

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 18 children in eight fostering households. It provides planned and emergency, short- and long-term placements. This is the sole branch of this agency. The directors operate, from the same premises, a supervised contact business for children separated from their parents.

Inspection dates: 27 to 30 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	Inadequate
How well children and young people are helped and protected	Inadequate
The effectiveness of leaders and managers	Inadequate

There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 24 June 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is inadequate because:

- The organisation's leadership roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined.
- Weaknesses in leadership mean that this agency is not managed effectively.
- Monitoring and quality review systems are ineffective.
- The registered person does not use learning from feedback or placement endings to learn from and use to improve children's experiences.
- Managers and staff do not follow safeguarding procedures, which leads to poor practice. This includes the response to allegations against foster carers and to risks in relation to radicalisation.
- Weaknesses in staff recruitment do not ensure that only safe people work with children.
- Managers and staff do not always carry out thorough health and safety checks on foster homes.
- Weaknesses in the assessment, approval and review of foster carers have the potential to jeopardise children's safety and stability.
- A few children are placed with foster carers who are not trained or skilled in meeting their needs.
- The registered person offers a range of placements for children and describes a service in its statement of purpose that the agency cannot meet.

The independent fostering agency's strengths :

- Foster carers are very positive about the support that they receive from their supervising social worker, who is also the director of the company.
- Placing authorities are complimentary about the commitment of the supervising social worker in her support of children and foster carers.
- Foster carers work well with teachers and health professionals to promote children's health and education.
- Foster carers provide good support to children so that they can stay in touch with the people who are important to them.
- Children receive good support from their foster carers so that they can understand their past.

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 with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the chief inspector, place a copy on their website, produce a written guide to the fostering service ('the children's guide') and ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose. (Regulation 3(1)(2)(3)(5)) In particular, the statement of purpose must contain accurate information about the types of foster care that the agency provides.	01/12/2017
The registered provider and the registered manager must: have regard to the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))* In particular, the registered person must have knowledge of the fostering regulations and associated statutory guidance.	01/10/2017
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a))* In particular, ensure that foster homes are safe and children are well matched to foster carers' skills and experience, review and learn from placement successes and those that end early, and work with the placing authority to provide children with the support they need as outlined in the child's plan.	01/10/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12(1)(a)(b))* This relates to escalating concerns about children's welfare	01/10/2017

and safety relating to radicalisation and acting on recommendations raised by the local authority designated officer.	
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))	01/12/2017
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. For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless 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)(3))	01/12/2017
The fostering panel must make a written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations. (Regulation 24(2)) This relates to clarity of recommendations and panel meeting minutes.	01/12/2017
Where a person ('X') applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decides to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 26(1))	01/12/2017
A fostering service provider must, in deciding whether to approve X as a foster parent and as to the terms of any approval, take into account the recommendation of the fostering panel. If a fostering service provider decides to approve X as a foster parent they must give X notice in writing specifying any terms on which the approval is given and enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the 'foster care agreement'). Regulation 27(3)(5)(a)(b))	01/12/2017
If a fostering service provider considers that X is not suitable to be a foster parent, they must, subject to paragraph (7), give X written notice that they propose not to approve X as suitable to be a foster parent (a 'qualifying determination'), together with their reasons and a copy of the fostering panel's recommendation, and advise X that, within 28 days of the date of the qualifying determination, X may submit any written representations that X wishes to make to the fostering service provider, or apply to the Secretary of State for a review by an independent review panel of the qualifying determination. (Regulation 27(6))	01/12/2017
The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. A fostering review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service	01/12/2017

provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. The fostering service provider must on the occasion of the first review under this regulation, and may on any subsequent review, refer their report to the fostering panel for consideration. (Regulation 28(1)(2)(5))	
The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The registered person must provide the chief inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. 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)(a)(b)(2)(3))	01/12/2017
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	01/12/2017
The registered person must give notice in writing to the chief inspector without delay if there is to be any change in the identity of the responsible individual. (Regulation 39(1)(e)(iii))	01/12/2017

* These requirements are subject of a compliance notice.

