

Foster Care Solutions

Foster Care Solutions Limited

9b Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, Chester-le-Street, County Durham DH2 1AN

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Care Solutions is an independent fostering agency based in County Durham. It is part of the Futures for Children group, the head office of which is in Maidstone, Kent. The group operates a total of six independent fostering agency branches.

Foster Care Solutions provides placements on an emergency, respite, short-term and long-term basis, including parent and child placements.

At the time of the inspection the agency had 21 fostering households and 28 children placed with its families. One fostering household was approved in the last year.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 February 2018

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: 12 February 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children are making good, and in some cases exceptional, progress in all areas of their lives. Their educational outcomes, their health, their emotional self-regulation and their self-esteem improve as a result of high-quality individualised care and support.
- Children are settled and happy. They benefit from stable, secure family life and have positive experiences. Placement stability, including the number of long-term and permanent placements, is excellent.
- Children's participation is a strength. The agency makes every effort to provide a large number of regular activities so that children can have fun, contribute their views and meet with other fostered children.
- Children are safe and feel safe because their foster carers understand and manage the risks that they face.
- Foster carers are supported well by the supervising social workers. Foster carers have regular supervision, but they also benefit from a service that responds when they need advice at any hour of the day and night. They feel valued, and that enables them to be resilient.
- Staff are well supported and provide an enthusiastic and child-focused service. Communication is good and the manager is knowledgeable, experienced, approachable and helpful.
- The agency is child-focused at all levels. A desire to achieve the very best outcomes for children underpins the practice. The manager has good systems to ensure that she is aware of the progress children are making.
- The agency works well with its partners, including local authorities and individual children's social workers. It understands its roles and responsibilities and it is not afraid to challenge when other partners could do better.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The agency's regulation 35 monitoring report requires further development. Although the manager's monitoring is thorough, she does not include the feedback from foster carers, children and stakeholders in that report, and it is not used as a developmental tool to drive improvement.

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 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. (3) The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(1)(3))	31/03/2018

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are making good, and in some cases outstanding, progress in their foster homes as a result of the high-quality care and support provided by their foster carers. One social care professional said: 'The boys are doing amazingly. I can't speak highly enough of the foster carers. They are an absolute credit to the agency. They totally get the boys.' Foster carers know and understand the children's needs well and they speak very fondly of them. A social worker commented: 'It is an excellent placement that offers warmth, unconditional regard and affection. The progress is testament to the insightful and nurturing care they receive.' A parent made the following comments: 'My child is cared for and loved like he was her own child. There is nothing they could have done better. They provide a safe and loving environment. Where he is now is down to their love and care.'

Of particular note are the number of long-term and permanent placements that account for 57% of all the current placements. Many of these children have complex needs, including learning disabilities, autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The stability afforded by a permanent family placement is a significant contributory factor in the progress the children are making. The high level of support provided by the agency ensures that placements are sustained despite the challenges that may occur. If a foster carer is struggling or a child is particularly challenging, the agency holds a multi-agency meeting to discuss what further support the foster carers require to continue and to hold other partners to account. When there are unplanned endings, the agency always evaluates the placement so that it can improve its practice if any shortfalls are identified.

Children are happy and they have very positive experiences. They feel part of the foster carers' family and they know that they are loved and cared for. One child said: 'My carers make me feel safe. They are the loveliest people in the world. I don't know what position I would be in if it were not for them.' Another child said: 'They are a really nice, caring family. I am doing really well. My foster carers try their best to help me and explain things to me. I feel safe and I am completely happy.' Children go on holiday, they pursue their hobbies and interests and they develop their skills and self-confidence. For example, children learn to swim, they go boxing, they garden with their foster carers and they go running.

Foster carers understand the importance of promoting education and act as any good parent would in attending parents' evenings and meetings, and advocating on the children's behalf. All the children have school or college placements, unless they are below school age. They attend well and are making good, and in some cases exceptional, progress taking into account their previous experiences and abilities. One child commented: 'I'm getting on great at school. It's because of my attitude and how hard I am working.' The agency has access to an education consultant who can provide advice and guidance to help foster carers improve a child's educational outcomes. Although this service has not been used much, it is there as an additional support to a placement.

