

Fostering Solutions

Fostering Solutions Limited

Atria, Spa Road, Bolton, Greater Manchester BL1 4AG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Fostering Solutions is one of several independent fostering agencies owned by a large national provider. This agency registered with Ofsted on 3 November 2003. It covers the north west of England from the main office in Bolton, and sub-offices in Barrow-in-Furness, Burnley, Liverpool and St Helens.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 248 approved fostering households providing care for 389 children. There are also 33 children who have chosen to remain living with their foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements. The agency provides short-term, long-term, permanent, respite, parent and child and emergency placements. It also provides specialist foster placements, including for children who are stepping down from residential care.

There is a permanent manager in post. She registered with Ofsted in February 2020.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 August 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 1 October 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children experience child-centred, individualised care and support. Foster carers are extremely dedicated and show exceptional levels of commitment and resilience in caring for children who have experienced trauma and loss. This ensures that children flourish in all areas of their social and emotional development.

Children experience total acceptance with their foster families. One foster carer described the child living with them as 'the heart of our family'. Children recognise the strength of these attachments. One young person, who has remained with his foster carers into adulthood, told the inspector that his experience was so positive because 'they just loved us'.

The agency has several foster carers who care for children long term and who enable brothers and sisters to live together. In addition, 'staying put' and 'shared lives' options are promoted for children when they reach 18. This assurance provides children with the same opportunities as their peers. For example, children have gone on to university, safe in the knowledge that they have a family home to return to for weekends and holidays.

Specialist education workers attached to the fostering agency ensure that staff and foster carers are equipped to support children's learning. This support empowers foster carers to advocate for children and ensure that they receive the assistance and services they require to achieve their potential.

Individual packages of support for children and foster carers, through schemes such as Bridge to Foster and Invictus, enable foster carers to provide stability for children. This includes high-quality individual work with children which allows them the opportunity to explore their emotions and to express their views about their care and plans for the future.

Children thrive because of the high-quality care they experience. They achieve exceptional outcomes from their individual starting points. Foster carers have supported children to achieve national recognition for their achievements in their hobbies and interests. For other children, foster carers' attention to their health needs has seen them make significant progress in their health and well-being.

The voice of the child is significant in the fostering agency. The Youth Council encourages children to develop skills and to have their voices heard. For example, children have received training in interviewing to enable them to participate in staff interviews and panel processes. One child has used their personal looked after experiences to develop materials for use with prospective foster carers in assessment. Another child has devised a recruitment film. These child-centred initiatives ensure that prospective foster carers recognise children's experiences from the very outset of their fostering journey.

Recruitment of foster carers includes a strong system of detailed initial home visits to ensure that only suitable people progress to assessment. Assessments are thorough and ensure that people feel equipped to foster.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of training that is relevant to their role. This includes access to specialist training when new needs emerge. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the fostering service has a continued reliance on online training. Although this provides a wide range of training, this style of learning does not meet some foster carers' individual needs. As a result, they do not find the training to be sufficiently impactful. Managers are aware of this and there was a review of training for foster carers and staff ongoing at the time of the inspection.

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

Children trust their foster carers and can talk to them about worries or concerns. In addition, supervising social workers regularly visit children, building positive relationships that offer professional stability at times when children may experience frequent changes of social worker. This means that supervising social workers know children well and can quickly identify changes that indicate new or emerging risks.

Foster carers, supervising social workers and placing social workers work together to ensure that children are safeguarded. Good communication ensures that supervising social workers are quickly aware of incidents of concern, and joint planning with placing social workers ensures that responses are timely.

Foster carers use their supervision to identify and reflect on risk, and this informs individual risk management plans for children. However, practice in this area is not consistent and there are some inconsistencies in the quality of the advice given to foster carers to reduce risk. Managers have already identified that improvements are needed in this area and training has recently been undertaken by supervising social workers. The impact of this is, as yet, untested.

