

A1 Foster Care

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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. Foster carers recruited by the agency provide the placements.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing placements for 28 children and had 22 approved fostering households.

The agency's staff team comprises of the registered provider, a registered manager, an assistant fostering service manager, 2 supervising social workers, one full-time finance and panel administrator and one part-time fostering team administrator.

Inspection dates: 16 to 20 March 2026

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: 19 August 2024

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are cared for in loving and stable homes. Most children who live with a fostering family have been in their 'placements' for over 2 years. Arrangements for securing stability for children in short-term placement are actively discussed with children's placing local authorities.

Foster carers are committed to the children they care for. It is rare for foster carers to serve notice to the placing authorities for a child to move from their care. When this happens, the agency works with partner agencies to try to support families through difficult times and reduce the risk of disruptions.

Children enjoy family life with their fostering families. Children are welcomed into the family and enjoy family celebrations and holidays. Children are encouraged to explore their own interests. A child's independent reviewing officer said, 'There is a whole fostering family approach and [the child] is very much included as a family member.' These experiences help children to develop socially in their familiar relationships and with their peers.

Foster carers appreciate the advantages of working with a small, close-knit agency. One foster carer described the agency as 'an extended family'. Foster carers are confident that social workers know them and the children they care for well. This helps them to feel confident in the advice and support they receive, including out of hours.

Children are taken to their health appointments to ensure that their health needs are met. Foster carers ensure that children are registered with local health services. Foster carers also engage with specialist services to ensure that children receive the help they need, including therapeutic services.

Foster carers are proactive in helping children to stay in touch with their families. Foster carers do this by transporting children to spend time with their loved ones and staying with children and their families to support them to have a positive experience. In addition, some carers support children to celebrate their cultural heritage to help them retain a sense of history and identity. For 2 children with diverse needs, their foster carer has been vital in helping them to integrate into the community and helped one child to identify a place of worship.

Children's views are captured for most of their foster carers' reviews, but not all. The agency is increasing its consultation with children. Their views are sought about the agency and the activities they would like to attend. They are also contributing to questions to be asked at the panel.

The agency has reduced the number of foster carers they support in a planned way to focus support for local foster carers. Foster carers and social workers value the agency and the support they receive. Social workers take pride in the relationships

they develop with foster carers, children and stakeholders. Foster carers emphasised the importance of their experience of receiving consistent support from a known social worker.

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

Children are integrated into their foster family, and this helps them to feel safe. Children are supported to develop trusting relationships with foster carers at their own pace. Foster carers understand the needs of the children and how to keep them safer through role modelling and positive experiences that increase children's feelings of safety.

Foster carers value the offer of training that is available to them, which includes training to prepare them to parent in a therapeutic way. Foster carers receive training from their early introductions with the agency. For one couple, they did not receive their preparation for fostering until after they were approved.

The manager responds to allegations and works with safeguarding professionals to ensure that concerns are fully explored. For one foster carer, they struggled to engage with the agency during an investigation. Although no safeguarding concerns were upheld, a decision and process took place to deregister them.

Most children have up-to-date risk management plans. These provide details about any known risks or vulnerabilities for the child. Guidance is provided in plans for foster carers to help them know how the agency expects them to support children. When sanctions are put in place to help manage or respond to a behaviour, the agency works with the child's social worker to ensure that it is appropriate and to form an agreed response.

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

Since the last inspection, there have been improvements in the management oversight of the agency and the storage and quality of records. There is still improvement to be made. Shortfalls have been identified during the inspection regarding management oversight, compliance with national minimum standards and the safe recruitment of panel members.

The manager has systems in place to monitor and review information to enable better oversight of the service. However, these are not always effective. The manager is developing systems, but these are still to be embedded in practice. Therefore, there are elements of inconsistent practice in foster carers' and children's records and decision-making. This includes a lack of quality assurance of fostering assessments and children's records to ensure that they are accurate and up to date.

There have been few assessments completed by the agency since the last inspection. The quality of one assessment lacked information to understand the strengths and vulnerabilities of the family and the support they may need. When a

fostering household changed, an addendum report lacked information about the reasons for the changes or an evaluation of the foster carer and child's support needs. The panel members lacked curiosity about the assessment to ensure that there was a full understanding of the fostering family's needs.

The manager does not ensure that there is panel consideration of foster carers' approval prior to children being placed in their care. Although one exemption was agreed by the manager, the panel lacks scrutiny of foster carers' assessed approval and why their approval status has changed, or if their circumstances have changed to allow them to care for more children.

The agency holds regular panel meetings that are quorate. A new agency decision-maker and panel chair are in place. The recruitment of panel members is insufficiently robust as members' employment history is not provided to the agency to be assured of their suitability for their roles. However, the safe recruitment for social workers is to be embedded in practice.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
The fostering service provider must not— employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so; or 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. For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person— is of integrity and good character; has the qualifications, skills, and experience necessary for the work they are to perform; is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, 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)) Specifically, the fostering service must ensure that panel members', including the panel chair and agency decision-maker, employment history and experience are provided as part of the safer recruitment procedures.	8 May 2026
The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must— make such enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster	8 May 2026

parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable; and seek and take into account the views of any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding), and any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent. At the conclusion of the review, the fostering service provider must prepare a written report, setting out whether— the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable; and the terms of the foster parent's approval continue to be appropriate. (Regulation 28 (1)(3)(a)(b)(ii) (4)(a)(b)) Specifically, the fostering service must ensure that when there is a change in a fostering household composition, there is a review of a foster parent's suitability to foster independently. In addition, the fostering service must ensure that children's views and the views of the placing authority are gained as part of the review.	
The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are— to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent; where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given; to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent; and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate. (Regulation 25 (1)(a)(b)(c)) Specifically, the fostering service must ensure that there are arrangements in place for panel to consider changes to foster carers' terms of approval.	8 May 2026

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker need in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up to date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third-party information. The reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider's fostering teams. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards 13.7')
- The registered person should ensure that support and training are made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. In particular, when specific training is identified for foster carers, this is provided without delay. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards 20.8')
- 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 is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards 25.2')

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

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Inspector

Joanne Wallis, Social Care Inspector

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