

County Fostering Service Ltd

County Fostering Services Ltd
Flexspace, Unit 28, 4 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton,
Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency was 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 inspection, the agency had five fostering households, and 10 children were placed with its foster carers.

Inspection dates: 10 to 13 February 2020

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

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: First inspection

Overall judgement at last inspection: Not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The agency has been operating for just under a year and there are a number of strengths. However, the service is not yet good because the shortfalls identified mean that children's well-being cannot be fully assured.

The assessment of some foster carers has not been as robust as it should be. When foster carers have transferred from another fostering agency, transfer protocols have not been fully adhered to. References from previous fostering agencies have not been incorporated into the assessment as they have been received after foster carers have been approved, and information from previous assessments has not been adequately verified. References have not been sought when applicants have worked with children in the past, and the agency decision-maker has been involved in signing off two assessment reports, which is a conflict of interest.

There has been one occasion when a placement was made outside of the foster carer's terms of approval, which means that their ability to meet a child's needs has not been confirmed. In addition, when a foster carer had more than three fostered children, not all of whom were related, the exemption was not given by the local authority but by the agency's own decision-maker, based on very little information. This is not the correct procedure. In addition, there is no evidence that the children's social workers gave their permission for other children to be placed alongside.

Despite these shortfalls, the agency is child focused and places children at the centre of its practice. There are regular children's forums to elicit their views, there are social activities that are really valued such as a pantomime visit, and the agency has adopted some animals that provide a point for discussion in the newsletters. Children were also involved in making boxes for the homeless at Christmas. This increased their awareness of social issues, as well as being a fun activity. Children's achievements are recognised through certificates, vouchers and mentions in the newsletter.

Children are happy and settled in their foster homes. They are part of the family and they enjoy family activities. One child said: 'I am looked after by caring and loving parents who want to make sure I have a good life.' Another child commented about being with his foster family, saying: 'I love it. I love being in a family and involved with everything.' Children's leisure interests are encouraged, their health needs are well met, and they are supported well with their education. Foster carers are also supportive of the arrangements for children to spend time with people who are important to them.

Children are making good progress. For example, their communication skills improve, they become more sociable and confident, and they develop their life skills. A children's social worker said: 'The children's needs are being met to an excellent standard and they have settled well.'

Foster carers feel welcomed when they first contact the agency, and their preparation training effectively prepares them for the task of becoming a foster

carer. Foster carers feel valued and respected for the job that they do. Their support needs are well met, and communication is good. There is a monthly support group that incorporates training, there is a group for men who foster, and foster carers have access to a 24-hour helpline. One foster carer said: 'They are always there for you.' Another commented that: 'I have got everything I could ask for.' Foster carers appreciate the personal fostering experience that the responsible individual brings to the role.

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

There are shortfalls in the way that children are helped and protected. Consequently, this area is not yet good. Allegations against foster carers have not been notified to Ofsted as required, thereby limiting the ability of the regulator to monitor how these are addressed and ensure that the correct action has been taken to safeguard children. The records do not provide a detailed timeline of the actions taken by each agency. Therefore, it is difficult to understand how decisions have been made and why referral back to the fostering panel has not been considered.

Recruitment records for staff and members of the central list do not clearly demonstrate that the best practice for safer recruitment has been complied with. For example, it is not always evident that telephone verification has been undertaken, that gaps in employment have been explored, or that two references, including one from the most recent employer, have been sought. When people have worked with children or vulnerable adults in the past, the reason for leaving this employment has not been verified. These shortfalls mean that the suitability of people working with children or having access to information cannot be fully assured.

The agency has been carrying out unannounced visits to foster carers. However, these visits have not been undertaken by a social worker and, therefore, the effectiveness is limited.

Foster carers have clear written guidance about all aspects of safeguarding and they have had recent, relevant training. They have a good understanding of their responsibilities to keep children safe from harm, including the risks associated with accessing social media or going missing from home. Each child has a risk assessment, and each fostering family has a safer care plan. The safer care plans are detailed and provide clear information about how the foster carer and the rules of the household minimise the risk of harm.

When risks are identified, the foster carer and the agency work in partnership with other agencies to ensure that the child is provided with the support required. For example, the agency shared a radicalisation risk assessment to assist a child's social worker in accessing specialist advice.

Foster carers are provided with training and guidance to help them manage children's behaviour. Children gradually become more settled as a result of clear boundaries and effective care and support.

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

Shortfalls in staffing arrangements, monitoring and oversight mean that the effectiveness of leaders and managers is not yet good.

