. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 42, paragraph 21.1)
- The manager should ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure that the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meetings for short-break foster carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files should include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 42, paragraph 21.8)
- The manager should ensure that the fostering service ensures that a clear distinction is made between investigation into allegations of harm and discussions over standards of care. Investigations which find no evidence of harm should not lead to procedures being invoked for looking into poor standards of care; these should be treated separately. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 45, paragraph 22.10)
- The manager should 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. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 50, paragraph 25.2)

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: 1226630

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