

A1 Foster Care

Unit 15, Evans Business Centre, Lingfield Way, Darlington DL1 4QZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency was first registered on 11 May 2017. The agency was initially registered as an organisation but is now registered as an individual provider.

The agency provides respite, short-term and long-term placements for children with a range of needs. Placements are provided by foster carers recruited by the agency.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing placements for 23 children and had 20 approved fostering households.

The agency's staff team comprises of the registered provider, a registered manager, two full-time supervising social workers and a part-time administrator.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 May 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	inadequate
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 17 June 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Children's progress and overall experiences of living with their foster families are difficult to gauge from case records. Children say they enjoy trusted and secure relationships with their foster carers and feel included in their foster family's lives. One child scored living in their foster family as being nine and a half out of 10. The only thing the child said could improve this score was if they could live there forever. Another child described their foster carers as being 'two of the most important people' in their life. Children themselves can identify what progress they have made since living with their foster family. While this progress is corroborated by their foster carers and placing local authorities, the agency is not able to provide evidence to support this. This is not helpful for children to see how they make progress in line with their set targets.

The agency is not proactive in ensuring that the voices of children and those people important in their lives are heard and used in the development of the service. This means that the agency is not effectively targeting support and services to the specific wishes, feelings and needs of the children that they are providing care for.

Foster carers say they are fully involved in referral and matching processes and never feel pressured into agreeing children's placements with them. However, there are issues with the agency's recording systems. There are no records of the process of considering the presenting risks from children coming into the home. There is also no assessment of the potential impact of a new child on other children already living in the home. Nor is there an assessment of how the carers will meet the presenting needs of all of the children. This means that children are placed without careful matching.

Foster carers spoke positively about their experience of the assessment process and the skills obtained in fostering training. Fostering assessments are undertaken in a timely way and are of good quality. Once approved, foster carers say they are never without support from the agency, which includes personalised support and advice day and night. One foster carer said, 'We are just one big family.'

When children move in with their new fostering family, this is managed sensitively and with care. When appropriate, this can include tea visits and overnight stays. Discussions take place with professionals involved in the children's lives, so information is shared well. Prior to children moving in with foster carers, they are provided with a welcome booklet from them. Children are also given a memory box from the agency for foster carers to place mementos in, which forms part of their life-story work. This approach allows children to settle quickly into their new home.

Effective professional relationships between foster carers and the agency support carers to provide good-quality care. Foster carers views are valued by the agency,

and this positively influences children's progress. Feedback received during the inspection from children's social workers and commissioners was positive.

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

Children's risk assessments are completed and kept up to date when new risks emerge. However, while risks are identified, there are no strategies in place to mitigate their reoccurrence. This means that there is no agreed plan in place for foster carers to follow, which potentially places the child and the foster carer at risk.

When children go missing from their home, which is infrequent, foster carers follow the agency's missing-from-home policies. However, the agency does not keep suitable records of any missing-from-home episodes. There is also no clear system in place for ensuring that return home interviews are offered or arranged for children by the child's local authority. This prevents the agency from effectively tracking and evaluating any patterns and themes or identifying any concerns the child may have in general or with their fostering family.

When complaints and allegations are made against carers, the agency follows safeguarding procedures and takes appropriate action with foster carers if necessary. However, as the agency does not keep specific records for the recording of allegations, it is difficult to track and understand any decision-making processes and rationale for such actions being taken. While no impact of this shortfall has been identified, it means that crucial information may be lost or not considered, thus placing children at potential risk of harm.

Safer recruitment processes are followed when carers are being assessed. However, the same rigour is not in place for the agency's staff. Certificates of qualifications and proof of identity are not on some staff's records. Some gaps in employment have not been followed up and do not have recorded explanations. This does not provide assurances that staff are suitably vetted and qualified to care for vulnerable children.

Unannounced home visits to carers are not always completed in accordance with the regulation. When they are completed, the recording of these visits is often poor. Children are not routinely seen or spoken to, and their bedrooms are not checked. This means that the agency is not regularly providing children with the opportunity to speak to a trusted professional without their foster carers being present.

Staff and foster carers understand safeguarding procedures and follow them when incidents occur. Children say they feel safe within their fostering family and can identify a trusted adult who they can talk to should they have any worries or concerns.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Agency leaders and managers have a clear vision for the service. However, since the last inspection, there has been a decline in the effectiveness of the leadership and management of the agency.

There is no evidence of any management oversight, evaluation or decision-making in the children's case files. The registered manager relies on information provided by the staff rather than undertaking their own evaluation of the quality of the staff's practice and record-keeping. The registered manager does not ensure that staff practice meets the needs of children and their foster carers.