Recommendations

- Ensure that, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including, where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. This information could be made available electronically to placing authorities to share with children on their emergency journeys. (National minimum standard (NMS) 11.3)
- Ensure that: the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision; the reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence-based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information; the reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager. (NMS 13.7)

- Ensure that, following a review of the carer's approval under regulation 28, the fostering service provides the foster carer with a written statement setting out whether they consider the foster carer's household, including any children placed there, to have additional support needs as a result of the change, and, if so, what these support needs are and how they will be met, and the foster carer provides their written agreement to the change. Foster carers must not be pressured to accept changes to their terms of approval. ('Assessment and approval of foster carers: amendments to the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations', volume 4: fostering services, page 15)
- Ensure that no one may foster more than three children unless the foster children are all siblings in relation to each other, or the local authority within whose area the foster carer lives exempts the foster carer from the usual fostering limit in relation to specific placements (in which case they must set out the terms as detailed below), and the foster carer's terms of approval allow it. (Any terms of approval must be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for even if an exemption to the usual fostering limit has been granted, unless the placement is in an emergency and for less than six days.) ('Assessment and approval of foster carers: amendments to the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations', volume 4: fostering services, page 16)
- Ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, and distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information and are signed and dated. (NMS 26.5)
This relates to the authenticity and reliability of any record made by the registered person.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

Widespread failures in the ways in which children are helped and protected and the effectiveness of leadership and management mean that children's welfare is not promoted.

Children in this agency have more chance of a placement that ends early than children in comparable agencies nationally. The figure for unplanned endings has increased over the last two years. The registered person has not identified this trend. For example, for the year ending March 2016, 36% of children's placements ended early, compared to a national figure of 4%. During the inspection, the registered person presented information to the inspectors that showed even more placements made by the agency ended earlier than planned in the 12 months prior to the inspection. This equated to a rising figure of 50%. The registered person has not reviewed the reasons why some children's placements end early. As a result, the agency has not learned from children's experience of placement stability to minimise the risk of reoccurrence.

The registered person does not take account of foster carers' skills, competencies and experience when matching children, or the needs of children already in placement. For example, the security of settled children is jeopardized by the placement of children who have unknown histories and levels of risk.

Children who harm themselves, who need to learn how to use the internet safely, who are vulnerable to radicalisation, or who have learning difficulties, such as autism, are placed with foster carers who do not fully understand what this means for the child's welfare. As a result, not all children receive care from foster carers who are skilled enough to meet their specific needs. This undermines placement stability.

Some children who need a foster home urgently do not have the opportunity to meet their foster carers before they go to live with them. When this happens, the fostering agency does not provide children with information about their new foster home quickly. This does not reassure children and help them to prepare for their new home.

Some children do experience stability and have lived with their foster carers for a number of years. More than half of the children live with foster carers who have transferred to the agency from other fostering services. Some children thrive in their foster homes and enjoy family life. When asked for his views, one child said of his long-standing foster home, 'I love it.'

Foster carers work well with teachers and health professionals to promote healthy lifestyles and educational achievement. One school noted how much more settled

one child was in school and that their disruptive outbursts were reducing. That child is on target to meet all predicted grades at GCSE. Children enjoy a range of leisure activities. This enables them to develop confidence and have new experiences.

Children receive effective support from their foster carers to help them understand their family histories and previous trauma. This includes good support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. As a result, children can begin to make sense of what has happened to them and ask questions about their past. One child, helped through his experience as a young refugee, told an inspector, 'They are my family now. They're amazing. A really nice family. Nothing could be better there.' Foster carers provide good support to children so that they can stay in touch with the people who are important to them. This is in line with children's plans.