Foster carers support the children to be as healthy as possible. Foster carers ensure that children have regular check-ups with doctors, dentists and opticians. They also support children's emotional well-being. Children start to understand their emotions and feelings and are better able to self-regulate and manage these more appropriately. Foster carers attend appointments with children and contribute as part of the team around the child. Foster carers are strong advocates to ensure that children receive the services they require and deserve. In some situations, if it were not for the foster carers' tenacity in challenging other professionals, the health outcomes for children would be significantly diminished.

Children's participation is a strength of the agency. Despite being a small service, the manager and staff work exceptionally hard to ensure that the children are fully engaged with the agency. There are regular activities, including arts and crafts, bowling and trampolining. There are also social events that include the foster carers, such as a trip to the pantomime, a Christmas party and a Halloween party. Children have a good time but they also have the opportunity to talk to staff, share their views and meet other children who are fostered. Events also include birth children, as the agency recognises the important role that birth children of foster carers play. The agency has developed a booklet for birth children, and staff remember their birthdays and celebrate their achievements. Foster carers say that they feel valued because of this approach to their wider family. One foster carer said of the agency: 'It is like a family.'

Foster carers provide placements for groups of brothers and sisters so that they retain their sense of family identity. If this is not possible, foster carers are instrumental in ensuring that the children placed with them see important family members, including parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, so that those relationships are maintained.

The children who are currently placed with this agency's carers are local. The commissioning arrangements mainly cover the Tyne, Tees and Wearside areas, meaning that children are generally placed within a reasonable distance of their homes and with carers who reflect their cultural background. When children reach 18 years of age, staying put arrangements are considered so that children can remain with their foster carers until they complete their education or feel more prepared for adulthood and independent living. Foster carers work hard to help children become more independent during their time in care. Children start to improve their self-care and life skills, in some cases by foster carers using very creative techniques.

The current group of foster carers is well established and many have been working for this agency for a number of years. The preparation and assessment of new carers is a thorough and timely process and results in carers who not only provide effective foster placements but also remain with the agency.

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

Children become safer as a result of the good safeguarding practice that underpins the work of the agency. Each child's risks are identified and documented in a comprehensive risk assessment that is reviewed as risk levels change or new risks are identified. This provides foster carers with clear strategies to manage and minimise known and emerging risks.

Children have a booklet of information that provides them with details of a number of independent people to contact if they are worried about anything, including a direct telephone number for a senior manager in the organisation. This is a particularly strong area of practice. Children also have opportunities to speak to the supervising social workers without their foster carers being present. This includes at social events and activities, when seeking their views for the foster carers' reviews, and during home visits.

Foster carers have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities to keep children safe from harm. Their safeguarding training is regularly updated and there are clear procedures to follow if children go missing from the placement. The current group of children placed with the agency's foster carers are very settled. Incidents of missing from care are very rare and no children are currently deemed at risk of sexual exploitation. Staff have a good understanding of the issues and provide carers with appropriate support and guidance if these risks emerge.

All foster carers are trained in an approved behaviour management method. Consequences are recorded and monitored to ensure that these remain appropriate. Restraint has not been used, and the emphasis is on de-escalation and rewards for positive behaviour.

The registered manager works well in partnership with other safeguarding agencies to ensure that safeguarding concerns, including those about foster carers, are investigated promptly and thoroughly. The designated officer for one local authority commented: 'I have no concerns. They are very good at knowing the threshold.' The manager attends any meetings arranged to ensure that information is shared and that actions for the agency are agreed and implemented. A representative from a local authority fed back in relation to one incident: 'The agency was extremely efficient in addressing issues raised by the local authority and other professionals. It maintained excellent communication and shared relevant information in a timely manner.' The open culture ensures that any deficits in practice are dealt with in a way that keeps children safe. Where necessary, carers have their approval reconsidered by the fostering panel when concerns about their practice have been highlighted.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is managed effectively by a very experienced and suitably qualified registered manager. It is a child-focused service and leaders and managers are ambitious for the children that they place with their foster carers. They want them to do well and they are proud of their achievements. This is evident in the number of

awards that children receive for a whole variety of successes. Children's views are sought and taken seriously in a number of ways. A children's champion has recently been appointed to produce a newsletter that has a focus on the children in the agency. The manager holds focus groups to gain children's opinions, and children have been involved in producing an information booklet and a children's charter.

