

Ideal Fostering

Ideal Fostering Limited

Anchor House, 4 Bridgeman Street, Walsall WS2 9NW

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The range of placement types provided includes emergency, long-term, medium-term, short-term and parent and child placements. The agency has a suitably experienced manager who is registered with Ofsted. The agency has 128 fostering households and just under 200 children.

The agency has had two monitoring visits and an assurance visit since the last full inspection. One monitoring visit took place on 18 December 2019, a further monitoring inspection took place on 20 May 2020 and the assurance visit took place on 18 and 19 November 2020. The reports are published on the Ofsted website.

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: 8 to 12 November 2021

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be 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	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 25 June 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Overall, children have positive experiences living with their foster carers. However, some children have experienced unplanned endings and moved on from their foster homes sooner than anticipated. Several children have made allegations against their foster carers. Although each of these has been investigated and procedures followed, the registered manager has not evaluated the allegations to help him understand if there are any patterns or themes to learn from, to improve placement stability and children's experiences.

Most children make good progress from their starting points. Supervising social workers and foster carers have a good understanding of children's achievements. These achievements are captured well in individual records that give an overview of the progress children are making. Children's views are gathered when records and achievements are reviewed, giving them input into their care and plans.

An education officer monitors children's educational achievements and offers support to children and foster carers when needed. She advocates for children to ensure that they receive the education they are entitled to. When other professionals' practice falls short, she holds them to account through constructive challenge. Children's attendance and attainment in education is good.

Foster carers promote children's health needs. They ensure that children attend primary health appointments and that they have access to additional health services if needed. The agency also monitors children's health and development needs well. This provides additional oversight, ensuring that all health needs are met and support can be provided if delays in children receiving health services are identified.

The agency has a medical professional who provides bespoke training to foster carers on childhood illness and any specific health conditions that are affecting children. Foster carers are positive about this training and find it beneficial because it helps them to understand children's needs better and provide them with personalised care.

Overall, matching of placements is good. The agency provides detailed documentation showing how they match children to foster carers. They consider the foster carers' skills and experience. This is shared with children's social workers to ensure that they agree and are aware of the agency's decision-making. On one occasion, the agency made a placement outside of a foster carer's terms of approval and did not review the terms of approval in light of this. The agency has also repeatedly used an exemption for one fostering household. Although they have followed the exemption regulations and the host local authority has agreed to the exemptions, managers have not given full consideration to the gender balance and needs of the children living there. This brings into question the agency's decision-making in this process and the use of exemptions.

Foster carers are supported well by supervising social workers and other staff in the agency. They receive regular supervision from qualified social workers. This support helps foster carers to meet the demands of their role and reflect on their practice. The quality of supervision records does not always reflect the discussions that have taken place. Some foster carers' supervision records are generic and contain outdated information. This does not provide a clear account of what is covered within each supervision meeting.

The agency is in the process of introducing a therapeutic parenting approach. Approved foster carers are attending therapeutic parenting training and new applicants undertake this as part of the pre-approval training. The agency has a small team of support workers who offer tailored direct work to children and foster carers when needed. This helps children to explore and understand their behaviour and has a positive impact on their emotional well-being.

Prospective foster carers are welcomed when they initially contact the agency. Those who go on to apply feel well prepared by the application process and the training that is provided.

The agency involves foster carers and children in the development of the agency. For example, the agency has a children's council to share and develop ideas and foster carers have been involved in training other carers, developing a foster carer online 'hub' and attending foster carer support groups.

The agency provides social events throughout the year for fostering households. These are enjoyed by the children and carers who attend.

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

Inspectors were aware during this inspection that serious child protection allegations were being investigated by the appropriate authorities. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate allegations of this kind, inspectors considered the actions (where appropriate) taken by the setting in response to the allegations, alongside other evidence available at the time of the inspection, to inform judgements.

Children are spoken to regularly by the visiting supervising social workers. Children's overall wishes, views and feelings about their foster carers are regularly sought and reported on. They have positive relationships with their foster carers' supervising social worker. This gives children the opportunity to share any concerns they have. When children have felt ready and safe to do so, they have shared their worries and concerns with supervising social workers.

When new adults join a fostering household, Disclosure and Barring Service checks are completed. An additional measure in the form of a new household member initial assessment has recently been implemented. This will provide further exploration and

scrutiny of new adults introduced to children by their foster carers prior to a formal updated assessment being completed.

The allocated safeguarding lead responds quickly and appropriately to safeguarding concerns. During a period when she was away from the agency for six months, the agency did not always notify Ofsted in a timely manner of safeguarding concerns, preventing the regulator from reviewing the service effectively. Despite this delay, other safeguarding processes were followed.

The agency has had several children make allegations against foster carers. The agency's response to individual allegations is appropriate. However, the registered manager has not reviewed or analysed why there has been an increase in allegations and if safeguarding practices need to be improved. Consequently, the registered manager does not know or understand why there is this increase and what he needs to do to respond. This lack of evaluation and oversight does not fully promote children's welfare.

Supervising social workers create safe care assessments for foster carers which are implemented and regularly reviewed and updated. Foster carers are guided by children's risk assessments and demonstrate an understanding of their role in minimising risk for children.

The agency is not always proactive in pre-empting potential risks. One foster carer has not attended training relating to the needs of a child who was placed with her. The training scheduled to take place was cancelled, however the agency still placed the child with the foster carer. This left the carer without information to help them in her care of the child.

Inspectors found that, on some occasions, there had been a lack of curiosity surrounding potential safeguarding concerns and the agency was too trusting of some foster carers' explanations when further exploration would have been beneficial. This lack of professional curiosity exposes children to the risk of harm.

