

New Life Fostering Agency

New Life Fostering Agency Limited

Charter House, 848 Tyburn Road, Birmingham B24 9NT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A private company operates this fostering agency. The agency was registered with Ofsted in May 2012.

The fostering service provides short-term, long-term, emergency and parent and child foster homes. It also provides foster carers who support brothers and sisters to remain together.

At the time of the inspection, the fostering agency had 41 approved fostering households providing care for 62 children.

The registered manager has been in post since February 2023 and registered in January 2024.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 July 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 31 July 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection:

The independent fostering agency was judged inadequate at the last inspection, which took place from 31 July to 4 August 2023. The inspectors found significant shortfalls and regulatory breaches. As a result, three compliance notices under section 22 of the Care Standards Act 2000 were issued, under regulation 8 (registered person - general requirements) regulation 11 (independent fostering agencies – duty to secure welfare) and regulation 12 (arrangements for the protection of children). A monitoring visit took place on 28 September 2023. At that visit, the inspector found that the provider had taken sufficient action to meet the compliance notices.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The registered manager has made improvements at this independent fostering agency. However, the changes made are still in their infancy, therefore it is too soon to understand the full impact they have had on children's experiences. Further improvements are needed to ensure that all children and their foster carers have a consistently positive experience.

Most children are attending education and are making good progress. Foster carers and the agency advocate to ensure that children have access to the right support at the right time. However, the agency is not always consistent in its approach. For example, poor communication between the agency and education professionals resulted in a child's education meeting being missed. This was particularly significant due to the child's disengagement from education, and was a missed opportunity for the agency to better understand and support the child's educational needs.

Overall, children's health needs are met. Foster carers ensure that children attend routine health appointments and receive support from specialist health services. However, for some children, the agency has not ensured that actions from their annual health reviews are completed in a timely manner. One child had not had a recommended health check, despite this being raised on two separate occasions. Furthermore, the agency had not ensured that a child had received their required childhood immunisations, despite this being raised on several occasions.

The registered manager has taken steps to improve arrangements for the care planning of children moving to foster carers' homes. Although there have been improvements, this is still an area for development and there have been occasions when care planning has not been effective. For one child who has complex needs, the registered manager did not sufficiently evaluate whether the carers, who were relatively inexperienced, could meet the child's needs. This resulted in an unplanned ending for the child.

Children's views are not always fully captured. Supervising social workers are not creative in gathering children's feedback for foster carers' annual reviews. This does not help children to have a say about the way the agency is managed or to contribute to important decisions. The registered manager has taken action to address this shortfall and there are plans to introduce a children's participation group to support children to feel valued and listened to.

Children are positive about their experiences of living with their foster families. One child said they had a great connection with their foster carer, while another child said they loved being a member of the family. Many of the children referred to their foster carers as 'aunty' or 'uncle'. This supports children to have a sense of belonging.

Children participate in extra-curricular activities, including swimming and tennis lessons, boxing and playing cricket. The fostering agency provides children with opportunities to meet up with other children to encourage friendships and for children to have fun. In addition, foster families celebrate festivals and host family events to help children to feel part of the family.

Children receive support to prepare them for adulthood. For some children, this has been further enhanced through 'staying put' arrangements. The agency has recently introduced an independence programme for children which provides additional support to develop their independence skills. Children enjoy attending the regular workshops and developing new skills.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Children say they feel happy and safe with their foster carers. They can identify people who they can talk to. One child said that if they had any problems they could talk to their foster carer. Another child said their carers had been instrumental in helping them to navigate the challenges they have faced.

Children's risk assessments and safe care plans are individualised to their needs. Risks and behaviours are recorded and strategies are agreed to help foster carers to keep children safe. However, these risk assessments are not routinely reviewed and do not always reflect current circumstances. For example, several children's risk assessments do not reflect changes to their mobile phone use.

Safer recruitment processes for the agency's staff are not robust. The registered manager does not consistently verify applicants' reasons for leaving previous roles where they have worked with children. In addition, some gaps in employment have not been followed up and do not have recorded explanations. This does not provide assurances that staff are suitably vetted and experienced to care for vulnerable children.

The agency has not always ensured that the appropriate safeguarding checks are in place for members of foster carers' extended families and individuals in a foster carer's support network. In addition, the agency has not satisfied themselves that full checks have been completed for carers who have lived overseas. This does not ensure that only adults who are safe care for children.

