

New Life Fostering Agency

New Life Fostering Agency Limited
90 New Town Row, Aston, Birmingham B6 4HZ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This small fostering agency is privately owned and was registered in May 2012. It currently supports 20 children in 12 fostering households. It provides planned and emergency, short- and long-term placements. This is the sole branch of this agency.

Inspection dates: 21 to 25 May 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	requires improvement to be 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: 26 June 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children make good progress in stable foster homes.
- The agency works hard to support children to stay healthy, to achieve in education and to feel safe.
- Carers and staff are highly motivated to make a difference to each child's life.
- Children feel part of their foster families and the community where they live.
- Children's views are listened to and acted on by agency leaders and managers.
- Children and carers receive practical and emotional support from the agency and enjoy regular social occasions to relax, enjoy and celebrate alongside staff and managers.
- Leaders and managers demonstrate a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service.
- Managers have effective monitoring systems. They use these to monitor children's progress and safety.
- Placing authorities, children, foster carers and staff are consistently positive about the agency.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Individual risk assessments and safe care plans for children lack sufficient analysis and review.
- Not all carers have completed mandatory training and only limited numbers have undertaken training in radicalisation, child sexual exploitation and e-safety awareness. This limits their ability to safeguard children appropriately.
- Carers do not benefit fully from personal training and development plans.
- Panel members have a limited range of experience and expertise.
- Staff development opportunities have been limited. Staff who undertake additional roles and responsibilities with children have not consistently received appropriate training.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 14, paragraph 4.5)
Specifically, ensure that risk assessments are regularly reviewed with foster carers, children and placing authorities.
- 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 the service caters for. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 31, paragraph 14.8)
- Ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 40, paragraph 20.4)
- Ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 40, paragraph 20.5)
- Ensure that there is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes induction, post qualifying and in-service training, that staff and volunteers are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 47, paragraph 23.1)
This is with specific reference to staff undertaking additional roles and responsibilities.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children who have previously experienced frequent placement moves now enjoy stability. Stable placements give children the secure base that they need to develop. One child told the inspector, 'I don't call my carers "carers", I call them auntie and cousin because they're like family.'

Children receive good-quality care from carers who are highly motivated to make a difference and persevere through placement challenges. For example, carers show understanding, empathy and reassurance when children cannot cope and lose control. As one child explained, 'They love and accept me, which is amazing considering how I behaved.'

Carers help children to benefit from positive experiences, including holidays, hobbies, clubs, sports, and family celebrations. Carers create positive memories and a sense of belonging for children. Children feel part of their foster families and the community where they live. Whenever possible, every effort is made to keep brothers and sisters living together in one family.

Children make good progress in relation to their development, health and education. They catch up because carers provide them with good routines, quality time and a wealth of new experiences. Children are well supported to do the best that they can in education. They stay in their existing schools when this is in their best interest or, when appropriate, carers source appropriate education placements nearer to home. Carers encourage children with their studies and help them to develop good study routines. They attend meetings and parents' evenings. Carers have high, yet realistic, aspirations for children because they understand the barriers to learning that have arisen due to children's previous experiences. One placing social worker for a group of three brothers said, 'All three are doing much better educationally than we initially anticipated and much better than the school predicted. Their school consistently comments that they are all academically and socially well prepared and supported by their carers.'

The agency provides a range of different types of placements for children. This includes both short-term and long-term placements. When children reach 18 years of age, they have the opportunity to remain living with their foster families under 'staying put' arrangements. The registered manager and staff recognise the attachments that children make with carers and enable these to continue into adulthood.

Children benefit from individually tailored support to help them develop their independence skills. Carers support children in this area by encouraging them to cook, budget and do their laundry. A new 'skills for life programme' has recently been introduced to support children working towards independence.

Carers demonstrate good skills and empathy with respect to children's birth families. They work well with placing social workers and are child-centred in preparing

children to keep in positive contact with family, friends and those who are important to them.

Staff and managers know all carers well, including their individual skills, culture, location and availability. Managers and carers discuss potential placements insightfully to ensure that there is a good match. The agency makes placements only when carers can reasonably be expected to meet children's needs.

Most children move to their foster families in a planned way. Since the last inspection, there have been two new placements. The agency provides children with information about their foster carers before they move in. Similarly, unplanned placement endings have significantly reduced. There have been none since the last inspection. Staff and foster carers have used past experiences of unplanned endings as a learning opportunity, identifying how they could prevent these occurring in the future.

Carers undertake some good-quality training. However, since the last inspection the uptake of training has declined, and some carers' mandatory training is incomplete or out of date. The registered manager has recognised this and put a strategy in place to address this shortfall. All foster carers have their own development plans. Although these record the training that the carer has undertaken with the agency, they do not evaluate how this has supported carers to meet the needs of children living with them or identify any gaps in learning.

New carers are welcomed and prepared well for the fostering task. Carers enjoy extensive support, advice and input from their supervising social workers and support staff. Supervising social workers are tenacious in their support for children's developing needs in placement. At times, this has led them to stepping outside their defined roles and offering respite support. Respite arrangements have not always been appropriately managed.

