

First for Fostering Ltd

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181 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, DL3 8DE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

First for Fostering is an independent fostering agency, which registered in May 2021.

The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children. The agency provides long-term and short-term care, parent and baby placements, emergency placements, and respite placements for children with a range of needs. Placements are provided by recruited foster carers. The agency currently has 8 fostering households who provide care for 12 children.

This is a small agency comprising of 3 directors, the responsible individual, 2 supervising social workers and a registered manager. The registered manager resigned from their role and left the agency on 30 January 2026. Another manager has been recruited but they have not yet commenced in post.

The registered managers post is vacant currently.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 March 2026

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 21 November 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Stability for children is promoted by developing warm, trusting relationships with their foster carers. Children describe feeling happy, safe and settled in their homes. They are welcomed as part of the family, and foster carers listen to them and respond to their needs. This consistent care enables children to make positive progress.

Children's needs are considered alongside foster carers' strengths and vulnerabilities, including when children have more complex health requirements. There have been recent improvements in assessing placement suitability. Supervising social workers now contribute to decision-making from the point of referral, using their knowledge at the earliest opportunity. This has led to a reduction in unplanned endings. However, in one case, matching records did not clearly demonstrate consideration of a child's diagnosed conditions. Although the child's placement with their foster carers has been successful, this gap in recording had the potential to affect planning for the child.

When children move in with their foster carers, this is thoughtfully planned wherever possible. Plans are adapted to each child's individual needs, with extended introductions used when required to help children feel secure. When a child's placement is ended unexpectedly, foster carers and agency staff make efforts to provide children with a sensitive ending, such as a final visit or letter, helping them move on positively.

Foster carers are committed to the children's education and learning. They are proactive in seeking additional support and show determination when children have been out of education, ensuring that children still have access to learning opportunities. Foster carers advocate effectively with schools and professionals to secure appropriate provisions. As a result, children are achieving well, including sitting GCSE exams and progressing to college.

Children's views are actively sought and valued. Foster carers and agency staff help children express their wishes and feelings to other professionals. One child described being well supported to share their views, which contributed to changes in their long-term plan. This reinforces to children that their voice matters.

The agency provides opportunities for children to come together for group activities, particularly during school holidays. Attendance varies due to the small size of the agency, but staff continue to plan activities based on children's interests. Supervising social workers take an active role in facilitating these events.

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

Foster carers create safe, nurturing homes where children feel secure and understood. They use their knowledge of children's individual needs and promote

positive behaviour. Foster carers are well trained in de-escalation techniques and, as a result, physical intervention is not used. When foster carers experience difficulties, they receive extra support through additional training, regular telephone contact and increased visits from supervising social workers. This ensures that both children and foster carers are well supported during periods of challenge.

The agency responds to complaints appropriately. Concerns are investigated in line with policy, and the views of foster carers and other professionals are considered. Where issues are identified, clear support plans are put in place to address them. This helps foster carers to continue making decisions that promote children's safety and well-being.

Leader's oversight of safeguarding matters is effective. Concerns about children's safety are shared promptly with safeguarding partners, and the agency contributes to multi-agency meetings appropriately. This ensures that children receive the help and protection they need. However, some incident records lack sufficient detail, which makes it difficult to understand the full range of actions taken. Discussions with safeguarding professionals confirmed that this is a recording issue rather than a practice concern, and that safeguarding procedures are being followed.

The agency manages allegations and concerns about standards of care in line with statutory guidance. Since the last inspection, one fostering household has been deregistered. The investigation was thorough and subject to scrutiny by the fostering panel and the agency decision-maker. Although a difficult decision, it was made with children's safety and best interests at the centre. Leaders have identified learning from this case and are using it to improve practice.

Supervising social workers complete 2 unannounced visits to households each year as required by the agency. Children are also seen regularly, and supervising social workers take time to speak with them alone. This provides children with opportunities to express their views independently.

The assessment process for prospective foster carers is robust. The recently introduced duty system ensures that enquiries are responded to promptly and that only suitable applicants progress to an initial visit. Assessments are of good quality and are overseen by experienced leaders who ensure that actions are completed within agreed timescales. The fostering panel provides rigorous scrutiny, and its discussions are well recorded. The panel chair and agency decision-maker bring significant expertise to their roles. This contributes to the safe recruitment of foster carers who can meet the needs of the children they care for.

There have been several missing-from-care episodes since the last inspection. The reasons why children go missing are well understood. Foster carers act quickly to find children and work effectively with safeguarding partners to reduce risks. Return home interviews are completed. However, the missing-from-care policy does not clearly outline expectations of foster carers when they locate a missing child meaning guidance is open to interpretation.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The leadership and management of the agency is effective. Although the registered manager post is currently vacant, the responsible individual provides consistent oversight. She is suitably qualified and experienced, and her practice is child-centred. She knows the service well and confidently explains the improvements made since the last inspection. Staff speak positively about her leadership, describing the responsible individual as supportive, approachable and committed to high standards.

The responsible individual is reflective and motivated to continue developing the service. She actively seeks opportunities to improve practice and promotes a culture of learning across the agency. This approach has informed practice sessions for supervising social workers and enhanced the support offered to foster carers.

Management oversight is generally thorough. The responsible individual uses established systems and an audit tool to identify shortfalls and take timely action. She has identified issues such as delays in receiving documents from local authorities or missing dates and signatures. When this happens, she follows these up promptly and escalates concerns when necessary. This usually results in the issues being resolved and ensures children's records are kept up to date.

Staff feel well supported in their roles and enjoy working for the agency. They describe a positive learning environment where leaders value their ideas and encourage continuous improvement. Staff appreciate working in a small agency, which enables them to build strong relationships with foster carers and children and provide a high level of support. They have access to a wide range of training, and supervising social workers complete some of the same courses as foster carers. This improves their understanding of foster carers' roles and enhances the quality of support they provide.

Supervision sessions for staff are regular and effective. Staff describe it as a reflective space where they can consider their wellbeing and discuss matters relating to fostering households and children. Supervision records are of good quality and clearly capture discussion, reflection and agreed actions, ensuring that issues are followed up appropriately.

Foster carers feel valued and well supported. They describe a strong sense of belonging in the small team and are confident seeking help from any member of the agency staff. Their views are listened to, and they feel they contribute to the development of the agency. Peer support is encouraged through a messaging platform and support meetings, enabling experienced foster carers to guide newer foster carers. Regular training and supervision help foster carers develop their skills and maintain their wellbeing. However, supervision records do not always reflect the depth of discussion or advice provided, limiting foster carers' ability to revisit guidance at a later date.

Foster carers routinely submit daily or weekly notes for children. However, the quality of these records is variable. Not all entries are detailed enough to support

children to understand their experiences and progress. These shortfalls limit the usefulness of these records in helping children make sense of their journey through care and the support they have received.

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, 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 prepare and implement a policy, which is agreed with the local police, setting out— the measures to be followed to prevent children placed with foster parents from going missing from their placement, and the procedure to be followed when a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 13 (3)(a)(b))	4 May 2026

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that they regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure that there is compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns, patterns and trends about specific incidents. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that information about a 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. ('Fostering Services: national minimum standards', 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, 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)

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: 2618526

Registered provider: First for Fostering Ltd

Registered provider address: 181 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington, Co Durham DL3 8DE

Responsible individual: Rachel Coates

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspector

Miriam Dolman, Social Care Inspector

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