

The Homefinding & Fostering Agency

Kent Homefinding and Fostering Ltd

67 College Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6SX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The Homefinding & Fostering Agency is operated by a privately owned limited company. It was registered on 30 October 2003.

A range of placements are provided, with a strong focus on long-term placements for younger children, seeking permanence either through remaining with the same foster carers, moving on to adoption, or being reunited with their birth families.

At the time of this inspection, 46 fostering households were approved by the agency.

Inspection dates: 18 to 21 March 2024

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

How well children and young people are helped and protected requires improvement to be 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: 7 October 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 experience stable, long-term placements. Children benefit from positive relationships with their foster carers and make good progress from their starting points. Children told inspectors that they like where they live, they feel part of the family and that their foster carers help them.

Supervising social workers know the children and foster carers well. They carry out regular home visits and spend time with children. Children enjoy showing supervising social workers their bedrooms and discussing their experiences.

Children's achievement and attendance in education are good. Foster carers support children to engage in education and routinely attend meetings to discuss their progress. The registered manager proactively advocates for children to ensure that they have access to the most appropriate education provision for their specific needs.

Children's health and well-being are promoted because their needs are consistently met by committed foster carers and staff. In one example, a child's health outcomes have significantly improved because their foster carers have encouraged physical activities and hobbies that match their talents and interests. This has had a positive impact on the child's physical health as well as their confidence and self-esteem.

Foster carers provide regular updates to the agency via electronic daily logs. Most of the records are of good quality because they are written in caring language that speaks directly to the child. However, there are some examples that use language that implies blame on the child for their behaviour. This has the potential to have a negative impact on children who seek to read their files in the future.

There are clear procedures for ensuring that placing authorities provide the agency with documents and information. However, not all supervising social workers have ensured that outcomes from children's care planning reviews are recorded. This risks a delay in agreed actions being carried out which may hinder children's progress.

Foster carers receive comprehensive training provided by the agency and they are encouraged to seek further training to support the care of children with specific needs. A competency-based model of development evaluates their knowledge and skills and demonstrates that disabled children are being looked after by knowledgeable and informed foster carers.

Children are supported to see their family and friends, and this enables them to explore and develop a sense of their own identity. Good communication between the supervising social worker, children's families and external professionals helps to ensure that the time children spend with their families is positive.

Children have access to youth engagement within the agency. This provides plentiful opportunities to attend organised events that support children to develop skills that improve their independence and social interaction.

Creative and engaging direct work with children enables them to gain an understanding of their childhood experiences and history. These are well recorded and provide children with an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings.

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

Children's safety and well-being are, on the whole, promoted in their fostering households. Children's positive relationships with their foster carers increase children's sense of security and help them to feel comfortable to share any worries they have about their own welfare.

There has recently been an update to the agency's child protection policy. Despite this, a serious safeguarding incident was not recognised as such. As a result, there was a delay before staff ensured that the foster carers and the placing authority understood the risks to the child. The regulator was not informed and therefore could not monitor the agency's response to the incident.

Some children's risk assessments do not provide foster carers with clear strategies to reduce known risks or describe the practical steps to take if risks arise. As a result, not all risk assessments reliably inform foster carers how to keep children safe.

When incidents occur, children and foster carers receive support from the agency. The youth engagement staff provide individualised direct work, for example about how to stay safe online. This provides children with additional support and guidance to foster carers with the intention of reducing the risk of a similar incident happening again.

Behaviour support plans are comprehensive and clear. However, there are sometimes delays in these being introduced and the plans are not created until times of crisis. This means that there is not always a joined-up approach to meeting children's behavioural needs or timely introduction of risk management strategies that can be closely monitored by the registered manager.

Staff know their roles and responsibilities and are committed to keeping children safe. Nonetheless, inspectors found that they had not completed some actions as directed by the registered manager. Therefore, there were missed opportunities for important learning and reflection. During the inspection, the registered manager took steps to address the shortfalls and began to implement a system that provides improved oversight.

Incidents of children going missing are rare. When they do occur, swift action is taken by staff and foster carers to ensure that children return home safely at the

earliest opportunity. Foster carers make appropriate use of the efficient out-of-hours service to report concerns. The response is timely and foster carers say they are supported well.

When foster carers do not meet the standard of care expected by the agency, they are challenged appropriately, and the concerns are managed effectively. Consultations with the local authority designated officer take place when there are allegations or complaints.

Foster carers receive regular supervision. However, not all records demonstrate that these sessions are used to good effect to improve foster carers' knowledge and understanding about how to meet children's needs.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is led by a committed and knowledgeable registered manager. The responsible individual is involved with the day-to-day running of the fostering agency. Regular leadership meetings demonstrate a collective oversight of the agency functions.

Staff well-being is paramount to the leadership team. Staff are passionate and dedicated to their role. They say that they are well supported by managers. Staff meetings take place regularly and provide opportunity to discuss service developments with the wider team.

New staff receive a thorough induction. Safe recruitment practices are understood and implemented. All necessary checks are in place to reduce the risk of unsuitable people working for the agency.

Staff receive regular supervision but there is limited focus on children's progress. As a result, some actions are not identified or followed up. The leadership team put measures in place to address this during the inspection.

Management monitoring and oversight procedures are not sufficiently robust. Quality assurance of records is not sufficient to ensure consistent compliance with the agency's policies. Consequently, the shortfalls found during the inspection had not been identified by managers.

The registered manager's review of the quality of care provides a good oversight of the functioning of the agency. However, it does not include the views of children or foster carers. It also does not demonstrate the effective joint working with external professionals, including escalation of concerns, seen during the inspection.

The fostering panel and agency decision-maker make timely, good-quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions. These provide detailed direction to the agency to ensure that foster carers maintain expected standards. Learning from a recent review has been successfully introduced.

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.</p> <p>(Regulation 11(a))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that all children’s risk assessments clearly describe children’s current risks and the actions that must be taken to mitigate them.</p>	31 May 2024
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must, subject to paragraph (4), provide in particular for—</p> <p>the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider.</p> <p>(Regulation 12 (1)(b) (3)(b))</p>	30 June 2024

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 meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure that the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, 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 there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors 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 information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('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: SC036653

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Registered provider address: 67 College Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6SX

Responsible individual: Rebecca Daniel

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Inspectors

Jill Sephton-Wright, Social Care Inspector

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