

Freedom Fostering

Freedom Fostering Limited

27 Waterloo Road, Wolverhampton WV1 4DJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Freedom Fostering is an independent fostering agency registered in 2003. The director of the company is the responsible individual. The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The agency provides emergency, long-term, medium-term, short-term and parent and child placements. The agency currently has 17 fostering families and 31 children placed.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 February 2024

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 **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 8 July 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make significant progress from their starting points because of the care they receive from their foster carers. Children have developed positive and meaningful relationships with their foster carers and they are happy living with their foster families. One child said, 'I am happy in my foster home, because my foster mom loves me so much and I love her more.' These positive relationships help children to feel secure.

Foster carers provide children with very stable and long-term homes, which gives the children a sense of permanence. In some cases, foster carers are caring for brothers and sisters to enable them to continue living together.

Most children move to their foster families in a planned way. The agency provides children with a welcome pack and information about their foster carers before they move in. This supports positive moves and helps children feel welcomed and valued. One child said, 'I felt welcomed by my carer's warm personality after being worried on the journey to my placement.'

Children have a voice in the care and support they receive. The agency actively promotes their engagement via their children's panel. They also seek children's wishes, views and feelings through a range of activities and consultation events. Children know how to make a complaint or raise any concerns they may have. The leaders and managers take all feedback seriously, using it to shape children's engagement with the agency and escalating concerns to placing social workers to positively influence their interaction with children. This helps children to feel respected, valued and heard.

Foster carers demonstrate good skills, with empathy and respect towards children's birth families. They work well with placing social workers and are child-centred in supporting children to keep in positive contact with family, friends and those who are important to them.

Foster carers are provided with a wide range of training opportunities to equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the complex needs of children in their care. One placing social worker talked about the benefit of the training foster carers receive from the agency, such as adultification training, which supported foster carers to meet the needs of her children. However, leaders and the manager do not always ensure that all foster carers complete the agency's mandatory training. For example, 13 foster carers had not completed mandatory health and safety training.

Some foster carers' records do not contain all relevant documents or details about the weekly direct work undertaken with children or the impact of this work. The agency ensured that records were updated and relevant documents were added to files during this inspection.

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

Children said they feel safe living with their foster carers. When there are concerns, foster carers and the agency are proactive in reducing the risk of harm. Children have trusted adults they can speak with when they have concerns to raise. As a result, children feel safe and feel that their foster carers listen to their views.

There have been no allegations of harm raised against the adults who care for children and the agency has clear policies in place to support good practice. All foster carers have completed managing allegations training, so are aware of the correct processes.

Children going missing from care is rare. When children do go missing, they experience well-coordinated responses from their foster carers and the agency. Foster carers understand the missing-from-care policies and implement these protocols well to support children to return home safely.

Children are supported to take age-appropriate risks, in line with their development and understanding. For example, foster carers have supported older children to become independent and travel to and from college alone.

Agency staff support foster carers to understand the risks associated with the internet and children socialising online. Appropriate safeguards are in place to keep children safe online.

Foster carers provide safe and comfortable environments for children. Health and safety checks of foster carers' homes are rigorous. There are established systems in place to ensure these processes are reviewed and remain up to date.

The recruitment and assessment of foster carers focuses on the safe care of children. Foster carer assessments are detailed and evidence based. They are carried out by experienced independent social workers who ensure that all information is considered and challenged. The assessments provide clear analysis and recommendations for panel. In addition, robust quality assurance processes help to ensure that only suitable carers are approved to care for children.

However, there are shortfalls in the recruitment of agency staff. A gap in one staff member's employment history and one previous employment reference had not been followed up by the agency, to ensure that staff are always safely recruited.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is a new registered manager at the agency. She is committed to working with leaders and staff to create the right environment to meet the needs of children and carers. In addition, the staff team is suitably experienced and qualified. Staff are dedicated to achieving the right outcomes for children.

Staff receive regular and effective supervision. Supervisions are of good quality. They provide staff with support and the opportunity to reflect on practice and the experiences of children and foster carers.

Foster carers have provided overwhelmingly positive feedback about the support they and their foster children receive. Foster carers talked about the positive impact weekly direct work had on the emotional well-being of their children. All foster carers spoken to said support was at the end of the phone, whatever time of the day or night they needed it. One foster carer said this made them feel they were with an agency that was committed to achieving the best outcomes for children.

Panel members are suitably skilled and knowledgeable and represent a diverse range of cultures. Panel provides a robust quality assurance function, while being sensitive to applicants. Panel members provide feedback to managers on the quality of reports and the quality of work completed by independent social workers. This enables managers to address any shortfalls.

The agency decision-maker makes clear, timely and reasoned decisions that demonstrate a good level of reflection and a consideration of all elements of the application and approval process.

Overall, the agency's monitoring systems are effective and help leaders and the manager to have an understanding of the agency's strengths and areas for development. However, monitoring systems had failed to identify that an exemption had not been in place for one fostering household for a period of six months. The agency identified and rectified this shortfall days before the start of this inspection. In addition, leaders and the manager do not always take action to rectify shortfalls that have been identified. For example, the need to hold panel members' annual appraisals was highlighted by the agency's monitoring systems. However, leaders and the manager failed to ensure that these annual appraisals were carried out.

Leaders and the registered manager have developed positive relationships with partner agencies and their local university. This joined-up approach contributes to them achieving positive outcomes for children and supporting placements for the next generation of supervising social workers. Children's social workers gave positive feedback about the communication with the agency, the professionalism of staff and the skills of foster carers, all of which they said contributed to the stability and progress of children.

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 limit is required and granted, there are processes in place to ensure that any changes to the foster carers' approval are progressed in accordance with this regulation.</p>	11 April 2024

The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))

11 April 2024

This specifically relates to ensuring that mandatory training meets relevant guidance and that all foster carers complete their mandatory training within set timescales.

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes ensuring Disclosure and Barring Service checks have been carried out. All those responsible for recruitment and selection of staff should be trained in, understand and operate these good practices. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19)
- The registered person should ensure that they have a system in place to monitor record-keeping and take action when required. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.2)
- The registered person should ensure all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. This specifically relates to fostering service panel members. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.6)

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: SC037304

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Responsible individual: Maureen Johnson

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Inspectors

Sharon Bourne, Social Care Inspector
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