

Foster Care Associates North West

Foster Care Associates Limited

Suites 1 and 3 Windsor House, Ackhurst Business Park, Foxhole Road, Chorley PR7 1NY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is part of a larger national organisation, Foster Care Associates, but operates under its own name and registration. The agency covers the areas of Cumbria, Cheshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside.

The agency offers a range of foster placements, including long-term, short-term, and specialist foster care, for children aged from birth to 17 years. Children who reach the age of 18 years can continue living with their foster carers as young adults. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 170 carer households providing care to 258 children.

The manager registered with Ofsted in November 2021. This inspection was carried out primarily on site at the office, although two inspectors worked remotely on one day each. There was a change in the third inspector part way through the week, which led to the involvement of four inspectors in total, but only three at any one time. Inspection activity included speaking with managers, supervising social workers, foster carers, children and other professionals.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 December 2024

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: 24 January 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

Many children have been living with their foster families for several years and have a sense of permanence and belonging. Many children call their foster carers their parents due the length of time they have lived with them. One child said of their foster carers, 'My parents are astonishingly the best in the world.' Another child said, '[Name of foster carer] is like an actual mum to me.'

Foster carers develop trusting relationships with the children they care for. They spend time with children and listen to their views. Children are fully integrated into the families they live with and often remain as adults when they leave care. This helps children to benefit from family support into their adult lives.

The agency offers wraparound therapeutic support for foster families who care for children with more complex needs, or where there is a risk of children having to move from their foster home. This therapeutic support has a positive impact for children and contributes to placement stability.

Foster carers have access to support groups, walking groups, appreciation days and foster carer buddies to mentor and support them. This enables foster carers to feel valued and connected with the agency.

The agency is ambitious for children and values education. There are a range of opportunities in place for children to support their education and prepare them for adult life. These include effective plans for children who are transitioning from primary to secondary school, work-based experience days at local colleges and open university days. Foster carers developed and now run a weekly homework club for children to support those who need extra help.

Children are supported to join in a range of social, educational and recreational activities throughout the year. These opportunities are in place for children who are cared for, as well as birth children of foster carers. This provides children with the opportunity to learn new skills, develop confidence and build new relationships. Alternative activities are in place for children with additional needs who may not cope well with the busier environments of traditional children's activities.

Foster carers and staff promote children's family identity and support children to spend time with their birth families. When siblings are placed separately in the agency, foster carers meet up regularly to ensure that siblings can maintain their bond.

Children who are cared for and birth children of foster carers are given the opportunity to join a children's forum to ensure that their voices are heard. In addition, foster carers have regional foster care representatives who take carer queries and concerns to a regional and national forum. This ensures that foster carers can contribute to practice in the agency.

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

Children feel safe living with their foster families. Some children have been able to settle into their foster families after moving between almost a dozen homes before moving to their current foster carers. One child said, 'I feel more than safe here, I feel happy and warm and all the other good words you can think of.'

Children know who the supervising social worker is for their foster carers and have a good relationship with them. Many children have said that the agency's supervising social workers are the most consistent professionals in their lives. One child said, 'My (supervising) social worker always makes time for me when she visits, and she always cares about my feelings and wishes.' Another said, 'I feel I can talk to the FCA (Foster Care Associates) social workers rather than my social worker.' A third child said, 'I love it when [name of supervising social worker] comes to visit because she plays with my toys with me, and I love her!' These positive relationships with the supervising social workers help to keep children safe by providing them with a trusted professional to talk to when they have worries.

Children are typically placed with foster carers who have been identified to meet their specific needs. However, for one child with extremely complex needs, this matching process did not identify how the foster carer would meet the child's needs nor did it identify the extensive support required to keep the family together.

Risk assessments are updated as needed, and they clearly identify the risks present for individual children. However, they do not contain clear strategies for foster carers and other professionals to follow. For one child, this has led to confusion regarding the best way for their foster carer to support them when the child struggles. Additionally, the foster carer has been given conflicting advice from social workers outside of normal business hours when supporting the family in crisis.

