

The Ethical Fostering Service Limited

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123 Hallgate, Cottingham HU16 4DA

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency has been registered with Ofsted since July 2018.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including permanent, long-term, short-term, 'staying put' and parent and child arrangements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 15 fostering households providing care for 24 children and young people.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2020.

The agency has use of an office base in Grimsby, which it rents when required. The agency largely operates remotely. This inspection was therefore completed remotely.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 October 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: 18 November 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 live in fostering households that support them to make good progress. The manager reviews a child's needs well when considering if a carer can provide them with the level of care required. This helps to provide children with stable and secure fostering families. Children describe feeling 'safe', 'comfortable' and 'relaxed' living with their foster carers, and that they feel like part of the family. Many of the foster carers and newly recruited social workers have considerable experience of working for other agencies. This has resulted in a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce, which supports children's needs well.

All foster carers are offered two weeks' respite each year. However, some carers choose to relinquish this right, taking the children on holiday with them instead. The agency also assesses foster carers' family members and friends to provide carers with a safe support network. This contributes towards the 'family feel' that the agency strives to achieve, and provides children with a sense of belonging combined with continuity of care. However, not all foster carers have this wider support consistently available to them. These carers feel that they would benefit from having access to respite foster carers, for example when they are unwell.

Children's education needs are well met. All children are in education, employment or training. Foster carers help children to identify their skills and talents to help them to achieve their potential. Foster carers help children to apply to further education establishments, and support children with these transitions. This includes children moving into residential education settings, and carers maintaining contact with them regardless of distance. This provides children with greater life opportunities, as well as a sense of control over their life choices.

Children have their voices heard through contributing to the annual review of their carer. Where possible, the chairperson of the fostering review panel meets with the child to obtain their feedback prior to the review meeting. The agency also facilitates children's champions meetings and involves children in updating the agency's children's guide. This helps children to have a say about the care they receive, input into the agency and the chance to be heard. The remote nature of the agency means that most of its child-focused activities are online. This prevents children from having the opportunity to meet with each other and discuss their shared experiences.

Children are supported by their foster carers to enjoy a range of activities and social events. This helps them to socialise. The children build happy memories of family experiences and important events, such as performing in plays. Foster carers also support children with activities associated with gaining their independence, such as driving lessons and owning a moped.

Foster carers and the agency's social workers value the importance of children's relationships with their families. Children receive support to travel long distances to

spend time with their families and those important to them.

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

Agency staff and foster carers know and understand the risks to each child. These risks and vulnerabilities are generally well recorded in the children's risk assessments. When foster carers identify emerging concerns, these are shared with the agency staff so that risk assessments can be re-evaluated. When a child is at risk of exploitation, the agency shares the information with the necessary professionals and identifies specialist support for the carers and the child. This helps to improve children's safety. However, risk assessments do not always include strategies for foster carers to use to reduce the potential risk of harm, such as when a child goes missing from home.

Children know how to make a complaint. Children are usually well listened to when they make a complaint or an allegation. Steps are taken to support the child and they receive information about the outcome of their complaint.

Foster carers receive training in attachment and trauma. This training enables foster carers to provide therapeutic approaches to support children when they are upset, and strategies to keep children and others safe from harm.

Foster carers speak highly about the level of support they receive from the agency's supervising social workers. This includes access to support outside of the agency's core working hours. Foster carers do not feel the remote aspect of the agency impacts on the support they receive. Supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits to foster carers on an annual basis. They also have visits at least every three months. However, those more experienced foster carers feel those carers who are new to fostering would benefit from a buddy system, and the opportunity to meet other foster carers.

Not all foster carers and agency social workers document well their decision-making, discussions and details about the child's journey. Records are inconsistent in their detail, in their use of caring language and in capturing significant events. This prevents the manager from being assured that foster carers and agency social workers are consistently making safe and effective decisions. It also prevents children from having a clear picture of their time living with their foster carer. However, foster carers and their supervising social worker are in regular contact to discuss the children in their care. This helps the supervising social workers to complete monthly reports which help to evaluate children's progress and safety.

The process for the assessment of prospective foster carers is thorough. The assessments are of a good quality. They are analysed and evaluated by the quality assurance process that is undertaken by the fostering panel. This helps to ensure that foster carers are appropriately assessed and that only those who are suitable become foster carers.

