

County Fostering Service Limited

Flexspace, Unit 28, 4 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton,
Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency registered on 8 March 2019. It provides a wide range of placements, including emergency, short term, long term and parent and child.

At the time of this visit, the agency had seven fostering households and 11 children placed with foster carers.

The manager has been registered since 2019.

Visit dates: 1 to 2 December 2020

Previous inspection date: 10 February 2020

Previous inspection judgement: Requires improvement to be good

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Children have formed very positive and close attachments with their foster carers. A social worker for one child stated, 'He is the happiest he has been since my involvement. It is clear that, for the first time, he feels part of a family where he is loved.' Other children made the following comments:

- 'Having loving carers who want to take me on holiday with them. I am treated like part of the family.'
- 'They support me if I am going through anything and the fact that I am accepted into the family.'
- 'Kind foster carers'.
- 'I want to stay here forever. I don't want to leave when I am 18, this is my home.'

Children get to keep in touch with family, friends and others who are important to them. Foster carers supervise and support transport arrangements for visits, as appropriate. Foster carers have been sensitive to the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic. They have ensured that children keep in touch with those who are important to them through video calls and telephone calls. This enables children to maintain important relationships and increases their sense of belonging and value.

Children feel able to speak with their foster carers about any worries they may have. Children report having positive relationships with the managers in the agency. They know and trust them and feel that they could also speak with them about any worries they may have.

Children's complex needs are well understood by foster carers, agency staff and managers in the agency. Specialist help is made available to meet needs promptly. Foster carers receive training to help them support children's physical and mental health needs. Placing social workers feel confident that children's physical and emotional needs are well met.

All children placed with this agency have education or training in place. Foster carers and agency staff/managers act as strong advocates for children. They ensure that their learning needs and styles are fully considered and met. There is good monitoring of the educational progress being made by each child by the agency.

The safety of children

Children feel protected from harm and safe. Risk assessments reflect current and changing needs and/or risks for each child. Foster carers show a real understanding and competence in supporting children to reduce any concerning or risky behaviours they may exhibit.

There has only been one missing-from-care incident. The foster carers responded to this effectively and the child was found and safely returned to the placement in under an hour. Managers have a new system for monitoring and recording any missing-from-care incidents. This will include ensuring that return home interviews are completed by the placing authority. This reflects the commitment of foster carers and agency staff to ensuring the safety of children.

Foster carers demonstrate a real ability to manage children's challenging behaviours sensitively. They work with involved agencies to ensure that consistent strategies are in place. Placing social workers have confidence in foster carers' ability to support children. One stated, 'They have appropriate boundaries but also help the child to develop independence skills.'

Foster carers have a good understanding and awareness of the impact of abuse and neglect on the children in their care. They work with involved agencies to better understand how to support children who have experienced trauma. This includes close working and collaboration with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and placing social workers. Foster carers receive a wide range of training opportunities on abuse, attachment and mental health of children. This provides for competent and skilled carers who are able to identify and meet children's complex emotional needs.

Leaders and managers

It is evident that managers and staff place the well-being of children at the centre of their practice. Children know the managers and staff well. They refer to them fondly and have clearly formed positive relationships with them. One child said, 'The managers and directors have done activities with us during lockdown. We were set challenges to do at home, with rewards.'

Agency managers and staff have responded sensitively and competently to the challenges posed during the COVID-19 outbreak. They have completed and updated specific risk assessments for each child and foster carer. They have maintained weekly calls to foster carers and children, when home visits were not possible/safe to undertake. They have ensured that training opportunities for foster carers and agency staff have still been available online and held video calls and meetings. Foster carers state that there has been no decrease in the high level of support they receive, due to the current pandemic.

Managers have devised and implemented a wide range of new tracking and monitoring systems since the last inspection. There is more robust and detailed management oversight evident of plans and documentation relating to children and foster carers. Managers have ensured that looked after reviews and health assessments have taken place (via video calls) and that records reflect this.

Internal management monitoring of all aspects of the care and support provided to children and carers has improved significantly. The supervising social worker has completed outcome/progress trackers for each child placed. Managers now have a wide range of tracking tools in place. These enable them to monitor and consider such areas as missing-from-care incidents, education, accidents, significant incidents and events. Managers have recently set up a system to contact education providers bimonthly for each child. This provides them with opportunities to obtain progress reports and discuss any issues or concerns.

The agency has formed positive relationships with external agencies and professionals. Feedback from placing social workers is consistently positive. They feel that the agency and its foster carers work positively with them. Communication is reported to be good, with information being shared appropriately. Managers intend to further strengthen their working relationship with the police, to consider protocols and practice for when children go missing from care. This is positive and reflects the strong learning ethos of this agency.

There have been no reported complaints or concerns from children, foster carers or others since the agency registered. Managers have clear systems and policies in place to record and respond to any that may be received. Children and foster carers feel confident in discussing any worries or concerns they may have.

Agency staff and foster carers have undertaken a wide range of training and development opportunities. Foster carers report satisfaction in the training they receive. They feel that it reflects their needs and can ask for specific/bespoke training when needed. Foster carers receive monthly supervision from the agency social worker. Annual reviews to consider their approval have taken place. These are well recorded and reflect a detailed consideration of carers' ability to meet children's needs, as well as considering their own training and development needs.

The fostering panel consists of members who have a range of skills and experience. The panel chairperson is an experienced and skilled social work practitioner who has many years relevant experience. The agency decision-maker fully considers all documentation and records her decisions on approval applications in great detail. The panel has adapted well to the current COVID-19 restrictions. They have held virtual panel meetings to consider new applications for approval. Improvements have been made to the recording of panel meetings/minutes, with managers continuing to work on ensuring that minutes accurately reflect the discussions held and recommendations of each panel member.

Managers have fully considered and responded to the requirements and recommendations which were made at the last inspection. No shortfalls were

identified during this visit. Managers have demonstrated a real commitment to learning from the previous inspection, improving outcomes for children placed and in supporting their foster carers. One foster carer stated about the managers, 'They are child focused and supportive. They strive for excellence and support us to do the same.'

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 2484185

Registered provider: County Fostering Services Limited

Registered provider address: Flexspace, Unit 28, 4 Summerhouse Road,
Northampton, Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ

Responsible individual: Marie Archer

Registered manager: Shirley Bowron

Inspector

Tracy Murty, Social Care Inspector

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