

The Midlands

Fusion Fostering Limited

Hilton Hall, Hilton Lane, Essington, Wolverhampton WV11 2BQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This fostering agency was registered in August 2017. It is part of a larger, privately run organisation that operates nationwide. Prior to this service being registered, it formed part of another registration within the company. This registration supports foster carers across the West Midlands.

The placements provided include emergency, short-term, long-term, respite, bridging to permanent and parent and child placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 30 fostering households and cared for 34 children.

The registered manager left the post in April 2022. A new manager has been appointed. She holds the qualifications required for the role. She has made an application to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 August 2022

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be 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: 6 August 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are making good progress in all aspects of their development because of the good-quality care they receive. Foster carers show they are knowledgeable and skilled in meeting the needs and vulnerabilities of children. They demonstrate resilience and commitment to the children in their care. In addition, children enjoy positive and flourishing relationships with their foster families and have strong, emotional connections to the foster carer's wider family members. As a result, children benefit from long-term stability, with many children living with their foster carers for several years. One social worker told the inspector, '[child] carers have a very good understanding of [child] individual needs, and this has allowed for a good relationship to be built and for [child] to be comfortable to approach [carers] for support and guidance.'

Children say they feel part of the foster carer's family. They enjoy a range of family activities and are included in significant family events such as holidays. Foster carers provide a safe and nurturing environment for children. Children have positive experiences that hold memories, which are captured through memory boxes and photo albums. As a result of this positive care that children receive, their emotional well-being is promoted that enables them to build positive childhood memories through to their adulthood.

The agency takes time to fully consider the needs of children with the experience and skills of foster carers before children are matched. Referrals and applications are scrutinised by the manager and discussed with internal and external professionals. Children are welcomed and feel that they are treated well as a member of the foster family. As a result, children develop a sense of being valued and respected.

Foster carers continue to encourage and support children to do well at school. They have realistic expectations for children making progress in their learning and education achievements. Foster carers support children by attending parents' evenings and statutory meetings and keep in close communication with children's social workers and teachers. As a result, children make good academic progress. Two children have made progress and completed GCSEs and have been offered college placements.

Children's health needs are consistently met to a good standard. Supervising social workers ensure that individual health assessments are in place. Children attend regular appointments at the dentist, general practitioner, optician and specialist services. As a result, children's physical and emotional health is promoted well.

The agency has continued to encourage and support children to be active during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. For example, staff have been creative in engaging children in various activities via social media. During the periods of restrictions, children have enjoyed Easter-themed, arts and craft activities, calendar competitions

and sunflower seed-growing sessions. These events provide children with the opportunities to develop new skills. In addition, children enjoy annual events organised by the agency such as a Christmas party and Easter activities. These enjoyable experiences give children a sense of inclusion.

Foster carers understand the importance in supporting children to maintain links with birth families and people who are important to them. They show sensitivity to children's experience of separation and loss. Foster carers receive training to understand the conflict that children experience on significant days in the calendar such as birthdays, Mother's Day, or Christmas. Consequently, this enables children to maintain their sense of identity, while celebrating their foster experience.

The agency provides opportunities for children and foster carers to give feedback about the agency. Supervising social workers consult with children through foster carer reviews and regular visits to carers' homes. Children's participation is recognised by the manager as an area for further development to ensure that children's views are obtained more regularly. Despite this shortfall, children do have other forums to share their views and experiences. For example, one child told the inspector, '[carers] are brilliant, I get to see my sister, I like seeing her and [supervising social worker] comes around and asks how I am feeling. He is very nice.' Another child told the inspector, 'I tell [carers] and my brother if I'm worried or sad.'

Foster carers work hard to help children settle when they first move into their homes. They provide a good level of nurture to embed consistent boundaries and routines. Also, foster carers and staff are informed by the agency's adopted therapeutic model. The agency has knowledgeable and skilled supervising social workers, who support foster carers with trauma-based strategies to help children manage difficult feelings and emotions. Children make good progress in a range of areas, including emotional regulation, education, mental health and building positive relationships. The manager has high expectations for the foster carers, staff and children. As a result, the agency is raising the standard of care children receive.

