

Connect Fostering Services Ltd

Connect Fostering Services Ltd
16 College Avenue, Harrow, Middlesex HA3 6HB
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Connect Fostering Services Ltd is an independent fostering agency that registered with Ofsted in 2013. The fostering service specialises in providing foster care placements for individual and sibling group placements, emergency placements, and short- and long-term placements. The agency also provides parent and child placements.

The company has a group of directors which includes the responsible individual of the fostering service. The agency's aim is '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 the inspection, the fostering agency had 37 approved fostering households with 49 children and young people in placement.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 January 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: 5 December 2014

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 make good progress while living with their foster carers. Placements are secure and stable, and children's individual needs are well met.
- The training, supervision and support of foster carers and the staff team are excellent.
- Children are safe from harm and abuse. There are strong safeguarding systems in place that help to ensure the protection of children.
- The leadership and management of the agency is strong. Plans to develop the service are ambitious and realistic, and support the service's continual improvement.
- The service meets well children's identity needs. The matching process is highly effective and promotes successful, stable placements.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Staff do not consistently record complaints or manage these in accordance with the service's complaints procedures.
- The foster carers' annual review process is not consistently robust.
- The fostering service's consultation forms are insufficiently detailed.
- Foster carers' safe caring policies are not consistently explicit in addressing children's risk-taking behaviour.
- Staff do not always conduct unannounced visits to foster carers' homes within at least a 12-month period, as required.
- Fostering panel meeting minutes fail to explicitly record discussions around changes to the recommended approval status of foster carers.

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
The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. (Regulation 18(4))	01/04/2018
(3)When undertaking a review, the fostering provider must— (a) make enquiries and obtain such information as they consider necessary in order to review whether the foster parent continues to be suitable to be a foster parent and the foster parent's household continues to be suitable. (Regulation 28(3)(a))	01/04/2018
(3)When undertaking a review, the fostering provider must— (b) seek and take into account the views of— (ii) any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 28(3)(b)(ii))	01/04/2018

Recommendations

- The wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the service. (National minimum standard 1.7) In particular, that children's consultation forms for general use and for the purpose of foster carers' annual reviews are revised to focus on the experiences of children while living with their foster carers. Where appropriate, interpreters should be used to help obtain the views of children.
- Foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. (National minimum standard 4.2) In particular, to ensure that foster carers devise safe care policies that highlight strategies which address children's specific risk-taking behaviour.
- Ensure that staff conduct at least one unannounced visit a year to foster carers' homes. (National minimum standard 21.8)

- The panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (National minimum standard 14.7) In particular, that panel minutes reflect the discussion held if the panel recommends differing terms of foster carers' approval to those that the assessing social worker recommends.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children very much feel that they are treated as 'one of the family' in their foster placements, and they have a strong sense of belonging. They quickly settle with their foster families and feel emotionally secure. Children form strong, trusting bonds with their foster families. A child told the inspector, 'I really like it here. My family are nice. They support you. We go on holiday and stuff. I see them as my family now.'

Most children make excellent progress and have very positive experiences. The vast majority of children attend school, college or training, and their attendance at their educational provision is excellent. As a result, children's learning outcomes are good. Foster carers support them to achieve their academic goals. For example, they support children with homework tasks, facilitate travel to and from school as required, and arrange for private tuition if this is identified as a need.

Children enjoy a good range of social, recreational and educational activities. Typical activities include participating in sports, attending religious festivals, enjoying family social events and attending community youth clubs. The fostering agency also facilitates social outings for children in care and their foster families. A recent example is last December's trip to a children's West End play production.

Children's healthcare outcomes are good. They have good access to primary care services and they regularly attend appointments with dentists and opticians. Children attend annual medicals and their vaccinations are kept current. Young people access specialist services as required. These include sexual health and post-natal services and advice. When children have complex medical conditions, foster carers ensure that they receive appropriate healthcare services and treatment. Arrangements for the safe administration of medication are sound.

Children are treated with dignity and respect. The fostering service ensures that children's identity needs are well met by foster carers and staff. The matching process is robust and effective. Staff pay good attention to the individual matching needs of children from the outset of placement negotiations and thereafter. For example, the service is successful in matching children with foster carers who speak the same language and dialect as children, share the same religion and have expertise in caring for unaccompanied minors and young people who are mothers. This supports successful, long-term placements.

Children receive good information about the families they are going to live with before the placement starts. This helps them to know what to expect when they move in. The ending of placements is usually carefully planned and is managed sensitively. There are very few unplanned placement endings. Staff and foster carers place the well-being of individual children at the centre of their practice. This results in successful, secure foster care placements for vulnerable children. A local authority social worker said, 'The supervising social worker always takes into

account what children have to say. She listens to children, which makes it a good match.'

