

Fostering North East

St Cuthbert's Care

St Cuthbert's House, West Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE15 7PY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency was registered with Ofsted in 2003. It is operated by a charitable organisation. The fostering service provides emergency, respite, long- and short-term foster placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing care for 15 children in 11 fostering families. One young person was being cared for under a 'staying put' arrangement.

The manager registered with Ofsted in December 2024.

Inspection dates: 18 to 21 August 2025

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: 12 December 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

Children live in stable foster homes and are cared for by committed foster carers. Most children experience long-term arrangements.

Foster carers and staff are strong advocates for the children in their care. Foster carers and staff build effective working relationships with professionals that support children's progress. One teacher wrote: 'Engagement [by foster carers] with professionals is always honest and open and with [name of child]'s best interests at the core of any discussion.' As a result of this partnership work, children make progress in all areas of their lives.

Children experience family life with their foster carers. Children are welcomed into the household and enjoy family celebrations, holidays at home and abroad and a range of individual activities and interests. These experiences help children to develop social links and peer relationships.

Children are supported to maintain links with people who are important to them. Foster carers are committed to helping children spend time with friends and family, recognising the importance of this in helping children to retain a sense of history and identity.

Children's views about their care are captured as part of most foster carer reviews. Staff also run a Young Stars group that enables children to meet and enjoy a range of activities. Recently, the role of the group has been extended to encourage children to share their views on other aspects of the agency. The registered manager is keen to develop how children are involved in the fostering agency. Examples such as providing a work experience placement for one young person placed with foster carers demonstrates the manager's willingness to be creative in doing this.

Foster carers say that they benefit from the agency being small, with a 'family feel'. One foster carer described the agency as 'small but mighty'. Foster carers are confident that social workers know them and the children that they care for well. As a result, foster carers are confident in the advice and support that they receive. This includes the out-of-hours support that staff provide, where foster carers value having timely access to staff who understand their circumstances.

Managers and staff are exploring new and diverse opportunities to recruit foster carers. Potential foster carers receive timely responses when they contact the fostering agency to enquire about becoming foster carers. Assessments of suitability are completed in appropriate timescales, allowing for panel recommendations without delay.

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

Children feel safe. They are supported to develop trusted relationships with their foster carers at their own pace.

Foster carers understand children's individual needs and how to keep them safe. Foster carers receive training that helps them to understand how to safeguard children and to reassure them when they are unsettled. Positive role modelling and feeling accepted contributes to children's sense of safety. Managers have expanded the support to foster carers by commissioning a therapeutic service to provide individual support and guidance. This is a new development and the impact is, as yet, untested.

Up-to-date risk management plans provide foster carers with details about any known risks or vulnerabilities for children. The guidance these plans provide ensures that foster carers know what steps to take to safeguard children, and who they can contact for additional support.

The registered manager has taken steps to reduce the risk of a closed culture developing in the fostering agency. She has appointed an independent reviewing officer to oversee foster carer reviews, bringing objective scrutiny to the service. However, other potential conflicts of interest have yet to be addressed. For example, the agency decision-maker has provided support to the registered manager regarding panel matters. This risks compromising the quality and independence of the decision-making process.

The registered manager understands safeguarding processes and is confident to challenge when these are not followed by partner organisations. This ensures transparency between the agency and safeguarding professionals. The registered manager responds to allegations and complaints and is keen to learn from any issues that arise. Reflection on practice results in action plans to develop staff knowledge and skills when necessary.

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

Since the last inspection, there has been a change in registered manager. The new manager was previously the deputy manager. This gives her an established relationship with staff, carers and children. She can talk knowledgeably about foster carers, children and their journeys. Foster carers report that the registered manager is someone they and their children know and are confident to approach about any issues.

The registered manager is committed to driving service improvement. She has reviewed a range of systems, policies and processes to ensure that these are compliant with current guidance and legislation. At the time of the inspection, there was much work in progress. However, many of the systems and processes are still to

be embedded. Some of these systems contradict each other, resulting in confusing information or misinformation about the service. In addition, as new processes develop, some practice is inconsistent. The manager has plans to further develop these areas.

Staff receive an induction into their role, and ongoing regular supervision by a manager or senior social worker. These discussions offer a balance of personal development and decision-making about foster carers and children. However, when actions are identified, these are not consistently followed up, and as a result, there is drift in progressing decisions. This pattern is also reflected by social workers in their supervision of foster carers. As a result, long-standing issues, such as a lack of escalation when information about children's care plans is missing, remain ongoing.

Staff training is an area for improvement. Although staff report that regular training is available to them, managers have yet to implement a clear pathway for staff. This means that some social workers have not had access to the expected training that underpins their specialist role. For example, staff are supervising carers and other staff without any training to do so. Also, staff have not had essential training to support them in managing allegations.

Panel structure and process requires further development. Despite attempts to increase the diversity of the fostering panel, this has yet to be achieved. The central list is small, and this raises challenges in quoracy and the range of expertise available. Panel minutes lack clarity about who has participated in discussions and the questions that they have raised. In addition, the agency decision-maker's decision does not reflect their view about the fairness of the process.

There is a lack of clear, accessible information for foster carers about finances and agency expectations on these matters. This leads to the potential for confusion and misinformation.

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 fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3)) Specifically, the registered provider must ensure that foster carers have access to all up-to-date information about children to enable them to provide the most appropriate care in response to the child's individual needs. This requirement was made at the last two full inspections and has been restated again.	10 October 2025
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a)) Specifically, the registered person must ensure that agreed actions in supervision are strengthened with oversight and followed up. In addition, the registered person must ensure that training associated with individual staff roles and responsibilities is provided.	10 October 2025

Recommendations

- The fostering service provider should ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. The service's decision-maker should review the performance of the panel chair, and for this purpose may attend a proportion of panel meetings but only as an observer. Views about the chair's performance should be sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings, such as prospective foster carers and social workers who present reports to the panel. ('The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 41, paragraph 5.15)
- The fostering service provider should ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.8)
- The fostering service provider should ensure that there is a clear and transparent written policy on payments to foster carers that sets out the criteria for calculating payments and distinguishes between the allowance paid and any fee paid. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 28.5)
- In reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision-maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM* [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin), in which the court set out guidance for the way in which an adoption agency decision-maker should approach a case, whether it is a decision based on the agency panel's recommendation or the independent review panel's recommendation. This applies equally to fostering decision-makers. The court said that it would be good discipline and appropriate for the decision-maker to:
 - list the material taken into account in reaching the decision;
 - identify key arguments;
 - consider whether they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel(s) and are satisfied as to its fairness and that the panel(s) has properly addressed the arguments;
 - consider whether any additional information now available to them that was not before the panel has an impact on its reasons or recommendation;
 - identify the reasons given for the relevant recommendation that they do or do not wish to adopt; and
 - state (a) the adopted reasons by cross-reference or otherwise and (b) any further reasons for their decision.

This relates to ensuring that the agency decision-maker considers whether they agree with the process and approach of the relevant panel(s) and are satisfied as to

its fairness and that the panel(s) has properly addressed the arguments.
(Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989
Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 19)

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: SC033542

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