

# Worcestershire Children First Fostering

Worcestershire Children First

Worcestershire County Hall Campus, Spetchley Road, Worcester, Worcestershire WR5 2NP

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

The independent fostering agency was registered on 1 October 2019. The agency was formerly part of Worcestershire County Council, and now sits within Worcestershire Children First. Worcestershire Children's First is an independent not-for-profit company that is wholly owned by Worcestershire County Council. Worcestershire Children First Fostering Agency sits within the company as an independent fostering agency. The agency offers mainstream, short- and long-term, emergency, and connected persons or kinship placements. The agency provides placements to children placed by Worcestershire Children First only. At the time of this inspection, there were 107 mainstream foster carers and 146 connected persons carers. There were 351 children placed with the fostering agency.

The registered manager post has been vacant since 27 September 2022.

### Inspection dates: 6 to 10 February 2023

**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 **requires improvement to be good**

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

**Date of last inspection:** 20 September 2021

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** requires improvement

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good**

Children are happy and settled with their kinship and foster families and have trusting relationships with family members. They feel part of their kinship and foster families because carers are committed to meeting their needs. One carer stated, 'He's our boy. He's staying with us forever.' As a result of experiencing these nurturing relationships, the children are achieving in many areas of their lives. Children are making good educational progress. Children who have previously experienced significant disruption to their education are now meeting their expected levels of attainment. The agency, in partnership with the virtual school, has good oversight of all the children's educational attendance and achievements. The virtual school supports carers by providing regular guidance and training. This oversight and intervention mean that carers have a clear understanding of educational issues for the children in their care.

Carers promote healthy lifestyles to the children in their care. Carers who care for children with specific health needs describe being supported by fostering social workers 'who go the extra mile'. Children's health and well-being are further supported by a multi-disciplinary health team. They provide a range of services, including therapeutic support, directly to the children, carers and fostering social workers. The multi-disciplinary team has recently increased their oversight of the children's health assessments. This is helping to better identify and provide services to the children with emotional well-being needs.

Carers support the children to experience a wide range of activities both with their foster families and with their peers in the wider community. One child who had little outside interest and no friends now has a wide circle of friends. He plays rugby and attends sea cadets, and teaches both to younger children. He is excelling in sea cadets, having recently moved up rank to a 1st Class Cadet. These opportunities mean that the children build good self-esteem and grow in confidence in other areas of their lives.

Fostering social workers know their foster families well. They have good relationships with them and with the birth and foster children who they care for. The agency places a strong emphasis on the voice of all children, and this is evidenced throughout the work that they do. They work in close partnership with other professionals and advocate on behalf of the carers and the children. The agency's fostering social workers are often the most consistent professionals for the children due to frequent changes in children's social workers. In recognition of this, fostering social workers do direct work with children, joint visits to families, attend meetings, and take the lead in liaising with other professionals from health and education provisions. This ensures that matters are progressed, and the children's needs are identified and met.

Carers are overwhelmingly positive about the support that they receive from their fostering social workers. They feel that the range of mandatory and developmental

training enables them to meet the needs of the children who they care for. The supervisions that they receive are regular and reflective. Unannounced visits are taking place regularly to further promote the continued safety of the children. There are range of participation groups that enable the children to express their views. The agency also links with a wider children's voice group. The fostering social workers have used these forums to identify questions from the children for the fostering panel members to ask prospective carers, and to develop a wider range of children's activities. The agency's quarterly newsletter reports on these developments and enables the children to see their ideas brought to life.

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

Children feel safe living with their kinship and foster carers. Carers understand the risks that the children face and are proactive at keeping them safe. Carers discuss their concerns, when necessary, with their fostering social workers. This enables them to implement age-appropriate strategies, which reduce risks for the children while they continue to develop their independence.

Managers and fostering social workers respond well to identified risks for the children. They work in close partnership with other agencies to monitor and reduce risks. Fostering social workers work with carers and the children to produce individualised safe care plans, which are regularly reviewed. These plans do not consider or involve other appropriate members of the wider family, such as older birth children who return on a regular basis to stay in their family home. This has the potential to place children at risk as adults and the children may not be fully aware of the measures needed to keep them safe.

Managers' and staff's responses to significant incidents and safeguarding concerns involving the children and carers are good. There are clear procedures that ensure that there is close partnership working with other professionals. Carers are supported during any allegations or investigations. Managers have a system that enables them to consistently monitor serious incidents and report these to Ofsted in a timely way. However, they do not systemically inform Ofsted of the outcomes of notifications and this prevents Ofsted from having the necessary oversight of the fostering agency.