Children know how to complain, but do not do so. The service has received no formal complaints. However, on occasion, children and others have indicated dissatisfaction with some aspects of placements. This has not been acknowledged or recorded as complaints, or dealt with in accordance with the service's complaints procedure. Adhering to the complaints procedure is important to ensure that any level of concern is recorded and managed in line with agency policies.

The fostering service staff encourage children to share their views and opinions about their placements and the agency in general. Staff conduct a number of differing consultation exercises to obtain children's views. These include face-to-face consultation and the distribution of consultation forms. The service's current consultation forms require review as they are insufficiently detailed and do not result in comprehensive feedback from children. Staff should also consider the more consistent use of interpreters when children do not communicate confidently in English. This would ensure that all children have the opportunity to fully voice their opinions, influence their care and shape the development of the fostering service.

Children experience increased independence, learning how to do things for themselves and take responsibility. Children benefit from remaining in stable placements. Some children experience a positive move back to live with their birth families. Some young people stay with their carers beyond the age of eighteen, in 'Staying Put' arrangements. This ensures that they experience continuous support into their early adulthood from carers they have come to know and trust.

Children have contact with their brothers, sisters, parents, friends and significant others, when it is safe for them to do so. Staff and foster carers are sensitive in ensuring that children have safe contact with their families and friends, and appropriate arrangements are in place. This is also the case when children are placed out of borough and far from their original families.

Prospective foster carers making enquiries with the fostering service feel valued and welcomed by the staff team. The assessment process is timely, and is sensitive to the needs of carers. Foster care assessments are comprehensive and analytical, and identify the strengths and competencies that foster carers have, or need to develop. This is to ensure that they are well equipped to meet the needs of children safely.

Children benefit from the close partnership working between their foster carers, the fostering service staff and other professionals. Communication is consistent and effective. This is particularly true with local authority social workers, education staff and health professionals. This close partnership working supports the effective coordination of children's care. A local authority social worker said of a member of the staff team, 'She always puts the safety and well-being of X at the centre of her practice. She also ensures X's foster carer is on board in this central area of our profession.'

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

Children are protected from harm, abuse, neglect, and bullying while living with foster carers. Children say they feel safe in their foster homes. Their carers make sure that they are safe, and teach them how to keep themselves safe. Children do not experience bullying and are protected from discriminatory behaviours.

Staff and foster carers take their safeguarding responsibilities seriously. Child protection issues are routinely discussed in staff and foster carers' supervision and training. Children benefit from the service's clear and comprehensive child protection policies, which foster carers and the staff team strictly adhere to. This helps keep children safe. Safe care policies offer foster carers guidance about caring for children safely in their households. However, some children's individual safe care policies are not tailored to address known risks. This does not help to reduce and eliminate risk-taking behaviour.

The fostering service's response to allegations made against foster carers is effective and prompt. This ensures that children are appropriately safeguarded if they make an allegation. Foster carers receive good advice and support when they are subject to allegations. Risk assessments address children's individual needs for protection, and staff keep these current. Typically, risk assessments identify and address issues such as sexual exploitation, episodes of missing, and self-harm.

Staff and foster carers manage well all incidents when children go missing. Their practice is supported by clear written policies and effective individual strategies. For example, in one case, the curfew time of a child was increased to allow ample travel time for her to return home without the foster carers having to regularly report her missing. As a consequence, the child has continued to return home within the specified time frame. This minimises the involvement of the police. Episodes of missing are on the decline due to the effectiveness of preventative strategies.

Children receive clear information about making complaints, and have opportunities to speak privately with staff of the service. However, staff do not consistently conduct annual unannounced visits to all homes as required. This limits their ability to promote the safety of children.

Children respond positively to the clear boundaries set by their foster carers. These are appropriate and encourage children's good behaviour. When children's behaviour is poor or challenging, staff assist foster carers to develop strategies and to address the offending behaviour. For example, in one case, staff advised the use of a rewards chart to monitor and support the improved behaviour of a child. Written guidance to manage this child's behaviour reads, 'Once she has stopped, discuss the behaviour with her and give her a hug.' There have been no instances of restraint being used with a child.

The fostering service has strong and effective working partnerships with other

agencies. These include children's social workers, designated officers, school personnel, and the police. Communication between all parties is consistent.

This successful collaboration promotes an effective coordinated approach to safeguarding children looked after.

