

Excel Fostering Limited

Unit 4, Calder Court, Shorebury Point, Amy Johnson Way, Blackpool FY4 2RH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is part of a larger national fostering group that is an employee ownership trust. The agency covers the north-west of England from the main office in Blackpool and a sub-office in Burnley.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was supporting 97 approved fostering households who were providing care to 149 children. The agency provides short-term, long-term, short-break, parent and child, therapeutic and emergency placements.

The manager registered with Ofsted in April 2022. She has recently returned from a period of extended leave.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 September 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: 13 May 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are at the centre of this agency. They experience care that is child-centred and individualised. Children are supported to develop positive, trusting relationships with their foster families and agency staff. These relationships underpin the positive progress that the vast majority of children make in all areas of their lives.

Children say that they like living with their foster families. They are helped to enjoy new opportunities and experiences. Children are regularly consulted and their views inform the care they receive. One child said, 'I am part of the family. [Name of carer] helps me a lot.'

There is an emphasis on fostering together that runs throughout the agency. This includes everyone in the fostering household and where possible their extended family. The agency has a strong family feel that is valued by children, carers and agency staff. Foster carers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences and are proud to be part of Excel Fostering Limited. They feel well supported. Feedback from foster carers about agency staff included, 'Amazing', 'They always go above and beyond', 'We can't thank them enough for the difference they make', 'They are always there for us and our family', and, 'We would not be able to do what we do without them.'

Children are welcomed into their foster families. When possible, agency staff support children to learn about their foster family and to meet their carers before moving in. This helps children to develop a sense of belonging and to settle into their foster family.

Leaders and managers have agreed processes with one authority to ensure that children who need to move into foster care in an unplanned way are supported to experience this as positively as possible. Processes to explore reasons for children moving out of their foster home in a way that is not in line with their plans are robust. Any learning identified for agency staff and foster carers is used to further develop practice and to improve experiences for children.

Children living in foster families are regularly seen by agency staff. Children know the fostering social workers and support workers well. They recognise them as adults who they can trust, and they know they are there to help them. Agency staff listen to children and ensure that children's voices are heard. Children's groups and activities are centred around children's wishes and are well attended. Children know how to make a complaint. Any concerns raised are explored.

The agency helps children to live with their brothers and sisters, in line with their plans. When appropriate, children are supported to spend time with their family. This helps them to develop their sense of identity and self.

Some children are helped to stay with their foster families long term, and many continue to benefit from this support throughout their lives. Children are helped to develop their life skills and social networks. This helps them in preparation for adulthood.

Children's education is a priority and is well supported. Carers are proactive in ensuring that children have access to education. When children do not attend education, agency social workers and foster carers work closely with placing authorities to identify suitable alternatives and to offer a range of learning opportunities to supplement children's education.

Children's physical and emotional health needs are well understood by foster carers and agency staff. Children are helped to access routine and specialist services as required.

When concerns arise regarding the standard of care provided by some foster carers, appropriate action is taken to minimise the impact on children. However, records of foster carers' reviews and supervisions do not always reflect appropriate challenge or demonstrate that conversations with foster carers and children have taken place.

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

Foster carers are supported to understand and appropriately respond to children's individual risks and vulnerabilities. They are helped to understand what is going on for children and are able to talk to children about issues that affect them. This helps children to develop their understanding of risks in the home, community and online and helps them to make safer choices and to understand healthy relationships.

Leaders and managers are committed to providing safe and secure foster homes for children. They are proactive in engaging more specialist services to ensure that foster carers and staff have a strong understanding of their roles in keeping children safe.

Foster carers value the agency's out-of-hours support. They know that there is always a social worker available to support them. This service provides foster carers with guidance and support during periods of crisis.

Incidents of children going missing from their foster homes are appropriately responded to. The agency takes steps to minimise future incidents and to implement safety plans for children. There are a low number of incidents of children needing to be held by their carers to keep them safe. When incidents do occur, records are detailed, and reflective discussions take place. Processes for speaking to children following incidents are continuing to be strengthened to ensure that children have the opportunity to share their views in a way that works for them.