Staff recruitment and vetting practices require some improvement. In some cases, managers have not verified the reasons why staff have left previous employment where they worked with children and vulnerable adults, to help confirm that all staff are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

Unannounced visits to fostering households take place twice yearly. Recordings of these visits are variable but show that the children are living in safe and secure homes.

The number of incidents involving children who go missing from home is low. when children do go missing from home, staff and carers follow procedures to locate children and help them to return quickly and safely.

The agency positively challenges local authority professionals when they disagree with how they respond to safeguarding issues. On one occasion, this resulted in further investigation taking place to keep a child safe.

The agency does not ensure that they disseminate their own policies and ensure that national health guidance is followed by foster carers who have parent and child placements. This is in relation to foster carers who smoke or vape or who have recently stopped smoking or vaping.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The registered manager delegates monitoring and reviewing to other managers. This limits his oversight and he is reliant on others to inform him of issues, concerns and progress. At times, this does not create shared understanding of the areas for development within the agency.

The agency has some monitoring tools in place to monitor children's health, education and safeguarding matters. As an agency, they can ensure that children's individual needs are met. However, managers do not effectively analyse and evaluate information from this monitoring activity to consider patterns, trends and learning to develop practice and further support and improve children's safety, experiences and outcomes.

Leaders and managers are approachable. Staff and foster carers are positive about them and their accessibility. Supervising social workers receive regular supervision. The quality of this is good and reviews practice and monitors cases held. The registered manager is provided with supervision by an independent consultant to address potential areas of conflict arising from the employment of family members in the agency. However, the independent consultant's role is not documented in the statement of purpose nor is there a policy and procedure for staff to follow should they become concerned about a conflict of interest.

The agency's statement of purpose is not reviewed and updated regularly. It does not contain information about all the services it provides or the types of placements it offers.

The fostering panel functions effectively, is safe and provides support and challenge appropriately. The panel chair is experienced and raises practice issues when appropriate to help the agency to improve. The agency decision-maker is the registered manager and he also provides pre-approval training which informs potential carers' assessments. As a registered manager, his operational role means he has a conflict of interest when undertaking the agency decision-maker role. During the inspection, this was discussed and acknowledged as an area that needs to be addressed.

The agency has a small number of parent and child placements. Internal assessments are completed to assess the foster carers' suitability to care for parents

and their children. However, these are not presented to the agency's panel. In addition, the agency decision-maker does not stipulate the number of children that foster carers can care for. Although this is not a specific regulatory requirement, guidance states that this would be good practice. On one occasion, a placement was made outside of the foster carers' terms of approval on an emergency basis. The foster carers' terms of approval were not reviewed to reflect this and whether this could be done again if the need arose.

Foster carers are very positive about the agency and the support they are provided with from the staff and managers. In the past, the agency has struggled to get feedback from foster carers but this has improved. They have now developed an online platform to gather feedback and this is proving to be more effective.

The agency has had one decision relating to the suitability of a foster carer referred to the independent reviewing mechanism (IRM). The IRM provided three areas of advice to the agency. Verbally, the agency informed inspectors that they had taken the advice on board and made changes to practice. However, there has been no written review or analysis of their learning.

The agency has been successful in recruiting a number of new carers. However, managers have not reviewed patterns and trends in the agency's growth and development. Six fostering households (10%) approved in the last year resigned and a number of new carers do not have placements. Although there may be some link to the pandemic, the review and analysis about this is not clear. There is little understanding about why new foster carers are not used and why some foster carers have resigned within the first year.

The panel chair's appraisal is up to date. Although the agency seeks feedback from panel member's about the chair's performance, it is not evident how this is used in the panel chair's appraisal. This limits the effectiveness of the appraisal process.

The agency has experienced some staff changes but this has stabilised. Foster carers and children did not report that this has negatively affected them.

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 fostering service provider must keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide, and notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4(a)(b)) In particular, ensure that the statement of purpose is updated and reviewed and contains information about the types of placements and services the agency provides, and that details about, and the role of, the independent consultant are clear.	27 January 2022
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)) This relates to supervising social workers being more professionally curious when they have potential concerns about a foster carer's practice, ensuring that foster carers are aware and implementing policies relating to parent and child placements and that foster carers have the training needed to care for the children they look after. In addition, when the designated safeguarding lead is away from work have appropriate cover arrangements in place.	27 January 2022
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))	27 January 2022

Specifically, the registered person should ensure that he verifies why someone has left their previous employment when they have worked with children or vulnerable adults.	
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having 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(a)(b)) In particular, the registered provider and manager should ensure that foster carers are approved to care for the children that are placed with them and consider how they use exemptions.	27 January 2022
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. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b)) The registered manager must ensure that he is actively involved in reviewing and monitoring the quality of the service to understand, and when necessary act on, patterns and trends that emerge in all areas of the service.	27 January 2022
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)) This specifically relates to notifying the regulator of safeguarding incidents as detailed in schedule 7 in a timely manner.	27 January 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that views about the chair's performance are sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings, such as prospective foster carers and social workers who present reports to the panel. For all other panel members, the panel chair should conduct the performance review. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering services', paragraph 5.15)
- The registered person should ensure that the agency decision-maker has sufficient independence from the assessment and review process to enable them to reach a decision that shows due regard for Regulation 27, and for *Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM* [2009]. This particularly relates to ensuring that the agency decision-maker is not involved in processes relating to the assessment and review of foster carers which could be seen as having an impact on their ability to make an impartial decision regarding suitability. ('Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering services, page 19')

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: SC472125

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