Managers ensure that post-allegation reviews are carried out, and fostering social workers from different teams are used to undertake investigations and look for lessons that could be learned. Post-allegation reviews are taken to panel and the agency decision-maker, and are shared with appropriate trust and local authority designated officers. This ensures an independent overview of practice and kinship and foster carer approvals.

The fostering agency's panel chair ensures that assessments of prospective kinship and foster carers include all necessary checks and explore issues that are pertinent to fostering. Panel members prepare for panel by identifying areas of vulnerability to explore with the assessor and prospective carers. This provides robust consideration and recommendation of the prospective kinship and foster carer's suitability to foster.

There is a safer recruitment and vetting procedure that sits within the agency and is overseen by managers. This helps to prevent unsafe adults from providing care and support to the children. All managers with responsibility for implementing and auditing these processes have attended training that is bespoke to this agency's procedure.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good**

The agency has been without a registered manager since 27 September 2022. Leaders have been proactive in recruiting to this post and have successfully appointed two candidates. However, both have withdrawn due to personal reasons after accepting the post. An advert is currently out for this position.

Interim management arrangements are in place, ensuring that there is effective oversight of the day-to-day operation and management of the service. After the last Ofsted inspection, a plan and strategies were put in place to develop the agency. As a result, requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have been met. However, a registered manager must be appointed.

The responsible individual has taken the lead in overseeing the management and progression of the service. She is ambitious for the staff, children and kinship and foster carers, and has a clear vision for the future of the agency. She has a stable team of staff, who are also invested in progressing the service. Team managers have taken lead roles in areas that require development. Together, they continue to work to implement plans and drive up standards.

Managers know the strengths and weaknesses of the agency. They have introduced a range of systems that audit, track and evaluate practice and outcomes at an operational level. This is giving them good insight into patterns and trends, and they have used this intelligence to develop areas and make plans. For example, the number of kinship carers continues to increase. The agency has and continues to develop information and practice to respond to this growth. The recruitment and approval of mainstream carers to meet local need continues to be a challenge. New strategies are being put in place to try and address this.

Staff and carers continue to develop their practice. The agency has introduced new training programmes, and staff and carers are clear of the expectation to complete training courses. Training is actively encouraged and progressed. For example, all mainstream foster carers have completed the training, support and development standards for foster care within their first year of fostering.

Staff are well supported through a range of systems, including regular supervision sessions, annual appraisals and team meetings. Staff feel valued by their managers and enjoy the development opportunities provided to them. Children's social workers are positive about the support that the children receive, citing 'brilliant support' from both carers and fostering social workers.

The foster panel is chaired by an appropriately experienced chairperson. Since the last inspection, the diversity of panel membership has been improved by the

recruitment of new members, including a care-experienced person. The quality assurance processes have also been strengthened. Emerging themes have been identified and the service is addressing these. For example, the agency decision-maker process has been developed, reducing the number of people in this role by appointing a full-time post that sits within the agency and not the wider trust.

The central list and minutes of panel meetings do not clearly identify that there is social work representation at panels. All panel members have received an annual appraisal. However, the agency decision-makers have not fed into the panel chair's appraisal. The agency has completed learning reviews after safeguarding concerns. This is good practice. However, there was a significant delay in the findings being shared with the panel members, so that they could amend practice where appropriate.

# 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
The registered provider must appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 6 (1))	31 May 2023

## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. This specifically relates to ensuring that all safer care plans include information that is appropriate to relevant wider family members. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 14, paragraph 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that following an incident that is notifiable under regulation 36, the registered person contacts the responsible authority to discuss any further actions that may need to be taken. This specifically relates to updating Ofsted of outcomes to notifiable events. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 57, paragraph 29.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. This specifically relates to ensuring that the panel has appropriately constituted social work representation. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 31, paragraph 14.8)
- The registered person should ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. The service's decision-maker should review the performance of the panel chair and, for this purpose, may attend a proportion of panel meetings but only as an observer. (Volume 4: statutory guidance on fostering services for looked-after children, page 41, paragraph 5.15)
- The registered person should ensure that panels play an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice

that is felt to fall short of the regulations or NMS, or not to be in the interests of children. Panels are required to give regular feedback to the fostering service. This specifically relates to the agency sharing any learning reviews with the panel members so that they can amend practice as a result of any findings. (Volume 4: statutory guidance on fostering services for looked-after children, page 38, paragraph 5.1)

## **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:** 2549696

**Registered provider:** Worcestershire Children First

**Registered provider address:** County Hall, Spetchley Road, Worcester WR5 2NP

**Responsible individual:** Maria White

**Registered manager:** Post vacant

**Telephone number:** 01905 846000

**Email address:** [MWhite2@worcschildrenfirst.org.uk](mailto:MWhite2@worcschildrenfirst.org.uk)

## **Inspectors**

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Anne Daly, Social Care Inspector

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