

The Fostering Team

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St Luke's Chapel, 57a Buxton Road, Stockport SK2 6NB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency was previously operational as part of a privately owned company. It re-registered in May 2023 in its own legal entity. The agency provides a range of placements for children. It is responsible for the assessment, approval, training, supervision and support of foster carers.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was supporting 47 households providing care to 73 children.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 January 2024

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are making good progress from their starting points. Children receive child-centred and good-quality care from their foster carers. This enables children to develop positive, trusting relationships with their foster carers. One professional said, 'The children have been provided with good and consistent care and are thriving.'

Consideration is given to ensure that children are well matched in relation to their individual needs with the skill set of their foster carers. This results in placement stability for children and provides them with security and permanence.

Children's education is well supported, and carers are proactive in ensuring that children have access to and attend education. There are numerous examples of positive education outcomes for children. For example, one child is at university studying law. This support provides children with lifelong opportunities.

Access to the specialist therapeutic service is used to support and help foster families to understand and respond to children's behaviours using trauma-informed practice. Foster families were complimentary about this service. This supports and improves children's emotional well-being and placement stability.

Children maintain contact with family members and family time is supported in line with children's care plans. Keeping siblings together is a strength of the agency, and helps children to develop their sense of identity. One birth family member said, 'We couldn't have wished for better foster carers for our grandchildren and the agency has kept them all living together.'

Children's views are captured in feedback for foster carers' annual reviews. However, children's views, wishes and feelings are not consistently evident within the agency records. This means that it is difficult to ascertain whether children's views, wishes and feelings have been acted on to improve the quality of care that they receive.

Children are provided with new opportunities and holidays and take part in community-based activities that they enjoy. This supports children's confidence, self-esteem and social skills.

The agency promotes equality and diversity well. The agency ensures that foster carers have a good understanding of children's cultural identity and needs. When English is not a child's first language, the agency translates children's guides and other key documents. This supports children's heritage and identity.

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

Children live with foster families that understand their individual needs. Clear and consistent boundaries in foster carers' homes contribute to children receiving predictable and safe care.

Foster carers spoke affectionately about the children they care for. Observations of children with their foster carers were warm, nurturing and genuine. This supports children to build trust with their foster carers so that they can share any worries or concerns.

Incidents of children going missing from foster carers' homes are low. When children do go missing, foster carers and staff respond in an appropriate and well-coordinated way. The agency completes its own welfare checks when they have not been completed independently through the placing authority.

There have been no physical interventions within the foster homes. This means that children are receiving consistent help and support to manage and regulate their emotions and feelings and that carers are able to de-escalate situations and meet the children's needs.

Recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members follows robust safer recruitment procedures, which helps to ensure that the foster homes are safe places for children to live.

Foster carers value the agency's out-of-hours support. They know that there is always a social worker available to support them at any time of day or night. This service provides foster carers with guidance and support during periods of crisis.

Children's vulnerabilities are understood well. In most instances, foster carers are given clear strategies to follow to help keep children safe. However, a small number of risk assessments were not of the expected quality and contained conflicting or incorrect information. The manager took action during the inspection to rectify this.

Managers and staff have a good understanding of safeguarding procedures, including how to manage allegations. However, on two occasions, the agency has not returned foster carers' to the fostering panel in accordance with its policy. Also, on one occasion, the agency failed to complete its own internal investigation following a safeguarding incident. A requirement will be made to address these shortfalls.

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

The manager is suitably qualified and experienced. He is dedicated, and passionate about his role. The manager is supported by a committed responsible individual who shares the same child-centred ethos.

Foster carers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. Foster carers feel supported by their supervising social workers and they feel valued. They said that the agency has an inclusive family feel, which they are part of. This contributes to a high retention of foster carers.

Some shortfalls have been identified in relation to the monitoring and review of the service. Audits do not routinely explore the quality and accuracy of records. Consequently, managers have failed to identify that some records, for example relating to foster carer supervisions, safer-caring policies and risk assessments, vary in quality, do not always contain up-to-date information and are not fully completed. These shortfalls have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of care provided to children.

The panel is diverse and members have the necessary knowledge and expertise to support the agency decision-maker to make effective child-centred decisions. However, one panel was not quorate as one panel was conducting panel business without a social worker representative sitting on the panel.

Management meetings and whole-team meetings happen regularly and have detailed minutes. However, staff supervision records lack detail and parts are incomplete. There is no review of actions from the previous supervision session. Supervision records would benefit from including practice-based reflection.

Monitoring and review of foster carers' mandatory training require improvement due to gaps in foster carers completing all mandatory training. For example, one carer had not completed first-aid training despite being approved as a foster carer in 2019. Some children's statutory documents are missing or not updated. This impacts on effective care-planning for children.

There is good multi-agency collaboration, and foster carers and staff build effective relationships with professionals external to the agency. This means that children receive holistic care. External professionals spoke highly about the quality of care that foster carers provide to children.

Foster carers and children have direct access to therapeutic support when they need it in their own home. Foster carers value this. Furthermore, some foster carers said that they have been helped to access other specialist services to support them in meeting the needs of the children they care for.

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

Requirement	Due date
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a)) In particular, the registered manager must ensure that the agency's policies and procedures are followed for all safeguarding concerns. Specifically, ensure that risk assessments are completed in a timely way, and internal investigations take place following safeguarding concerns, and return to panel when appropriate.	4 March 2024
No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel— one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience. (Regulation 24 (1)(ii)) In particular, the registered person must ensure that a social worker representative is sitting on panel.	4 March 2024
The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals; and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b)) In particular, the registered person must ensure that there are robust systems in place to monitor and review the agency records. Specifically, ensure that the records are fully completed and contain accurate and up-to-date information.	4 March 2024

Furthermore, the registered person must ensure that there is evidence of management oversight within the agency records, and how this is used to improve the quality of care provided to children.	
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Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. In particular, ensure that children's views, wishes and feelings are detailed within their records, including how they have been acted on. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 1.3)
- The registered person should ensure that all foster carers, including all members of a household who are approved foster carers, are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care. In particular, provide foster carers with mandatory training, and training that reflects the children's specific needs, in a timely way. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.2)

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

Unique reference number: 2716337

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