Since the company director took up primary responsibility for supervision and support to all foster carers, relationships between foster carers and the agency have improved. Prior to this, foster carers told inspectors that they received poor support. Because of the improvements made, foster carers said that they are satisfied with the agency. One foster carer said, 'If I pick up the phone, somebody is always there.'

Children's positive experience of day-to-day life is largely due to the characteristics of their foster carers, rather than the systems and structures of the agency. However, children's stability and progress is vulnerable due to poor management and weak safeguarding systems.

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

Managers and staff do not follow safeguarding procedures. Poor safeguarding practice leaves children at risk of harm.

The registered person has not carried out internal investigations into allegations about foster carers' conduct and practice when requested by the local authority. This means that managers do not find out what happened and establish whether any action is needed to rectify the concern. This does not promote children's welfare and safety or that of foster carers.

When the fostering agency has concerns about children becoming radicalised or who threaten self-harm, the registered person does not escalate these concerns to the local authority, or take advice from the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Thus, the agency is not exercising its responsibilities under the 'Prevent' duty. Furthermore, the agency does not include information about these concerns in children's risk management plans. Therefore, strategies to manage all known risks are not clearly outlined. This failure compromises children's safety. Foster carer assessments are incomplete and presented to panel before outcomes from basic checks about criminal history, health assessments or local authority checks are

completed. Consequently, assessments do not have a strong enough safeguarding focus. Furthermore, foster carers do not always receive good-quality safeguarding training before they care for children. Thus, the registered person takes unacceptable risks with the care and safety of children.

Local authorities have asked the agency to complete specific work with children in line with their care plans. For example, the local authority asked the agency to work with children on their vulnerability to exploitation and safe use of social media. The registered person does not ensure that this work is carried out. In one case, this had still not happened seven months later. Without this work, children are at risk.

Responsibilities for safeguarding are confused, and accountability for decision-making is unclear. The current safeguarding policy reinforces this confusion. It states that any concerns about the registered manager as the designated safeguarding lead should be referred to the director. However, the director is also the supervising social worker and managed by the registered manager. This is not tenable. In practice, the director, in her role as supervising social worker, takes the lead on safeguarding matters rather than the registered manager. Unclear lines of accountability do not promote safe practice.

Weak recruitment processes mean that the registered person has not properly checked people who work for the service. For example, the registered person has not sought references from a social worker's last employer. Furthermore, references were not available for the panel chair until months after he started work. The registered person was not able to show inspectors the completed return of vetting checks for staff working directly on activities with children. Leaders and managers are not skilled or trained in the principles of safer recruitment. This leaves children at risk of harm.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

This agency is not being managed effectively. There has been a high turnover of managers and changes in supervising workers. For example, three registered managers have been employed in three years, and two people have held the responsible individual role. The current manager was registered in January 2016, left the agency in November 2016 and returned in February 2017. Furthermore, the registered person failed to notify Ofsted of changes to the responsible individual for five months. Frequent changes in managers does not provide for continuity and consistency for foster carers and children. The current responsible individual is employed as a consultant for two days a month, and his contract does not stipulate this role, only that of the agency decision-maker. As a result, the agency does not have fitting management arrangements to ensure that it provides a good-quality service to children and their foster carers.

Throughout these changes, the one constant has been the director, now working as a supervising social worker. However, she has held a number of positions, including those of the responsible individual and interim manager. As a result, roles

have become confused and lines of accountability unclear.

Leaders and managers had not read Ofsted's framework for the inspection of fostering agencies until the inspection. This shows a lack of knowledge about the existing frameworks governing the service by which the agency is inspected. Furthermore, the agency has not taken the opportunity to use the new framework to make sure that it is meeting the inspection evaluation criteria.

Managers do not effectively monitor the quality of care provided to children. This limits the managers' understanding of the strengths and needs of the service. The registered person relies on 'buying in' external professionals to develop the service on an unplanned basis. This means that the registered person does not build on or embed the skills, knowledge and experience necessary to run the fostering agency. This does not help the agency to progress or sustain improvement.