A small number of children placed with the agency go missing from home. There is an effective multi-agency response in these situations and supervising social workers are proactive in ensuring that children have an independent interview when they return. Staff are also aware of the 'Prevent' duty. This was evident when a supervising social worker identified concerns that were quickly reported. The learning from this experience has been shared across the staff team to inform and develop practice.

When a foster carer is subject to an allegation, responses by agency staff are thorough and balanced. This ensures that children are safeguarded and that foster carers are supported through the investigation process.

The agency follows safer recruitment processes and takes every measure to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency has a permanent registered manager, who has a management qualification at level 5. The registered manager is passionate about the service and has been instrumental in several key developments that have occurred since the last inspection. These have been shared across the wider organisation as examples of good practice.

The fostering agency covers a large geographical area. Each office has an on-site manager. There are clear lines of the accountability to the registered manager. However, evidence of the registered manager's decision-making and monitoring of children's records and events is not always clear. Although the impact of this is reduced by the detailed knowledge that managers have about children and foster carers, this presents a potential risk in the case of a serious incident or investigation.

Staff at all levels of the organisation are extremely child centred and highly committed to achieving excellent outcomes for children. They know their foster carers and children well. They also take pride in children's progress and achievements.

Staff are mostly positive about the supervision and support that they receive. Managers are available and approachable. Clear, good-quality supervision and appraisals ensure that staff have regular opportunities to reflect on their practice, and staff feel supported to develop professionally in the organisation. The registered manager's formal supervision is not provided by a qualified social work professional. This limits the content and quality of her supervision to a strategic rather than a practice focus. Her regular contact with the responsible individual, and the group supervision of managers and peers in the agency, goes some way to addressing this gap.

There have been two complaints to the agency in the past 12 months. These have been well managed with clear outcomes. The manager ensures that learning is shared and that practice is amended when necessary.

Panel members are suitably experienced, and the central list is diverse. The fostering panel chairperson ensures that the views of all panel members are considered when reaching recommendations. The agency decision-maker considers the panel recommendations and supporting documentation to reach a decision about suitability to foster.

Managers have not consistently followed processes when seeking to place a child outside of the usual fostering limit, or when changing a foster carer's approval. Although strong matching of children with foster carers, along with panel oversight of these decisions, offers a level of reassurance about decision-making, managers do not demonstrate a clear understanding of the regulatory requirements.

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, The 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 fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>If, taking into account any recommendation made by the fostering panel, the fostering service provider are no longer satisfied that the foster parent or the foster parent’s household continue to be suitable, or that the terms of the approval are appropriate, they must (subject to paragraph (8))—</p> <p>in any case where the fostering service provider propose only to revise the terms of the foster parent’s approval—</p> <p>provide a statement setting out whether the fostering service provider considers that the foster parent or members of the foster parent’s household (including any children placed there) may have additional support needs as a result of the proposed revision and, if so, how those needs will be met, and’</p> <p>request the foster parent’s agreement in writing to the proposed revision of terms,</p> <p>advise the foster parent that, within 28 days of the date of the qualifying determination, the foster parent may—</p> <p>submit any written representations that the foster parent wishes to make to the fostering service provider, or</p> <p>apply to the Secretary of State for a review by an independent review panel of the qualifying determination. (Regulation 28 (1) (7)(a)(aa)(i)(ii)(b)(i)(ii))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that when an exemption to the usual fostering is granted, there are processes in place to ensure that any changes to the foster carers’ approval are progressed in accordance with this regulation.</p>	<p>29 September 2023</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. In particular, the registered person should ensure that children's individual risk assessments consistently give foster carers clear strategies to manage and reduce risks, and that the registered manager's oversight of case records is clearly evidenced. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that, in setting out how foster carers will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development, they consider how training is delivered which reflects foster carers' individual preferences and learning needs. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the registered manager receives supervision from a suitably qualified and experienced person. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.3)

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: SC033219

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