

Liberty Foster Care

Liberty Foster Care Limited

Passfield Business Centre, Lynchborough Road, Passfield, Liphook, Hampshire GU30 7SB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This private company is owned and managed by the responsible individual and the registered manager. At the time of this inspection, the agency provided support and supervision to 25 approved foster care households and 33 children looked after. The provider states in its statement of purpose that the agency provides a positive, safe and nurturing experience of foster care for children in emergency, short-term and long-term placements.

The agency does not provide short breaks or parent and child placements.

The registered manager has been in post since 2009.

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 March 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	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 11 October 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make very good progress in all areas. Those spoken with by the inspector recognise the progress that they have made and are able to identify the way their lives have improved since living with their carers. Children attend school and do well. Some go to university. Children's health needs are being met consistently.

Children enjoy the events that are set up by the agency, which are well attended. However, the voices of children are not being fully included to assist in the development of the agency. Opportunities to include children's views in panel questions and the development of children's guides have been missed.

Foster carers and children gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the agency. They feel supported; they state that it feels like a family and the agency cannot do enough for them.

Children build very strong, trusting relationships with their carers. Most children remain with their carers for many years and are extremely settled. Children receive well planned introductions to new foster families. Very few children experience unplanned endings.

Children's relationships with their birth families are well supported. Foster carers build respectful relationships with parents to help children continue to maintain relationships that are important to them. When time with family does not meet children's needs, the agency challenges the local authority and ensures that the children's views are heard and their needs are prioritised. The agency advocates well for children.

A strength of the agency is how it supports the relationships between brothers and sisters. Siblings remain living together wherever possible when it is in their best interests. When these relationships have been adversely affected by the children's traumatic experiences, the agency provides therapeutic support to help children recover and repair relationships. When siblings are not placed together, the respective foster carers work together to make sure that the children spend quality time with one another.

Matching documents are detailed and consider the needs of children against the skills and knowledge of carers. The impact of a child moving to the home on other children already in the home is also well considered in the assessment. However, despite discussion taking place in a timely way, some written assessments have been completed after the child has been placed. Children's needs are well considered by the agency. This includes their cultural and identity needs. However, this is not always consistently recorded on the child's plans.

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

Most risk assessments are robust and useful documents, with clear guidance and strategies for foster carers on how best to respond to the child's individual behaviours. However, one risk assessment that was viewed had the wrong child's information in it.

Safer care plans are clear and detailed and set out expectations for foster carers and children. The needs of each child are identified and considered as part of their evolving plans.

Restraint is rarely used. When it has been used, the recordings are clear and there is useful follow-up activity by the supervising social worker to ensure that lessons are learned. Children are involved in this process, and their views are used to find better ways to manage their behaviour.

Children are rarely missing from home. One child went missing three times, and these incidents were responded to effectively by the foster carer. They made efforts to locate the child and return them home. The appropriate external safeguarding agencies were informed to promote a coordinated approach to supporting the child.

The agency responds robustly to situations where children are placed at risk of harm. When concerns are raised about the care that a child receives, these are investigated thoroughly. Lessons are learned, and training in good practice is disseminated to the team and carers.

Supervising social workers undertake regular and frequent supervision with carers. Areas of development are discussed with carers and support is provided. For example, one carer was not completing recordings consistently. They were given support, including a laptop. Others were not completing online training. Staff visited the home to support them to log on, and they demonstrated how to complete the training. However, records of supervision are not consistently written up in a timely way.

Unannounced visits to foster carers by supervising social workers have not been consistently taking place every 12 months. Although each visit reviewed by the inspector had taken place within the last year, there have been gaps of up to 18 months between these and the previous visit.

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

The agency has a small team of staff, and there is a family feel. They are well supported by an experienced team manager who is driving improvements in social work practice and the delivery of the service. Systems are in place to monitor and review the quality of the care that children receive. Regular audits are being undertaken to check that carers are up to date with training and health and safety and mandatory safeguarding checks.

Leaders and managers are conscientious and have children's achievements and happiness as their focus. They have acknowledged the shortfalls identified at the last inspection and have worked hard to develop the service.

Staff have access to regular and good-quality reflective supervision. Practice developments are clearly identified and actioned. There is evidence of follow-up activities from previous supervision to ensure that actions are completed. Staff also have annual appraisals to assist with progression and improvements in practice.

Managers ensure that foster carers have access to regular respite support. The well-being of foster carers is carefully considered and supported.

The agency's electronic recording system is not always reliable and, at times, hinders access to children's records. Staff have reported issues with recording, and records have been in draft form despite being logged weeks before.

Managers robustly challenge placing authorities when plans for children do not meet their needs. Information is collated and presented at reviews and meetings to ensure that the experience and voice of the child is clearly heard.

The agency has a small panel that makes clear and safe decisions about the renewal of foster carers' approval. It clearly highlights the strengths of carers' practice and any vulnerabilities. Actions are detailed and are consistently followed up by the agency. These actions are discussed at subsequent panel meetings. There is limited diversity within the panel. There is good oversight by the agency decision-maker.

Recruitment practices are not always thorough. Gaps in employment history are not always routinely and rigorously checked or explained prior to an offer of employment being given.

Feedback from external professionals is very positive. They report that the agency communicates well with them. They consider that the agency goes above and beyond to ensure that children have the best outcomes. It is their view that children build wonderful relationships with their carers and the supervising social workers. This supports their sense of security, helps them develop self-confidence and enables them to do well in all areas of their lives.

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 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 relates specifically to children’s needs being fully considered and matched with the carers prior to them living with foster carer and their needs being recorded appropriately and accurately.</p>	27 May 2023
<p>The fostering service provider must not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or</p> <p>allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>This paragraph applies to any person who is employed, other than by the fostering service provider, in a position in which that person may in the course of their duties have regular contact with children placed by the fostering service.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is of integrity and good character, has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform, is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	27 May 2023

<p>This relates specifically to the registered person ensuring that any gaps in employment history are fully explored and recorded prior to an offer of employment being made.</p>	
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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service has, and implements, a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. This relates specifically to ensuring that children's records are accurate. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.1)
- The registered person should ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. This relates specifically to records being completed in a timely way. Furthermore, having a recording system that enables staff and carers to record accurately and in a timely way. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.2)
- The registered person should ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. This relates specifically to the views of children being sought to inform developments with the fostering panel questions, children's guides and activity events. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 9, paragraph 1.7)
- The registered person should ensure that a suitably qualified social worker, makes at least one unannounced visit a year to each approved foster carer. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 43, paragraph 21.8)

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: SC397846

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Inspector

Penelope Kutz, Social Care Inspector

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