Carers feel well supported and involved in the development of the agency. Managers and staff value all family members and consider their views. Regular surveys are now undertaken by carers and provide a positive testament for the agency's support. Carers form part of the agency's improvement board, which is steering the development of the agency. As one foster carer said, 'I feel listened to and feel like I now own a bit of it. I can really see the progress that has been made.'

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

Risk assessments are not consistently reviewed by supervising social workers. Some are weak, as they do not contain enough information about children's current risk-taking behaviours. This can lead to a lack of proportionality in the strategies identified, for example reviewing the supervision levels that children require as they make progress. Ad hoc respite arrangements have not been consistently risk assessed or safe care plans identified. This has not appropriately safeguarded children or staff.

Although training is offered to carers about identifying and knowing how to respond

to issues such as children going missing from home, radicalisation, child sexual exploitation and risks associated with using the internet, a limited number of carers have taken up these opportunities. This means that not all carers know what to look out for and are able to provide children with good help, advice and guidance as part of everyday living.

Children tell the agency's staff that they feel safe. In a recent survey, all children reported that they feel safe with their current carers. As a result of the support that children receive, their behaviour becomes increasingly safe. This is because carers are resilient and skilled. One child explained to the inspector why they felt safe with their foster carers. The child said, 'Nothing happened when I tried to push all their buttons. They still stuck by me!'

Supervising social workers ensure that carers carefully supervise children by adopting safe routines around dressing, bathing and medicines. These practices promote children's safety.

There has been one allegation since the last inspection. This was appropriately managed and safeguarding procedures were followed. A referral was made to the designated officer and the outcome considered by the foster panel.

No children have gone missing from foster care since the last inspection. There have been two absences, which have been appropriately managed. The agency has a protocol in place to ensure that procedures are followed, including a return to home interview.

Systematic reminders and tracking in respect of health and safety checks, alongside two unannounced visits each year, ensure that foster homes are always safe places for children to live.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency has undergone a period of significant change since the last inspection in 2017, including a new registered manager, responsible individual and panel chair.

The registered manager took up post in November 2017. Carers, senior agency managers, supervising social workers and placing social workers speak highly of her positive impact. She has significant social work, fostering and managerial experience. Staff told inspectors that she encourages and enables them in their work. Her active engagement in the daily conversations and decisions in the office provides motivational leadership for the staff.

The registered manager has high expectations of what all children can achieve. She consults with children and has developed a children's improvement board, chaired by a young person, to drive forward improvement.

Alongside the responsible individual, the registered manager has implemented many positive changes and monitoring practices in the agency. She recognises that some of the changes will take time to embed fully. The registered manager is now able to

use monitoring systems to focus on children's progress and improve the quality of care that they receive. These recently introduced systems identify the strengths and weaknesses of the service and consider children's views.

The recruitment, preparation and assessment of foster carers has been low this year. Only a handful of applicants have moved from initial enquiry to assessment. All new carers have been recruited via recommendations from current carers. The agency is realistic about the balance between recruiting numbers and ensuring the quality of foster carers. Once they are being assessed, the agency ensures that prospective foster carers feel part of a timely and fair process.

Placing social workers are consistent in their positive praise for the support to foster carers, one describing it as 'second to none'. Another stated, 'I am of the opinion that [the agency] promotes an ethos of genuine care, compassion and advocacy, which I believe to be evident in the way that carers fulfil their role.'

Social work and support staff are very positive about their supervision. However, since the last inspection the agency's focus on the professional development and competence of social work and support staff has been limited, and this has led to the omission of training for them. The registered manager has plans to address this.

Carers are very well supervised and supported by the agency. One foster carer told inspectors, '[The agency's staff] are always available and will talk through things at moments of crisis.' Supervision of foster carers by supervising social workers is both supportive and challenging when it needs to be.

The appropriately experienced chair ensures that the panel makes informed recommendations about carers to the agency decision maker. The panel gives quality assurance recommendations to managers. These are reviewed by the registered manager and the progress reported back to panel. The make-up of the fostering panel has some limitations, for example there is no foster carer on the panel and no one with a health care background. This limits the scope of some discussions.

Leaders and managers are developing good-quality professional relationships with local commissioning teams, social workers and safeguarding professionals. They use these relationships well to ensure that children get good support in all areas of their development. Leaders and managers also actively challenge professionals when responses from other services are not effective.

A clear statement of purpose helps staff, foster carers, placing authorities and parents to know what to expect from the agency. Children learn about their rights and entitlements in children's guides. These are currently being revised with help from children.

Effective quality assurance processes and development plans support ongoing improvement. The cycle of monitoring and review includes consultation with stakeholders, children and carers. The registered manager has acted to meet previous requirements and recommendations. As a result, the agency delivers a

service that is able to meet regulation and provide increasingly positive outcomes for children.

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: SC447166

Registered provider: New Life Fostering Agency Limited

Registered provider address: 90 New Town Row, Aston, Birmingham B6 4HG

Responsible individual: Gary Pickles

Registered manager: Jeanette Towning

Telephone number: 01213 598 811

Email address: fostering@newlifeagency.co.uk

Inspector

Anne Daly, 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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