The recruitment and vetting of staff and carers working for the service is thorough and helps to protect children. Detailed employment histories are obtained to ensure that prospective staff have suitable experience and qualifications in order to support and train carers. Suitable references are obtained and verified. There is a detailed approach at the assessment and preparation stage to ensure that carers and their households are safe. Thereafter, staff complete ongoing checks, to make sure foster-caring households remain safe and suitable to provide care to vulnerable children. Managers and leaders monitor, reflect and report on any safeguarding incidents.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The leadership and management of the fostering service is strong. Leaders of the service are ambitious for change, and many aspects of the fostering service's leadership and management show improvement since the last inspection. The registered manager is a qualified social worker, with good experience of managing fostering services. The agency's two directors are also qualified social workers and have experience of managing other fostering services. A staff member said of the managers, 'I really appreciate their fostering expertise.'

Leaders are enthusiastic about new developments already established since the last inspection. The agency has a clear development plan that outlines future plans for the expansion of the service. These include, for example, larger office premises and the recruitment of additional foster carers and staff. A foster carer said of the management team, 'They genuinely care, they're not superficial. Their care is backed up by their competence. They care for staff, foster carers and young people.'

The fostering service is appropriately resourced to meet the aims stated in the statement of purpose and the development plan. The service employs sufficient, qualified staff. This is reflected in the frequency and quality of support and supervision that foster carers receive. A foster carer said of the staff team, 'The best thing about the agency is their integrity and the quality experience of staff. They are resourceful and respectful.'

Staff have good opportunities for professional development. Staff supervision and training is regular and meaningful. A staff member commented, 'I never understood the need for so much supervision, but I appreciate it now.' Managers conduct staff appraisals annually. This is to ensure that staff knowledge and skills are in line with current practice and research developments. Communication between the staff team and foster carers is effective, and this results in the good coordination of children's care. A foster carer said of the staff team, 'They are

always available... they made the challenges bearable.'

The fostering panel is effective. The panel fulfils its quality assurance function well in scrutinising foster care assessments and making recommendations about the suitability of existing and prospective foster carers. The foster carers' annual review process requires improvement to maximise its efficiency. The registered manager is currently responsible for chairing annual review meetings. Leaders acknowledge the benefits to appointing an independent person to fulfil this role, and there are plans in place to do so. Some recent annual reviews have not been conducted thoroughly and have failed to explore fully standard of care issues. This is the case for one foster carer's recent annual review in particular. The administration of the fostering panel is efficient. However, meeting minutes must reflect any change in the panel's recommendation which differs from that of the assessing social worker.

The fostering service provides foster carers with excellent training. Foster carers identify this as a major strength of the service. A foster carer said of training, 'Support and training here elevate us and bring out the best in us.' The service's training programme shows significant improvement since the last inspection. Training has a strong focus on safeguarding and other relevant subject matters such as radicalisation and managing challenging behaviour. The newly introduced 13-week coaching programme offers experienced foster carers further opportunity to explore and reflect on complex issues posed by challenging placements. A foster carer said of the coaching programme, 'The therapeutic training helps me understand how children present, and how not to take things personally.'

The fostering service promotes the learning and development of those working for the service. These include members of the central list. Additionally, for example, safeguarding training specific to parent and child placements is made available to parents currently living in such placements. The fostering service regularly offers placements to social work students, to help develop their social work practice. A number of former students of the agency are now employed as supervising social workers.

Foster carers value highly the service's support groups. This offers them another avenue for learning and the opportunity to share ideas and experiences.

The fostering service continues to develop monitoring systems to assist managers and leaders to evaluate the function and operation of the service. For example, since the last inspection, managers have developed tools to regularly track progress made by individual children, their outcomes, and the review of key policies and documents. Managers routinely complete quarterly monitoring reports and monthly case file audits. This is to ensure that the standard of staff's recording is of a good standard.

Since the last inspection, the service has appointed staff to specialist posts. These help streamline and focus personnel to dedicated tasks. For example, the service now employs business and finance managers, a dedicated placements officer, outreach support workers, a psychologist and a training consultant.

The fostering service's statement of purpose outlines well the aims and objectives of the service. It provides stakeholders with information about the types of placements offered, and what to expect from the agency. There are two age-specific children's guides. These are geared for the use of young children and older young people.

Leaders and managers of the service are visible and available to children, foster carers, the staff team and external professionals. They have good oversight of the function and operation of the fostering service, and this promotes service improvement.

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: SC465868

Registered provider: Connect Fostering Services Ltd

Registered provider address: 16 College Avenue, Harrow, Middlesex HA3 6HB

Responsible individual: Kiranjit Sirpal

Registered manager: Winston McKenzie

Telephone number: 0203 7803333

Email address: winston@connectfostering.com

Inspector

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, 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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