

Connect Fostering Services Ltd

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The Stables, Parsonage Farm, Hollow Hill Lane, Iver SL0 0JW

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered with Ofsted in 2013. The fostering service provides both short-term and long-term homes for children, including specialist provision for emergency, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and parent and child placements. The provider states in the agency's statement of purpose its aim to provide safe caring and supportive placements for children and young people that will enable them to achieve positive life outcomes.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency provided support and supervision to 49 approved foster care households and 70 children in care.

The registered manager has been in post since May 2013.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 February 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 8 January 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are at the centre of this inclusive and welcoming foster care agency. The leaders and managers enthuse about their common goals and shared values to positively impact and improve the lives of children. The majority of the children live with stable and long-term fostering families who provide them with warm and nurturing homes.

Foster carers enjoy professional and supportive relationships with the agency. This helps them to provide high-quality and safe care to the children. In feedback to the inspector, foster carers were unanimous in their praise of the support that they receive from the agency, especially of the support they received throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One foster carer said, 'We felt like we were in this together.'

The agency provided thoughtful touches during the more restricted periods of COVID-19. These included winter hampers, extra funds for education, and play equipment. This conveyed a message to the foster carers and children of being valued and appreciated. Other measures included virtual coffee mornings, online quizzes, baking competitions, humorous and informative videos, and regular updates. This helped keep the foster carers' morale high and connected to the agency and with each other.

The diversity of the staff team and of the foster carers means that children experience care that is responsive to their identity, culture and religion. Wherever possible, the children are matched with foster carers with the same culture and background. Committed foster carers support children of all faiths to attend religious celebrations and participate in important traditions throughout the year. This helps the children to feel comfortable and develop a positive view of themselves, alongside helping them to celebrate and understand difference.

Supervising social workers and foster carers understand the important supporting role they play in encouraging the children to reflect on and understand their life story. Foster carers ensure that significant memorabilia and photographs are shared with the children and are also safely stored, so that these are available for the children when they become adults. This helps the children integrate their past into the present, to help them heal and move on into the future.

Children build good relationships with their foster carers, who know them well, listen to them and enjoy spending time with them. When children join fostering families, they are welcomed and included as family members. Many children continue to live with their fostering family as they become young adults, in 'staying put' arrangements.

Foster carers spoke about the lifelong and transformative relationships they have built with the children they have fostered. The agency's ethos on family and

belonging lays the foundations for the children to form and sustain trusting and secure relationships with their foster carers.

There is a strong agency focus on supporting the children to achieve academically. During the inspection, some children shared their personal experiences via video messages, expressing how they have been helped to grow and develop because of the care that they have received. Practical measures include providing children with individual tuition. As a result, the children benefit from a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills in order to help them to lead successful lives as adults.

Supervising social workers often go above and beyond in their role to provide additional support and visits to help children and their foster carers, particularly when they may be struggling. Creative initiatives, such as individualised reward tokens, helped one child understand and engage in his daily routine. This has led to a significant reduction in anxiety for the child. Consequently, a potential planned move for the child to a residential setting was averted.

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

Overall, safeguarding practice is good. Managers keep records of safeguarding incidents, including contacts and follow-up actions that are taken. This means that information is available for active oversight of emerging risks and identification of any patterns that may arise over a period of time.

Unannounced home visits to the foster carers' homes promote the children's safety and well-being. Any concerns are followed up in a timely manner by the supervising social workers. Managers personally visit each fostering household each year. This provides an extra level of scrutiny and oversight to ensure that the children are living in a safe environment.

Children are consulted regularly on their views about the agency and the care that they receive. Children whose first language is not English are provided with interpreters for all meetings. The children's guide is set out in a child-friendly format for different age ranges and in different languages. As a result, children are made aware of their rights and what they can expect from the care that they receive.

Supervising social workers and managers actively consult and seek feedback from foster carers around their training needs. Recent training in relation to gangs has had a significant impact on improving the supervising social workers and foster carers understanding of gang risks and dynamics that the children may be vulnerable to.