Most children's records contain the relevant information about the child, which is recorded clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child. However, some carers' recordings do not always capture the child's daily journey and experiences. This means that, if the child wanted to access their files in the future, this has the potential of limiting information and misrepresenting the child's journey.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Overall, the agency ensures that it has satisfied itself with all the relevant information regarding safer recruitment before staff start working with foster carers and children. However, on one occasion, the inspector found that one staff member reference had not been adequately checked. The agency took immediate action during the inspection to address this shortfall.

Supervising social workers support foster carers to implement safe care plans and risk assessments when children move in. These identify known risks for the children. However, supervising social workers do not always update individualised risk assessments, and omit relevant information, guidance and advice to help carers support children better. For example, one child's risk assessment had not been updated with relevant information about risk. This means that foster carers can be without clear strategies to enable them to respond to a child's risks.

In the main, the agency has ensured that foster carers have had a wide range of training available for them to develop their skills and learning to support children's vulnerabilities. However, this is not consistent for all carers. For example, some foster carers have not received training in staying safe online and county lines. This potentially limits carers' knowledge and skills to better support children.

There are gaps in management oversight of the service which have affected standards within the agency. For example, the manager did not have written consent from the placing local authority to have surveillance and monitoring equipment in the foster carers' home for one child. In addition, the carers were using monitoring and surveillance of this child without good reason. This places unnecessary restrictions on the child to move freely in their home and infringes on their privacy. This does not create a positive homely environment.

During the inspection, it was identified that missing from care protocol were not always followed by foster carers. For example, one foster carer failed to follow clear guidance on what steps to take when the child went missing, when there was a risk of child sexual exploitation.

Most children are very settled in their foster homes and incidents of restraint are low. Overall, foster carers use restraint as a last resort to prevent the child injuring themselves or others, or causing serious damage to property. However, on two occasions, a foster carer's use of restraint was not appropriate or proportionate. In addition, the foster carers had not received refresher physical intervention training. The new manager acknowledges this shortfall and plans to address it.

All foster carers have appropriately qualified supervising social workers who meet with them regularly. This provides the opportunity to supervise and access the foster carer's work and ensures that the carers are meeting the children's needs, as well as offering support when considering the child's wishes and feelings. However, not all carers' supervisions are purposeful, and staff do not evidence how decisions are made. For example, some supervision recordings are generic and duplicate information from previous meetings. In addition, supervising social workers' recordings lack context, making it difficult to track if issues have been resolved. This is a missed opportunity for raising foster carers' ambition and learning.

Regular health and safety checks and unannounced visits are carried out by the supervising social workers. Children are always spoken to at these visits. This means that children's wishes and feelings are obtained about the quality of care they receive.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager has been in post since the end of April 2022. When they were appointed, they quickly identified the strengths and weaknesses in the agency. The manager has begun to make positive changes to the operation of the agency. Overall, foster carers, staff and stakeholders feel supported by the manager, and she has developed positive relationships with the new staff team. In addition, the manager has developed an effective action plan to address the shortfalls.

The agency has had a high staff turnover in the past 12 months, with some core staff leaving the agency. However, the foster carers told the inspector that they have continued to receive support from the agency during this period. Consequently, despite the staff changes, foster carers have received the help they need to support children in times of crisis.

Foster carers have found it difficult to allow children to participate in a range of leisure and recreational activities because of the pandemic restrictions. However, participation has been encouraged by the agency to support children and foster carers with activities. For example, there is a new family support worker to engage children in various face-to-face and online activities. In addition, the agency arranged events for foster carers and children such as a picnic in the park, and visits to Twycross zoo and Drayton Manor Park. Foster carers and children told the inspector they would like more carers and children participation face-to-face groups. The manager has identified this in the action plan.