There has been a delay in notifying the regulator of serious incidents on two occasions. A further two incidents have not been appropriately notified. This means that Ofsted is unable to review the information in a timely manner to ensure that the provider has taken appropriate action to keep children safe. This leaves children and foster carers vulnerable to the risk of harm.

The quality of recording is poor. Children's and carers' records are not kept up to date and can contain conflicting information. This is not helpful for children who may wish to access their records as part of their journey and life-story work. For one child, the lack of appropriate recording and management oversight resulted in them remaining longer than needed with their foster carers. This was of particular concern as the standards and quality of care in this placement had been an ongoing issue.

Foster carers and the agency do not have all the required information about the children in their care. This includes placement plans, care plans, personal education plans, looked after health assessments and looked after child review documents. This means that foster carers do not have the most up to date information when providing care for the children.

Foster carers have completed all mandatory training, although this is not always recorded appropriately. Foster carers are clear about the expectations with regards to their training standards. However, despite this, there remains one carer who has not completed their training standards in the required timescale. Therefore, the requirement regarding this shortfall has been reissued.

The statement of purpose and the children's guide are not currently completed as required. The statement of purpose does not identify what support and services are provided to children and birth parents. The children's guide is not currently appropriate for the specified age range, with younger children not being able to read and understand the document. The regulator has also not been sent up-to-date copies of these documents. This means that children, their parents and commissioners do not have the most current information when considering planning for children.

Minutes from the fostering panel do not provide an accurate appraisal of panel business. The quality of assessments and reviews that are considered by the panel is

good. However, this is not reflected in the quality of the minutes. The minutes also do not include a clear rationale for any recommendations made.

The agency decision-maker considers all recommendations from the panel and appropriately records the decisions made. However, it is not clear what documents the agency decision-maker considers in coming to decisions about foster carers' approval. In addition, as the date the minutes were received is not recorded, it is not clear if the decision is being made within the required timescale.

The quality of care review report is not completed at regular intervals as required. The most recent report, which is overdue, was not available to the inspector during the inspection. This is a missed opportunity by the registered manager to identify patterns and themes to inform service development to make improvements.

Feedback from supervising social workers about the support offered to them by the management team is positive. Staff say they receive regular reflective supervision on their cases, which they find beneficial. However, there is no evidence in the records of children or their foster carers that supervision takes place.

Foster carers say they find the quality of their supervision to be good, and they value the opportunity to reflect on their practice. However, there is a lack of consistency in the quality of the supervision records. Some are of good quality. However, others do not demonstrate that the supervising social worker has assured themselves that foster carers are meeting the child's needs, considering the child's wishes and feelings and reviewing their performance.

When shortfalls or concerns are identified, there is no evidence of challenge or escalation by the agency to placing local authorities. This means that practice does not change or improve.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered persons must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered persons must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide, and</p> <p>notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 (a)(b))</p>	23 June 2023
<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 specifically relates to children’s risk assessments.</p>	23 June 2023
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written procedure to be followed if a child is missing from a foster parent’s home without permission. (Regulation 13 (3))</p>	23 June 2023
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child’s care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6 (3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))</p> <p>This specifically relates to all statutory documentation, including the placement plan, care plan, personal education plan, looked after child review document and looked after health assessment.</p>	23 July 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>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,</p> <p>has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>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) (3)(a)(b)(c))</p>	<p>23 June 2023</p>
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2))</p>	<p>23 July 2023</p>
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table.</p> <p>Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36 (1) (2))</p>	<p>23 July 2023</p>

Recommendations

- 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. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 1.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings from the panel chair are accurate, clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.9)
- The registered person should ensure that they only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered, analysed and recorded. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service follows up with the responsible authority and, if necessary, challenges and escalates any gaps in the information provided to them on the child or the child's family, which may hinder the foster carer in providing a safe caring environment that meets the child's needs and enables them to keep the child, other children in the fostering household and the foster carer him/herself safe. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.2)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.3)
- The registered person should ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings should 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. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and

resolved, a record of any action taken and the decisions reached, are held on the person's file. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 22.7)

- The registered person should ensure that a written record is kept on the foster carer's record detailing each supervision held with the supervising social worker, including discussions and decisions made. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.5)
- The registered person should ensure that they 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)
- The registered person should ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are kept up to date, legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third-party information and are signed and dated. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.5)
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child and their progress is recorded clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.6)

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: 1232379

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Registered provider address: Unit 15, Evans Business Centre, Lingfield Way,
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Inspector

Paula Shepherd, Social Care Inspector

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