The recruitment and approval processes for foster carers are robust. All required checks are undertaken before the application is presented to the agency's fostering

panel. Safer recruitment processes for staff and panel members are also followed to ensure that they are suitable to work with children.

Agency staff take action to ensure that children are only placed with carers who can meet their needs. However, records do not routinely reflect the rationale for decision-making. Leaders and managers have recently taken action to address this.

When appropriate, children and carers benefit from access to the agency's specialist therapeutic service. In agreement with a child's placing authority, the service provides therapy for children and support to foster carers. This service is integrated into the agency and works collaboratively. However, on one occasion, key information about strategies used by a foster carer to manage children's behaviour had not been shared between the agency's therapy and social work teams. This limited the agency's oversight of the appropriateness of strategies used in the foster home.

Allegations and complaints are predominantly well managed. There is clear oversight and scrutiny from leaders and managers, with reflective learning undertaken to identify any practice changes. However, on one occasion, a concern shared by a child's placing authority was not recognised as an allegation and was not considered under the allegations management process. Managers were not aware of this shortfall.

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

Since the last inspection, there have been changes in the leadership and management of the agency. These transitions have been well managed. Staff feel valued by managers and are positive about the support they receive. The workforce is stable, with some staff having worked for the agency for many years. New staff receive a robust induction. Children and foster carers benefit from being supported by a stable and happy workforce.

Changes to the agency's operational model have led to an increase in the number of senior practitioners and team managers supporting the team. Although accessibility to managers has increased, this structure is not fully embedded and there has been a reduction in accountability and oversight. Opportunities to appropriately identify concerns and to share key information with senior managers and other professionals have been missed.

Audits by managers do not routinely explore the quality and adequacy of records. Consequently, managers have failed to identify that foster carer supervisions and review reports do not always contain up-to-date information and do not routinely demonstrate appropriate challenge or professional curiosity. These shortfalls reduce the effectiveness of foster carer review and supervision processes and limit opportunities for learning.

Oversight of behaviour management strategies used by foster carers requires improvement. Records do not enable managers to monitor patterns or to identify any trends to ensure that any strategies used are appropriate, proportionate and effective in helping children to understand and learn from their behaviours.

In consultation with children, the agency has developed expectations around language. This is continuing to be implemented and at times some foster carer and agency records are not written in a way that is helpful to children. Some children's statutory documents are missing or not updated. This impacts on effective care planning for children.

Agency staff generally work collaboratively with other professionals to ensure that children's needs are being met. Commissioners and social work professionals are complimentary about the communication and care provided to children.

The agency's panel and decision-making processes are effective. Minutes of panel meetings clearly reflect discussions that underpin recommendations and decision-making.

Leaders and managers have taken action to address the recommendations made at the last inspection.

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 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>In particular, the registered person must ensure that any concerns about foster carer practice are appropriately escalated and recorded, and that any concerns received by the agency are fully considered.</p>	3 November 2023
<p>The fostering service provider must maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedule 2. (Regulation 22 (1))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that records kept by the agency contain relevant, up-to-date information and are written in a way that is helpful for children.</p>	3 November 2023
<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. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must have oversight and routinely monitor the use of any measures of control, restraint or discipline in respect of any child placed with foster carers. In addition, escalation processes for obtaining missing statutory documents must be consistently followed.</p>	3 November 2023

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers provide an environment and culture that promotes, models and supports positive behaviour and that any methods to manage behaviours are child-centred. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.2)
- The registered person should ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about their carers' ongoing suitability to foster. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.8)

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: SC396525

Registered provider: Excel Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Wootton Chase, Wootton St Lawrence,
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG23 8PE

Responsible individual: Debbie Tomlinson

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Inspectors

Caroline Bertram, Regulatory Inspection Manager
Nicola Clements, Social Care Inspector

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