The agency makes at least one annual unannounced visit to fostering households. When they are completed, the recording of these visits lacks detail. Children are not routinely seen or spoken with. In addition, children's bedrooms are not always checked. This means that the agency is not regularly providing children with the opportunity to speak to a trusted professional without their foster carers being present.

Overall, the registered manager has responded appropriately to allegations. When concerns arise, the agency works in partnership with professionals, including the

local authority designated officer, to promote the welfare and safety of children. Following allegations, the foster carer is discussed at panel and their ongoing suitability is reviewed. However, there was a lack of professional curiosity around a foster carer's practice when previous concerns had been raised. This was a missed opportunity to review and address the foster carer's practice and suitability.

The agency's response to safeguarding incidents has improved. When incidents have occurred, there is multi-agency working with a range of professionals to keep children safe. This supports foster carers and staff to respond in an appropriate and well-coordinated manner.

Since the last inspection, there have been no incidents of children going missing from home. When children are absent from their homes, the carers and the agency respond appropriately. Workshops have enhanced carers' knowledge around how to reduce the likelihood of children going missing and how to respond when a child goes missing.

There are few incidents of self-harm. When children do self-harm, carers provide the right support to children to ensure that they are kept safe.

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

The registered manager is suitably skilled and experienced. She is dedicated and committed to providing the right care to children. She has worked hard to develop practice in the agency. However, it is too soon to understand the longer-term impact the changes will have on the effectiveness of the agency's leaders and managers and, in turn, for children.

The registered manager regularly monitors the activities of the agency. This includes case file audits and compliance checks. However, monitoring reports lack analysis and evaluation and they do not support the manager to identify themes and patterns in practice, in areas such as the quality of foster carer supervision. Shortfalls in the monitoring of the service hinder the further development of the agency.

The registered manager has recognised the staff team's strengths and areas for development. She has invested a lot of time in supporting supervising social workers and has often completed work for them. This means that at times she has been unable to prioritise her management tasks to ensure the smooth running of the agency.

While most foster carers have completed their mandatory training, some are not up to date to with their training. In addition, foster carers have not always been provided with specific training in line with children's individual needs. In some cases, foster carers have been provided with specific training after a child has left their home. This does not ensure that foster carers have the right skills to meet children's needs.

The fostering panel provides a good-quality assurance function that ensures that there is independent oversight of the quality of assessments. Clear reasons are given by the panel chair for the recommendations made. This is supported by the agency decision-maker, who makes timely and reasoned decisions regarding the application and approval process.

The agency has sufficient staff. The staff feel supported by the registered manager and spoke positively about the culture she has created. One supervising social worker said the registered manager has been integral to the changes made. Another supervising social worker said that the registered manager goes above and beyond in her support.

Staff receive regular professional supervision and attend weekly team meetings. Supervision is well recorded and the registered manager uses reflective discussion to explore staff practice.

Foster carers are positive about the support they receive from the agency. One said that the agency always provides support when it is needed. Another said that the agency makes them feel part of a community.

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 not— employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so, or allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so. For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person— is of integrity and good character, is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (1)(a)(b) (3)(a)(c)) In particular, the registered person must ensure that safer recruitment processes are in place for the verification of references for staff when they have previously worked with children.	19 August 2024
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1)) In particular, the registered person must ensure that all members of the fostering household keep up to date with the agency's core mandatory training and any other training that the carers require to enable them to support children.	19 August 2024
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—	19 August 2024

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 provider should ensure that children's needs are fully considered with the carers before the child moves to live with their foster carers.

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that children's health is promoted in accordance with their placement plan and foster carers are clear about what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 17, paragraph 6.5)
- The registered person should ensure that checks are carried out in line with regulation 26 and foster carers understand why identity checks, relationship status and health checks, personal references and enquiries are undertaken about them and why enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are made on them and adult members of their household. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 27, paragraph 135)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers when the person has lived outside of the UK, and further checks, as are considered appropriate, when obtaining a DBS disclosure is not sufficient to establish suitability to work with children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 38, paragraph 19.3)

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: SC447166

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Responsible individual: Gary Pickles

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Inspectors

Lydia Isaac, Social Care Inspector
Dean Wilton, Social Care Inspector

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