

Choice Fostering Limited

19a Studio House Business Centre, Delamare Road, Waltham Cross EN8 9SH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned and is based in Hertfordshire. It registered with Ofsted in 2017 and offers same day, short- and long-term placements. The approved foster carers live in local authorities, including Essex, Hertfordshire, London and Buckinghamshire. At the time of this inspection, 21 fostering households were looking after 26 children.

The manager registered in November 2017.

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: 12 to 16 December 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 29 October 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive good-quality care from foster carers who feel valued and supported by the agency. Children, social workers, commissioners and agency staff hold the foster carers in high regard. Long-term experienced foster carers have transferred to this small, inclusive agency which provides a personal approach to foster care.

Some children live with their brothers or sisters. Foster carers warmly welcome children into their homes. They offer children the benefit of their life experience, patience and acceptance. Children become loved members of the foster carers' extended family. Most children have lived with their foster families for over one year, which has given them permanence and stability during their childhood. Unplanned endings are few and heartfelt. In these cases, the placing authority and agency offer new alternative homes to children when possible.

Careful and considered matching helps children to make significant progress from their starting points. Many children are flourishing. For some children, the quality of their lives has transformed due to the care, nurture and support they receive. Foster carers' attention to children's well-being enables children with significant health issues to receive specialist treatment. One child's health radically stabilised, which enabled them to receive a kidney transplant.

Most children attend school or college. Foster carers are aspirational for the children and routinely encourage them to go to school and to do their best. Some children become role models for other school children. Foster carers consistently attend personal education planning meetings and work closely with schools and colleges to support children's education. The agency identifies and coordinates additional help for children who find it difficult to sustain classroom learning.

Foster carers recognise and help to develop children's individual talents in art, writing and sport. This helps to improve children's confidence and self-esteem. Children benefit from holidays with their foster families and enjoy adventure days out with the agency staff. These new experiences help children to have fun and build happy memories.

Foster carers value the importance of children's family relationships. The supervising social workers and the managers make sure that the children spend meaningful time with their families. Some families visit children at the foster home. This helps to promote inclusion and supports children's identity.

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

The children have trusting relationships with their foster carers. The children say that the adults help them to feel safe. Children know how to reach out if they need to.

Supervising social workers carry out routine and unannounced visits. During these visits, they spend time alone with children. This helps them get to know each child's unique personality and temperament. This knowledge helps the supervising social workers and the foster carers to evaluate any risky behaviours. Written plans help to monitor and track incidents, which helps the agency staff to observe children's individual progress over time.

A monthly award system celebrates children's individual success and achievements.

There are few incidents and children rarely go missing from home. Foster carers respond appropriately to any concerns raised about children's safety. Weekly review meetings enable supervising social workers and managers to consider the emotions behind children's behaviour. The weekly meetings note any changes in children's or foster carers' personal circumstances. This helps the agency to plan support and provide immediate assistance to reduce risks.

The agency decision-maker is very well established, which provides experience and continuity. Many foster panel representatives have relevant lived or professional experience of fostering. The panel has regular discussions and provides good professional scrutiny. This includes reviewing information about any foster carers who return to panel because of allegations or concerns about their standards of care. Foster carers' strengths are recorded in panel minutes. However, areas for foster carers' development are not recorded. This does not demonstrate that the panel's recommendation fully captures all issues.

The agency regularly reviews the foster families' safer care plans. The agency ensures that foster carers are provided with breaks when these are appropriate. The agency encourages foster carers to identify support carers from the network. Most back-up carer arrangements work well because the children are looked after by a relative from the foster carers' extended family. Nonetheless, the quality of support for one support carer and the quality of checks for another carer are not good enough. This does not reflect the agency's ethos and does not keep every child safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the service registered, the manager, deputy manager and responsible individual have continued to work together to offer stability and direction for the staff, foster carers and children.

The managers and leaders have intentionally planned for incremental and steady growth. This is to ensure that every supervising social worker's caseload remains manageable. This pace allows agency staff time to get to know the children's care experience. The introduction of a senior supervising social worker has improved the quality of the manager's oversight. Regular student placements help the agency to keep up to date with current research and practice in social work.

Supervising social workers benefit from regular supportive supervision which balances the children's progress with individual professional development. This keeps the children at the centre of the agency's work.

The registered manager and the agency staff are influential advocates for the children. This helps the children to access the additional support and resources they need from other professionals. Commissioners say that this agency stands out from other agencies because of the manager's focus on achieving the best outcomes for the children in their care.

Foster carers say that the agency provided constant help and support for them during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included virtual meetings and garden visits. Following the relaxation of COVID restrictions, face-to-face group support meetings have yet to be re-established. This does not provide an extra layer of support for those who may be new to fostering or the agency.

The managers routinely audit case files and feedback to supervising social workers about the quality of recording. This ensures that written information is helpful to children who wish to see their files now or in the future. The annual reviews of foster carers' approval include feedback from children and their professionals. This helps the managers to track children's experiences and assures the agency of the foster carers' suitability.

Foster carers frequently complete a range of training online and in person. However, foster carers' personal development plans are not individualised and do not fully reflect children's changing needs. This could result in a complacent approach.

The registered manager is aware of the agency's strengths and how some of the identified shortfalls have occurred. The managers use routine meetings and a development plan to action the required steps and enhance children's experiences.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. This particularly relates to the arrangements for carer support and checks on back-up carers. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members. The reasons for the panel's recommendations should be recorded. This particularly relates to the panel's recommended areas for development. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. In particular, individualised plans that reflect the changing needs of the children should be provided. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)
- The registered person should ensure that peer support, foster care associations and self-help groups for foster carers are encouraged and supported. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.4)

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: 1258890

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Inspector

Rosie Davie, Social Care Inspector

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