The organisation's statement of purpose and children's guides are incorrect and mislead placing authorities, parents and children about what the agency offers. For example, the agency cannot support bridging or parent and child placements, as no one at the agency has the training or skills for this. The children's guide is out of date and contains information about how to contact a previous registered manager. The registered person has not sent revised information to Ofsted.

The registered person, responsible individual and registered manager have not implemented their knowledge and skills to lead the fostering agency safely. Weak systems to recruit, assess, approve, train and review foster carers mean that they cannot guarantee a high quality of care for children.

The registered person has not sought an exemption to allow more than three unrelated children to live in the same foster home. As a result, the agency is in breach of regulation in relation to the legal limit. A lack of regard to regulation has the potential to place children at risk.

The fostering panel provides challenge to the agency about the quality of foster carer assessments. When the agency presents incomplete assessments to panel, the panel defers making a decision until it has enough information to proceed. The registered person does not always act on the panel's concerns. For example, the panel recommends the need for caution in the proposed numbers of children that foster carers can care for, or the type of placement they can cope with. The agency decision-maker has overturned these recommendations three times and approved foster carers for more or different categories. The registered person does not have a record of the rationale for this decision-making and does not share this with the foster carer, or subsequently with the panel. When the registered person has terminated foster carer approvals, they do not follow the legal requirements and inform foster carers of their right to appeal. A failure by managers to follow due process compromises safety.

Panel minutes do not provide an accurate record of the matters discussed at each panel. Administrators, panel members and managers do not process panel minutes quickly. As a result, there is a delay in submitting minutes to the agency decision-

maker of up to two months. Minutes presented for inspection were in different forms and did not include an agenda or a full list of matters discussed. The panel's recommendations are insufficiently clear in the minutes.

Systems for deciding changes to foster carers' approval so that the agency can place children in an emergency are confused. The registered person does not make a timely decision, or document foster carers' agreement to any change to their approval category or their need for additional support for emergency placements. Additionally, the registered person does not issue a notice to foster carers of a changed approval, or issue them with revised foster care agreements. These haphazard arrangements demonstrate a lack of knowledge by senior managers. Combined with weak matching, the legality and viability of children's placements are not always clear.

Foster carers' annual reviews do not take place within timescale. As a result, the agency does not fully track foster carers' development and children's progress in a timely way. Review reports contain incorrect information and this undermines their quality.

Foster carers have welcomed very recent improvements in foster carer training. However, these are not yet fully established. Foster carers still need training in areas for which they are approved or before children who have significant needs are placed with them. Specifically, this training includes bridging to adoption and parent and child placements, self-harm, child sexual exploitation and children who may go missing from care. Foster carers have needed training in e-safety and autism. They have either not had this at all or not until a year after children have been placed. The registered person has not made sure that all foster carers achieve the required training, support and development standards in foster care within one year of approval. A lack of timely training opportunities means that some children are cared for by foster carers who do not have the relevant skills and knowledge to meet their needs. Chaotic training records contribute to the registered person's poor grasp of training shortfalls.

The registered person has not consulted with children, foster carers and placing authorities as part of their review of the quality of care. The fostering agency does not provide Ofsted with a copy of this report. The review of the quality of care contains confusing information about foster carer recruitment. For example, it is not clear how many foster carers have applied and been approved within the year. The registered person makes no evaluation of the core functions of the fostering agency for example, whether the placements they have offered to children have been successful. Consequently, the system of review is unlikely to lead to sustained improvement for children.

Records are unreliable. The registered person creates documents and affixes the digital signatures of foster carers, the responsible individual and the agency decision-maker in a way that has the potential to allow for falsification of records. This misleads any reader about the author or date of any document and whether the signatory has created it.

The registered person does not notify Ofsted in a timely way about significant events, such as child protection investigations or when children have made allegations about their foster carers. This means that the registered person does not share information with all relevant people as required. This does not promote young people's safety and well-being.

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 difference 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

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Inspectors

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