Matching children with foster carers is a well-considered and child-focused process. Foster carers are confident that they are only put forward for children whose needs they can meet, and foster carers confirm that they can say no if they have any doubts. The agency will decide not to fill vacancies if the needs of a particular child in placement are high, even when this is not specifically designated as a solo placement.

Foster carers speak highly of the agency and of their supervising social workers. One foster carer said: 'I get a lot of support from the agency. It has been absolutely marvellous. I can't fault my supervising social worker. She has always been there.' Foster carers are supervised on a regular basis, and the records of this demonstrate that children's progress is at the forefront of the discussions. Reviews are held at least annually and these are currently chaired by the agency's manager. Reviews are comprehensive and include the views of children and their social workers. Foster carers' training needs are identified in their development plans and monitored through supervision and at the review. Foster carers are well trained and if they need anything in particular to help them understand and meets the needs of a particular child the agency will source this for them. This ensures that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children placed with them.

The agency has sufficient numbers of qualified and ancillary staff to carry out its work effectively, efficiently and to a high standard. Workloads are manageable and this gives staff time to support the foster carers well. Staff are well supported by their manager. They receive regular supervision that enables them to reflect on their practice as well as on the children in placement. Staff say that the manager is approachable and that they can ask for advice at any time. Staff receive regular training to enable them to undertake their duties with competence. This includes external training as well as access to online courses. Good communication is promoted through weekly team meetings that provide staff with information about the families and children as well as the work of the service. This ensures that everyone is well informed.

Monitoring is strong. The manager has a number of systems to ensure that she knows what is happening in the agency and what progress the children are making. These include file audits that are used to inform staff supervision. The manager obtains feedback from children about their foster carers' supervising social worker and she uses this in staff appraisals. Outcomes trackers provide a visual representation of children's progress. The manager also seeks regular feedback from children and foster carers about the service. However, the report that is compiled to monitor and improve the service does not contain all the relevant information, such as user feedback, and it does not address service improvement. The service development plan does not link clearly to the rigorous monitoring that the manager undertakes.

The agency has strong and effective links with commissioners. The manager attends and contributes to all the provider meetings and engages in an open and honest dialogue. Consequently, she has a good understanding of the placement needs of the local authorities. The manager has been involved in shaping the staying put policies and guidance so that children can benefit from the stability of remaining with their foster carers once they are 18 years old. A commissioner said: 'The manager is not afraid to challenge us if we are not getting it right, but she does that in a constructive way.'

The agency has not been successful in recruiting foster carers in the last two years. This has reduced its capacity to be able to offer foster placements. The agency is now benefiting from the appointment of a recruiting and marketing officer who works for the whole company. In addition to raising awareness of the company brand and promoting a presence on social media, she has also been working with a national agency to target particular communities, such as older people, Muslims and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. There has been an increase of 21% in enquiries since 2016, which demonstrates that there has been a positive impact. There is a good system to ensure that enquirers receive a prompt and welcoming response.

The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced panel chairperson. It is robust and provides appropriate challenge to the agency. The members come from a diverse range of relevant personal and professional backgrounds that enable them to provide effective, child-focused quality assurance of the work of the agency. The administration of the panel is efficient and members receive all the relevant information in a timely way so that they can give full consideration to the cases before them. Minutes are of good quality and provide an accurate account of the panel meeting. This provides the agency decision-maker with a good basis for his decision-making.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC413428

Registered provider: Foster Care Solutions Limited

Registered provider address: 12 Conqueror Court, Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 5BH

Responsible individual: Nicholas Barnsby

Registered manager: Susan Melia

Telephone number: 0191 4250 095

Email address: suemelia@fostercaresolutions.co.uk

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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