Lack of staff has resulted in the registered manager undertaking supervising social worker and administrative roles. The responsible individual has also been actively involved in all aspects of the agency, some of which are social work and management roles. This has contributed to ineffective monitoring and oversight. Although the manager and responsible individual were aware of some of the areas for development, they were not aware of all of them. The responsible individual has responded very positively to the inspection and has already started to address some of the areas of weakness.

The registered manager has not received regular, professional supervision and has, therefore, not had the opportunity to reflect on her practice and professional development. Independent social workers who have been employed to undertake foster carer assessments have not received professional supervision, and opportunities to improve their practice have been limited.

Case recording is weak. Electronic records sometimes contain information about other foster carers or children, there are inaccuracies with dates on some documents, and not all files contain vital information such as delegated authority. Not all the required records are available, for example the children's register and a record of accidents. The statement of purpose and children's guide have not been submitted to Ofsted, and the statement of purpose is not on the website. Some of these shortfalls make monitoring difficult and, therefore, ineffective.

The fostering panel has convened on three occasions so far. The central list includes people with a range of relevant personal and professional experience of fostering, including a former care leaver. The panel minutes do not currently give an accurate account of the meeting as it is unclear who the members are, and in what capacity they sit. The minutes do not state the reasons for the recommendation, making it more difficult for the agency decision-maker to understand the rationale.

The agency has established good relationships with partner agencies, particularly children's social workers. There is good communication with other professionals, including effective challenge. One child's social worker said: '[name of agency] is always up to date with information sharing and staff always attend child looked after reviews and other meetings, such as personal education plan meetings, to provide information about the young person's progress and support the foster carers.' Another social worker commented: '[name of agency] is extremely good at communication with me and staff regularly attend the meetings for the child as support for the carers.'

The manager has linked with another independent fostering agency that has foster carers locally. This partnership has assisted the other agency in providing face-to-face training for its carers, but it also benefits this agency by increasing the range of training and offering the opportunity to meet other foster carers.

Foster carers are supervised regularly and thoroughly and have access to a good range of training. This enables them to support children more effectively and contribute to their progress and positive experiences. Foster carers have benefited from recent training in recording and their monthly logs are child focused. This will provide children with a positive record of their life in foster care should they choose to access their files in the future.

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, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
(1) The fostering service provider may carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and whom they consider may be suitable to become a foster parent ("X"), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (2) The fostering service provider— (a) must obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family, and any other information they consider relevant, (b) must interview at least two persons nominated by X to provide personal references for X, and prepare written reports of the interviews, (c) except where the fostering service provider is a local authority and X lives in the area of that authority, must consult with, and take into account the views of, the local authority in whose area X lives, (d) may, where X was approved as a foster parent by another fostering service provider and that approval has been terminated, and where X consents to the inspection, request inspection of the relevant records compiled by that other fostering service provider in relation to X under regulations 30 and 31. (Regulation 26(1)(2) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020
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. (2) Any notification made in accordance with this regulation which is given orally must be confirmed in writing.	29/05/2020

(Regulation 36 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to— (a) the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it, and (b) the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 19(a)(b) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— (a) receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal, and (b) are enabled from time to time to obtain further qualifications appropriate to the work they perform. (Regulation 21(4)(a)(b) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020
The registered person must maintain a system for— (a) monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and (b) improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 1(a)(b) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020
The fostering service provider must maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedule 2. (Regulation 22(1) The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020
The fostering service provider must— (a) keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide, (b) notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	29/05/2020

Recommendations

- Schedule 7 to the Children Act 1989 (the 1989 Act) limits the number of children who may be fostered by a foster carer. The "usual fostering limit" is set at three. This means that no one may foster more than three children unless: the foster children are all siblings in relation to each other, or the local authority within whose area the foster carer lives exempts the foster carer from the usual fostering limit in relation to specific placements (in which case they must set out the terms as detailed below), and the foster carer's terms of approval allow it (any terms of approval must be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for even if an exemption to the usual fostering limit has been granted, unless the placement is in an emergency and for less than six days). (Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services page 16)
- Other than in an emergency, a child must only be placed with foster carers whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services page 14, paragraph 3.3)
- 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. (National minimum standard 19.2)
- Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. (National minimum standard 21.8)
- The fostering service has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. (National minimum standard 26.1)
- The panel chair ensures that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (National minimum standard 14.7)

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: 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

Telephone number: 01604 438581

Email address: countyfostering@gmail.com

Inspector

Ros Chapman, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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