Bespoke training on criminal exploitation and gangs for a small group of older children was reported to be particularly powerful and has resulted in a programme of mentoring for some children. For one child, this has resulted in a reduction of missing-from-care incidents and improved relationships with his foster carers.

Supervising social workers obtain feedback from the children, fostering family members and external professionals to inform the foster carer's annual review. All necessary information is provided to panel members in advance of the panel meeting to enable full and proper consideration. Consequently, foster carers are only approved if they have the necessary experience and abilities to provide the children with safe and caring homes.

Supervising social workers carry out agency risk assessments and safer care plans to support foster carers in meeting the needs of the children in their care. However, these are not always updated after significant events. Although, in practice the foster carers and supervising social workers have a good understanding of the children's risks and vulnerabilities.

The quality of the agency's risk management guidance to foster carers is variable. For example, guidance for foster carers to take when a child is missing from home often does not expand further than phoning the police and safeguarding agencies.

Foster carers hold missing child profiles in the form of 'grab packs'. However, the agency does not keep copies of these. Return home interviews are not routinely undertaken by the local authorities. Consequently, key information may be missed. This has the potential to hinder the police and safeguarding agencies in locating a child missing from care.

Foster carers receive ongoing guidance and training in relation to creating a safe online environment for the children in their care. However, this could be strengthened by pre-planning and assessment of the children's use of social media and gaming.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager and directors are longstanding, visible and accessible leaders. They show a strong understanding of the service and display enthusiasm towards continuing to develop the service in the best interests of the children using it.

The agency has significantly increased its number of fostering households since the last inspection. The majority of new carers joining the agency have been recommended by current carers. The recruitment and retainment of foster carers is outstanding. This is a testament to the supportive nature and inclusive culture that permeates the agency. Managers, staff, supervising social workers and foster carers work collaboratively to provide the children with consistency and stability.

Leaders and managers have high expectations of the staff. The process for managing their performance is effective. Supervising social workers benefit from regular supervision, appraisal and developmental opportunities. The learning ethos of this agency means that when things do go wrong, managers are open to taking forward new learning to inform and improve future practice.

Managers monitor and track training, and attendance is good. However, foster carers have not undertaken specific awareness training on modern-day slavery and trafficked children. This was addressed on inspection, and there are imminent plans in place to roll out this training to all the foster carers and the staff.

A diverse range of members forms the central panel list that supports the agency's panel process. This includes care-experienced young people. The panel provides a good external overview on practice, alongside quality assurance feedback to the agency on the quality of reports being presented to the panel.

The agency tracks panel recommendations on a corresponding tracking document. This ensures that the recommendations inform foster carers' training development plans and that any actions are followed up. This system ensures that the panel recommendations don't drift and provides an extra layer of safeguarding practice to the agency.

There has been one complaint since the last inspection. This was recorded and responded to by the registered manager in line with the agency complaints policy. While the culture and practice in the agency create opportunities for children to share concerns or complaints, these opportunities are not fully maximised. Concerns raised by two children to their local authority social workers were not recognised as complaints. Consequently, the children did not see the outcome of their views acted on. This was addressed at the inspection.

Managers ensure that the children's records are clear, up to date, and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. However, some records and reports contain unhelpful abbreviations. For example, referring to the children as 'LAC' rather than by their name. This was discussed with the registered manager. He has recently run a staff workshop around the use of language and is currently working to develop this area of practice in the agency.

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

Recommendations

- The registered manager should ensure that foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. In particular, to ensure that foster carers are provided with up-to-date risk assessments and safe care plans that clearly set out strategies and actions which address children's specific risks and vulnerabilities. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.2)
- The registered manager should ensure that children receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and are kept informed of progress. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 1.6)
- The registered manager should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly, is non-stigmatising, and is recorded in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the care and support provided to children minimise the risk that they will go missing from care and reduce the risk of harm should the child go missing. This relates to ensuring that the agency hold children missing profiles and that children receive a return home interview. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 5.1)
- The registered person should ensure support for foster carers to play an active role in agreeing that contents of each child's placement plan, in conjunction with the responsible authority. This should include exploration around the benefits and risks around the children's use of social media and gaming. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 31.1)

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

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Inspector

Anne-Marie Davies, Social Care Inspector

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