

Fostering Connections

Fostering Connections Limited

Warlies Park House, Upshire, Essex EN9 3SL

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Fostering Connections is a new, small independent agency. The agency registered with Ofsted on 30 June 2021. The suitably qualified and experienced registered manager has been in post since the agency registered.

There are nine approved fostering households offering emergency, short-term and long-term placements for children. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 18 children in placement. Two foster carers have young people living with them under 'staying put' or shared lives arrangements.

Inspection dates: 20 to 22 February 2023

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The agency staff and carers all share a therapeutic child-focused approach and a determination to achieve the best outcomes for children. One foster carer said, 'It takes a village to raise a child. That is the agency's mantra and that is what they [the agency staff] are really doing. We do it together. I love it.'

Most children have lived with their foster carers for several years. These carers have moved to the agency through a foster carer transfer. The children, whether new to their carers or in established foster homes, are well matched with their fostering family. The children have benefited from well-planned moves, with opportunities to meet their carers before they moved in. This has helped to reduce anxiety for children and foster carers alike.

The children are loved and nurtured and seen as core members of the family. One social worker said that the foster carer had 'owned' the children, describing the lifelong commitment the foster carer had made to them. Children and their carers build strong relationships and enjoy spending time together. One child said that their foster carer 'is everything' to them.

Foster carers are inclusive and sensitive to difference. When children do not share a cultural background with their carers, the foster carers positively encourage and support them to explore their heritage to ensure that children develop a keen sense of self and a positive identity. Disabled children are well supported. Foster carers advocate effectively for the support services that children need and ensure that foster children enjoy the same opportunities, whenever possible, as their peers.

Carers encourage children to pursue individual interests, such as art, football, trampolining and swimming. Children enjoy making positive family memories, such as through cinema trips, holidays, playing games together and walks in the woods with their dogs. One child said, 'I like it very much because we go to lots of places and try lots of new things.'

Carers have aspirations for the children. They strongly encourage the children's education and learning. Carers establish regular, helpful routines for homework and bedtime reading. As a result, children's literacy skills improve and they progress well at school in relation to their starting points. Carers have advocated effectively for the identification of, and support with, children's additional educational needs. Carers and agency staff have, on occasion, gone above and beyond expectations to support children. For example, the agency sourced and funded an educational assessment, and one carer moved house to ensure that their child goes to a school that the carer believes will provide the bespoke educational help and support that the child needs.

Carers support children to maintain optimum health. They ensure that children with complex health needs have the health, speech and language and physiotherapy support that they need. However, most carers do not have a current valid first aid

qualification. Therefore, they may not have the appropriate current knowledge to respond to emergency situations effectively.

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

Foster carers build trusting relationships with the children. As a result, children feel that they can talk to their foster carers about anything, safe in the knowledge that their carers will help them. One child said, 'I feel safe. School is good but I like being at home more.'

Carers value the online safeguarding training, including in contextual safeguarding, that is provided to them. Carers are clear on what actions they should take if a child were to make a disclosure, go missing from home or become a potential victim of exploitation.

Significant events are unusual. There have been no incidents of children going missing, serious safeguarding concerns or complaints. The agency's staff respond appropriately to events when they occur. They work well in partnership with other agencies to ensure an effective team-around-the-child approach. Carers find the agency effective and responsive when they need advice and assistance.

The agency's staff make unannounced visits and health and safety checks each year to ensure that foster carers' homes remain safe.

Staff and foster carers understand children's individual risks and work together to help keep the children safe. However, records do not always demonstrate a consistently well-thought-through approach to reducing particular risks. Children's individual safer care plans sometimes lack detail regarding specific risks, surveillance used or particular supervision arrangements. In one household, doors are locked to prevent a highly vulnerable child from leaving the house alone. However, no emergency evacuation plan for the household is in place.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager has overcome the challenges of setting up a new fostering agency during the Covid-19 pandemic. The careful, well-managed growth of the agency has mostly been achieved through the recruitment of experienced foster carers. The foster carers were attracted to the agency because they trust the people involved. This is due to recommendations from other foster carers or through previous professional relationships.

The agency provides a selection of good-quality online training, which the foster carers value. Foster carers benefit from a useful monthly therapist-led reflective support group. This helps the carers to provide effective trauma-informed therapeutic parenting.

Carers feel well supported by their agency social worker and find the agency support consistently responsive and effective. One foster carer said, 'I have never been this connected as a foster carer in my 20 years. There is real wraparound support.'

The agency's staff work well in partnership with partner professionals to promote the children's well-being. The manager has ensured the smooth transfer of foster carers from other agencies in accordance with best-practice protocols.

The panel processes are effective and ensure that only suitable applicants are recommended to be approved as foster carers. Panel discussions show professional curiosity. The strengths and potential vulnerabilities of prospective foster carers are fully explored before any recommendation for approval is given. Decisions on whether to approve foster carers are made quickly. However, the agency decision-maker is not a senior person, trustee or director of the fostering service. This does not reflect their core decision-making role in the agency.

The manager ensures that each foster carer's annual review of approval is completed within regulatory time frames. A detailed report of the foster carers' ongoing suitability celebrates their strengths and how well they have supported the children in their care. However, there is no evidence in the review reports that agency staff have sought the views of the children or the local authority. Therefore, children's views about their carers are missing and potential opportunities to identify any concerns or celebrate what is important to the children are missed.

Sometimes, the agency records are not accurate or do not reflect the quality of support provided to staff and foster carers. Staff supervision and induction records do not demonstrate the good-quality support and reflective discussions that staff experience. Panel minutes, on occasion, do not demonstrate how questions have been resolved. Sometimes, information is hard to find, which means that the manager does not have reliable information quickly to hand.

While there are some areas for development, the children and foster carers receive good-quality care and support. The staff and foster carers ensure that the child is always kept at the centre of decision-making.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should implement a proportionate approach to risk assessment, ensuring that children's safer care plans include all relevant information. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.5)
- The registered person should ensure that all foster carers receive sufficient training on health and hygiene issues and first aid, with particular emphasis on health promotion and communicable diseases. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 6.7)
- The registered person should ensure that each foster carer's annual review of approval takes into account the views of each child currently placed with the foster carer. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.12)
- The registered person 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', 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: 2614070

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Inspector

Joanna Heller, Social Care Inspector

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