Supervising social workers receive a good induction that is specific to their role. They report that they are well supported by the manager, with regular and reflective supervision in line with the agency's statement of purpose. As a result, all staff receive consistent opportunities to reflect on their learning and development from their practice.

Foster carers report that supervising social workers have positive relationships with children and know them well. These staff have a good understanding of the children's complex behaviours and vulnerabilities. They show patience and resilience, and this helps children to begin to develop trusting relationships. Foster carers told the inspector, 'We feel 100% supported by the agency, we feel valued and important to them [agency]' and 'We are listened to and treated like professionals. 'They [supervising social workers] are always there when we need them.'

The manager and staff place good emphasis on monitoring children's progress. Systems to monitor the quality of children's care are generally good. For example, the manager has a reflective management group and uses questionnaires to gather foster carers' and children's views. These documents are scrutinised to reflect on the feedback and to identify any learning.

Staff build positive working relationships with a range of external professionals. They have built a good reputation with local authorities and other agencies. Feedback

provided by professionals during the inspection was positive. One local authority social worker told the inspector, 'There has been very good communication with the agency outside children's statutory and education meetings.'

It is clear that children are at the heart of the agency. The manager, staff and senior managers care about the children. This ethos is shared by the foster carers, who take pride in children's achievements and progress, no matter how small these are. Also, foster carers have access to 24-hour inter-agency support. This is effective by providing support and guidance to foster carers to manage disruption in the home. As a result, children benefit from more stable and nurturing care.

The functioning of the panel continues to be effective within the agency. The panel chair has extensive experience in fostering and is clear about the role of the panel. The panel central list shows there is a range of experience, diversity and skilled individuals, which includes social workers, education professionals, and fostering and leaving care members. The panel conducts transparent and appropriate analysis of the information that is presented to it. Foster carers' assessments have improved and are of good quality. The panel and agency decision-maker also carry out an effective quality assurance role to scrutinise the overall practice and performance of the agency.

Despite this good progress, the agency has not always ensured that all foster carers continue to receive refresher training either online or face to face in trauma-informed parenting, gang affiliation, county lines, substance misuse and internet safety. This was a requirement raised at the last inspection. This omission has the potential to compromise foster carers' ability to update their knowledge and skills to better support children.

Managers have not ensured that all supervising social workers have completed mandatory training to update their knowledge and skills to enhance good practice in supporting foster carers and children. Two supervising social workers have outstanding training for managing allegations and risk assessments. This means that some staff are without some of the skills required for their role. The manager has identified this shortfall.

Prior to the new manager, on one occasion the agency did not notify Ofsted of a serious incident that occurred within the agency as required. This meant the regulatory body was not able to ensure appropriate action was taken.

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 prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that—</p> <p>no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable, and</p> <p>restraint is used on a child only where it is necessary to prevent injury to the child or other persons, or serious damage to property. (Regulation 13 (1) (2)(b)(c))</p> <p>In particular, the fostering service must ensure that a missing from care protocol is followed by foster carers, and that recording is accurate.</p> <p>Also, this relates to the fostering service ensuring that physical restraints are appropriate and proportionate in accordance with children safety plans.</p> <p>And that the fostering service should ensure that monitoring or surveillance of children is proportionate to potential risk.</p> | 21 October 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, ensure that foster carers undertake relevant training regularly.</p> | 21 October 2022 |

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers encourage children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. Children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe, including when outside of the household or when using the internet or social media. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.4)
- The registered person should ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.1)
- The registered person should ensure that meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure 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 include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that all social workers and other specialists (e.g. medical, legal, educationalists, psychologists, therapists) are professionally qualified and, where applicable, registered by the appropriate professional body. They are appropriately trained to work with children, their families and foster carers, and have a good understanding of foster care and the policies and purpose of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.4)
- The registered person should ensure that 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', 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that they have a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 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: 1233309

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Inspector

Patrick McIntosh, Social Care Inspector

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