

Connect Fostering Services Limited

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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 family owned and operated private independent fostering agency registered with Ofsted in 2013. The agency provides short- and long-term homes for children. Over half of the children placed with this agency have come to the country unaccompanied. The fostering agency also provides parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had 53 fostering households caring for 81 children. A further five young adults were 'staying put' with their foster carers.

The manager registered with Ofsted on 16 March 2023.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 August 2024

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: 7 February 2022

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 develop trusted relationships with foster carers and their families. They develop a sense of self and feel accepted by those around them. Because of this positive regard, children make progress in all areas of their lives. Explaining to the inspector why their foster carer has had such an impact on their life, one young adult said, 'She just loved me.'

Foster carers are dedicated to the children they care for and ensure that they feel part of their family and home. Children enjoy a range of experiences with their foster families, including leisure activities and holidays at home and abroad.

Foster carers are wholly positive about the support that they receive from the fostering agency. Along with regular supervision from a qualified social worker, foster carers feel able to contact anyone in the agency for support and advice when they need to. One foster carer told the inspector:

'The team is not only knowledgeable but also deeply committed to ensuring that both the children in our care and the foster families feel valued and supported. Their dedication to our well-being has made a significant difference in my journey as a foster carer.'

Monitoring of children's care plans by the registered manager ensures that staff and foster carers are proactive in following up on actions, avoiding unnecessary drift and delay for children. Supervising social workers have oversight of children's health and education to ensure that all needs are met.

Over half of the children living with the fostering agency's foster carers are children who have arrived in the country unaccompanied. Staff work hard to ensure that foster carers have the knowledge and skills they need to support the specialist needs of these children. Managers have established links with an interpreting service, which is always available, if needed, to support children in meetings. This means that children are aware of the decisions that are being made and can contribute to these.

Engaging information about the agency is provided to children in a range of formats. This reflects the diverse profile of the children who are placed. When possible, children receive information about their foster carers before they move into the foster home. This sometimes includes the opportunity to visit the foster home or to meet with foster carers online before the move. This helps to reduce children's anxiety during this period of transition.

Foster carers and staff support children as they prepare to move into adulthood. Children experience the same opportunities as their peers; taking on part-time work,

learning to drive or going to university. Work is underway to implement a formalised assessment and support tool for young adults to help target their support, helping to equip them as they move into the adult world.

Managers are in the process of implementing a series of improvements to further enhance the quality of the care provided. For example, the appointment of a therapeutic lead is supporting managers in developing a therapeutic approach within the service. These new initiatives are at various stages of development and not yet fully embedded into practice.

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

Staff and managers have responded to the last inspection by updating the use of safe care plans and risk assessments. These tools remain under review and are updated following any changes. A weekly safeguarding meeting also ensures clear management oversight of known and emerging risks for children.

Staff regularly visit children placed with foster carers, developing trusted relationships. This enables staff to undertake individual work with children. For example, work with a child in response to emerging concerns about exploitation enabled the child to understand online risks and to develop safety strategies to reduce these.

Staff and foster carers receive regular safeguarding training. The agency is responsive to emerging challenges. For example, a workshop has been implemented for foster carers and staff in response to recent social unrest and attacks focused on people seeking asylum.

When foster carers are subject to allegations or complaints, managers and staff work in partnership with placing authorities and safeguarding professionals to ensure that matters are followed up quickly. Internal investigations are returned to panel, and foster carers' ongoing suitability to foster is reviewed. However, there are missed opportunities to ensure that all possible learning is considered and acted on in these situations. For example, sometimes, allegations and complaints are considered in isolation of relevant historical patterns.

There are clear systems and processes in place to support the safe recruitment of staff and panel members to the fostering agency.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

This is a family owned and operated fostering agency. The sense of family is strong, and foster carers value this. Foster carers are confident to speak to anyone in the service, including the director, and feel that their opinions are valued.

Since the last inspection, there has been a change in the responsible individual and registered manager. However, the previous registered manager remains in the organisation as the responsible individual, which provides stability in the agency. The

senior leadership team is keen to develop the agency and has taken action to meet all five recommendations identified at the last inspection.

The fostering panel is an established, diverse group that reflects the profile of the foster carers and children. The agency has two agency decision-makers. One of these is independent of the service. However, they have a good understanding of the agency and its function to enable them to undertake the role.

Decision-making regarding foster carers' suitability is well documented. However, it is not always clear that managers or the panel are applying current statutory guidance when making assessments or applying approval conditions to foster carers. For example, in a small number of fostering households of two adults, only one of the adults has been approved as a foster carer, despite the other adult co-parenting children in the household. This leads to confusion about expectations of the foster carer, household members and of the agency's oversight of the arrangements.

Staff receive regular supervision and annual reviews of their performance. This enables them to identify areas of strength as well as areas that they want to develop. Opportunities for internal and external training support the development of staff's knowledge and skills.

Senior leaders recognise the challenges that come from being a small, family operated agency. They are alert to the risks of closed cultures and have been proactive in mitigating these. The introduction of a staff advocate enables staff members to raise any issues they may have in situations where family relationships might be a factor. Despite this, staff told the inspector that they are confident and able to speak to managers at all levels of the service. Staff feel that their ideas are welcomed and acted on.

Some elements of the fostering agency records and recording systems need attention. For example, children's and foster carers' records can still be edited and changed, even when they have been agreed with the relevant people. This is a potential vulnerability as records may not be relied on as an accurate reflection of events if a complaint is made and an investigation is carried out.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure when assessing and approving foster carers, these assessments are carried out in line with current statutory guidance. In particular, approvals should accurately reflect the caring responsibilities in the household and, where terms of approval are applied, these should be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for, including in the case of an exemption to the usual fostering limit. ('Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services')
- The registered person should ensure that policies and procedures that relate to any investigations of complaints, allegations or concerns consider how these can be carried out independently of staff who are directly involved in the practice. Also, these investigations should consider relevant historical events when considering patterns and trends. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 45, paragraph 22.9)
- The registered person should ensure that staff understand the service's policy for the record-keeping, including when these have been agreed and are no longer available for update. This is to ensure the integrity of records in the case of a complaint, allegation or investigation. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.2)

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: SC465868

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Inspector

Tracey Cogan Greig, Social Care Inspector

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