The fostering panel is thorough in its discussions, which are well documented. The

agency decision-maker has suitable knowledge and experience for the role. The panel process helps with the safe recruitment of applicants to foster and ensures that the majority of approved foster carers provide the right level of care to the children.

There is a safer recruitment process in place. This provides the manager with the assurance that those employed by the agency have the necessary knowledge and skills to help keep children safe.

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

The registered manager provides a supportive environment for the staff and the foster families. The manager cares about the children and is often involved in supporting them and their foster families. On occasion, she has acted in the role of supervising social worker. There is a dedicated team of social workers who show a strong commitment to the children and foster carers.

Team meetings and practice meetings are well attended by the staff and manager. Detailed discussions take place about each fostering household. This allows the staff to have a good understanding about each child cared for by the agency. This also helps to provide foster carers with consistent advice when carers need out-of-hours support.

Foster carers and staff receive regular supervision sessions. The children are at the centre of these discussions. However, records of these sessions do not consistently reflect practice discussions held or a full account of the supervision session. This prevents the manager from holding the supervisor and the supervisee accountable.

Training is available to all foster carers and social workers. However, there is confusion and lack of clarity in the agency about which training courses are mandatory, the time frames for completing both mandatory and refresher training, and the consequences for those who fail to complete the necessary training in line with the agency's expectations. This has resulted in several foster carers' safeguarding training becoming significantly overdue. This prevents the manager from receiving assurances that all foster carers have the most up-to-date skills and knowledge required to care for these vulnerable children.

Monitoring and auditing processes are available to assist the manager in ensuring that the agency's policies and procedures are followed. However, these systems are not regularly used and are therefore not always effective. For example, the escalation policy is not used when requests have been made of a child's placing authority. This has prevented the agency from having access to essential information that may help foster carers to keep a child safe and well, and help them to plan for their future. It has also resulted in significant delays for children having access to important documents such as their pathway plans, passports and birth certificates.

The manager does not have a monitoring system to track whether children get

spoken to independently after they return home from going missing. The manager is therefore unable to escalate requests when these interviews have not taken place. These shortfalls in recording and monitoring prevent the appropriate mechanisms to help improve the safety of children.

The manager does not document investigations when allegations and complaints take place. This prevents senior leaders from knowing if the agency's procedures are being followed. It also prevents a 'lessons learned' culture from developing, to reduce the likelihood of similar events reoccurring.

The manager does not have an effective system to ensure that the agency's social workers complete and upload important documents to the agency's electronic recording system in a timely manner. This prevents foster carers from accessing essential information in line with the agency's expectations.

The manager also does not have an effective procedure to ensure that Ofsted gets sent notifications in a timely manner. This includes the regulator not always being updated following a child protection concern. These shortfalls prevent the regulator and safeguarding professionals from being assured that the agency is taking the required steps to safeguard children.

The manager does not ensure that the most recent version of the children's guide and statement of purpose are provided to Ofsted. This prevents the regulator from being assured that the agency is practising in line with its statement of purpose.

There is no documented management oversight from senior leaders when the manager has completed tasks associated with the role of supervising social worker. This prevents independent scrutiny of practice.

Prior to this inspection, the manager recognised there is the need for additional management support. The manager has successfully interviewed for the post of case manager. The manager intends to focus more on compliance and governance once the staff member recruited is in post.

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 registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b)) In particular, the registered person must ensure that they meet the shortfalls identified that relate to national minimum standards 5, 25 and 26.	1 January 2024
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing. (Regulation 36 (1) (2)). In particular, the registered person must have due regard to NMS 29.	1 November 2023
The fostering service provider must— keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide,	1 November 2023

notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days, and if the children's guide is revised, supply a copy to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 4 (a)(b)(c))	
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Recommendations

- The fostering service provider should ensure that foster carers contribute to the development of each child's care plan, in collaboration with the child, including the pathway plan for an "eligible" child, and work collaboratively with the young person's social worker or personal adviser in implementing the plan. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 12.2)
- The fostering service provider should ensure that a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record should be signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.5) In particular, the registered person should ensure that records of supervision sessions accurately reflect the discussions held.

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: 1274892

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Inspectors

Julia Hagan, Social Care Inspector
Cat Makel, Social Care Inspector

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