When children raise concerns or say worrying things when they are upset, the agency responds quickly to let children know that they are being listened to. Social workers and managers share information effectively with other professionals to ensure that there is a joined-up approach. However, there have been some occasions when the agency has not carried out its own investigations when incidents do not reach thresholds of external safeguarding professionals. This does not ensure that all concerns are fully followed up by the agency.

Children are not often held to keep them safe. When this happens, foster carers inform their social workers to let them know. However, there have been times when a child should have been restrained for their safety and was not, and there has been one incident when a child has been restrained unnecessarily. This reduces opportunities to keep children safe and means that a child has been held against their will when this was not required to keep them safe.

Most serious incidents are appropriately notified to the regulator as required. However, this has been somewhat inconsistent as some incidents identified should

have been notified and were not. This does not allow for full and sufficient oversight of safeguarding concerns by the regulator.

Foster carers understand their responsibilities to help keep children safe when they go missing from home. They follow individual risk management plans for children and contact relevant professionals in line with the agency's policies and procedures. This helps to bring children home quickly and safely.

Foster carers are provided with a range of training opportunities to meet children's varied needs. However, social workers and managers do not always proactively consider what training would benefit carers when considering children's needs. This has included a lack of specific training for carers when a child moving in has identified diagnoses, and a lack of training in attachment and therapeutic needs for the carer of a child who has experienced significant loss and instability.

Foster carers receive a timely review of their progress every year. Foster carers typically say that this is useful for them. However, the independent reviewing officer, who chairs many of these reviews, does not have full access to foster carers' files and can only see what the agency chooses for them to see. This means that information can be provided to the independent reviewing officer in a managed way and does not allow for full independent oversight.

A panel of independent professionals and people with care experience provides independent oversight and recommendations to ensure that those who care for vulnerable children have the skills to do so safely. Safeguarding checks are carried out for new panel members and agency staff members to ensure that they are safe to work with children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is a consistent registered manager in post who has the skills and experience to manage the agency. Staff and foster carers agree that the registered manager has strengthened support to carers and staff since stepping into this role.

Leaders and managers know the children and families well. Foster carers feel able to approach senior managers if needed and feel that managers are responsive to their concerns and ideas.

Foster carers benefit from supervising social workers who typically have extensive experience in this field. They speak consistently about the high level of support that they receive from their supervising social workers and the agency.

Referrals are considered by an experienced team with established and effective processes. When children are successfully matched, the team provides relevant and accessible information for children and their social workers.

Staff are provided with regular supervision to reflect on their own well-being as well as the families that they work with. Caseloads for many social workers are

maintained at a manageable level. However, new social workers in their first year have caseloads that are very similar to experienced social workers. Additionally, some managers have been holding high caseloads as well as their management responsibilities. This does not ensure that all staff are fully supported and that their well-being is promoted.

Management oversight of significant incidents has improved, with further layers of oversight put into place. The agency pursues a culture of learning where feedback is actioned, and improvements are consistently made and reviewed.

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 take all reasonable steps to ensure that restraint is used on a child only where it is necessary. Specifically, the registered person must ensure that all carers are fully aware of when children should and should not be restrained. (Regulation 13 (2)(c))	9 February 2025
If any of the events listed in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated. Specifically, the registered person must ensure that all notifiable events are notified to the regulator within a timely manner. When there has been a lapse in time before the missed notification is noticed. These should be notified late rather than not at all. (Regulation 36 (1))	9 February 2025

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that risk assessments provide clear strategies for carers and professionals to follow to best support children. In addition, when concerns do not meet the thresholds of external safeguarding professionals, such as the local authority designated officer, the agency should continue an internal investigation to ensure that it is satisfied that children are safe and well cared for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that children's needs are fully considered alongside foster carers' skills and experience before placing children with carers. In addition, carers should be provided with robust training and support to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge to meet the identified needs of those who are placed with them. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that those chairing foster carer reviews are provided with all information relevant to the review to provide robust and independent oversight. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 13.8)
- The registered person should ensure that social workers and managers are suitably supported to carry out their roles to a high standard. Caseloads should be maintained at a suitable level for each social worker's skills and experience, with consideration of other tasks expected of them. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.2)

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: SC040408

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