

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

This privately owned independent fostering agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The fostering agency provides emergency, long-term, short-term, respite and parent and child placements. At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had 127 fostering households providing care for 190 children.

The agency has two registered managers. One is a director of the fostering agency. The second registered with Ofsted in February 2023.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 May 2023

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	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 8 November 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Foster carers provide individualised care that supports positive outcomes for children. Foster carers are committed to the children that they care for, taking pride in their progress and achievements. One foster carer told the inspectors, 'I love her with my heart. She makes my heart jump.'

Children build strong, trusted relationships with foster carers and are fully accepted as part of their foster family. Children enjoy family events and holidays abroad with their foster carers. One child wrote, '[Name of foster carer] has been like a massive rock and has always been there for me through everything.'

Although most children experience stable, long-term placements, some have experienced placement endings since the last inspection. This is an improving picture. There is some tension between the placements and the social work elements of the fostering agency regarding decision-making. Managers are aware of this and have already begun to take action to improve matching. This work is ongoing and the impact is, as yet, untested.

Managers have established groups that enable both children and foster carers to make social links. Some of these developments, for example a foster carers' listening circle, support foster carers' resilience and well-being. For children, establishing a weekly football club and a DJ project has helped them to make friends and develop new interests.

The fostering agency provides additional services to enable foster carers to meet children's health and education needs. The support of these specialist members of staff provides foster carers with the knowledge and confidence to advocate for children in a timely way.

Children receive a comprehensive welcome pack and life-story box when they move into their foster home. This includes informative guides that are translated into a range of languages and communication tools. However, the children's guide does not clearly inform children about what will happen if they complain to the agency. This leaves children without information about how their voices will be heard by agency managers.

Children and foster carers are supported to achieve long-term stability through 'staying put' arrangements. Managers have plans to improve their preparation for children as they move into adulthood. Managers have begun work to implement a structured independence project for children, but this is not yet in operation.

Supervising social workers sometimes experience challenges in gaining relevant information about children and their plans from placing social workers. Managers have responded by identifying a member of staff to focus on this area. This ensures

that close monitoring and regular follow-up help foster carers to receive all the information that they need.

Overall, foster carers feel supported by their supervising worker and listened to by the agency. There have been some cases of foster carers experiencing changes of supervising social worker in recent months. For some foster carers, this has negatively impacted on the relationship with their social worker. Despite this, foster carers told the inspectors that they are confident that if they needed support, the wider fostering agency staff team would ensure that this was available.

Prospective foster carers receive a warm welcome when applying to the fostering agency and are well informed about the process they are about to embark on. Prospective foster carers feel that the assessment process leaves them well prepared for the fostering task.

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

Foster carers have access to a range of training that enables them to understand children's trauma and how to safeguard children from risk. For example, specialist training in managing children's anger equips foster carers to respond to children in distress.

The fostering service provides a therapeutic support service to foster carers. Led by a psychotherapist and including staff who provide direct placement support, this service ensures a timely response to carers and children experiencing crisis.

Children's care is informed by individualised risk assessments and safe care plans. These provide foster carers with clear information about how to safeguard children. However, when a foster carer is providing care for a parent and child, these documents sometimes lack clarity about the foster carer's responsibility for the supervision of day-to-day care of the child. This potentially leaves foster carers without essential guidance to inform the care that they provide.

Managers ensure that there is a focus on responses to children who go missing from home or who are at risk of exploitation. Identified lead staff members and helpful links with local police support staff and foster carers to develop their knowledge in relation to exploitation and radicalisation. When there are delays, for example in receiving information from independent return home interviews, managers have implemented internal processes to ensure that staff respond quickly to support foster carers and children.

Allegations against foster carers are followed up quickly and in detail. Managers have established good working relationships with local safeguarding partners to support this. However, although managers refer these matters to the fostering panel, this is not managed consistently. For example, sometimes these matters are referred for information and therefore are not considered by the agency decision-maker. This means that foster carers who have been subject to an allegation do not always have their continued suitability to foster reviewed.

There has been a focus on improving the safer recruitment of staff since the last inspection. This has resulted in significant improvements. However, managers have not ensured that this extends to one consultant who is contracted to provide management supervision on behalf of the agency. This impacts the consistency of otherwise good practice in this area.

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

The management of the fostering agency is going through a process of change. Since February 2023, the agency has had two registered managers. The roles and responsibilities in this arrangement are not clearly defined, and this has resulted in some confusion for staff and foster carers about the management structure of the service. There are elements of the leadership and management of the fostering agency that require strengthening.

Most staff report that they are well supported by available managers. However, a number of changes to the staff team in the past six months have, at times, negatively impacted staff dynamics and morale.

Managers do not always ensure that agency policy is understood and implemented. This can result in confusion and, as a result, agency policy is not always adhered to. For example, not all staff are clear about the purpose of unannounced visits and agency information on this is confusing. This impacts the consistency of staff practice.

The panel central list is diverse, and the deliberations of panel members ensure good scrutiny of assessments and foster carer reviews. However, managers do not always demonstrate good understanding of panel process. Because of this, some practice in this area does not comply with regulations or guidance. For example, managers have implemented a system on non-quorate panel meetings to consider some foster carers' annual reviews. This practice undermines the panel process and dilutes the independence that it brings. The lack of annual panel training jointly with agency staff and the lack of a system to provide feedback to panel prevent shared learning to inform practice.

Managers do not understand the process by which a foster carer can exceed the usual fostering limit. When this was identified during the inspection, managers took immediate action to remedy the situation and to implement changes to the process to ensure regulatory compliance.

Responses to complaints are clear and timely, with evidence that managers learn from matters raised and act to strengthen practice when necessary. There have been two complaints since the last inspection. In addition, Ofsted received an anonymous complaint during the inspection. This was considered during the inspection process and has been closed.

The responsible individual has moved into this role since the last inspection. She is not from a social work background and is developing her skills and knowledge in relation to the strategic oversight of a social care service. As yet, she has not undertaken training regarding the management of safeguarding or the role of the responsible individual, to support her learning.

The new registered manager is committed to the success of the agency and has a developing awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. She had implemented a priority action plan before this inspection and has been quick to respond to issues raised during this inspection.

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, The 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 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. The registered provider must ensure that— where the registered provider is an organisation, the responsible individual, from time to time, such training as is appropriate to ensure that they have the experience and skills necessary for carrying on the fostering agency. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b) (2)(b)) In particular, ensure that managers understand the purpose and function of the agency fostering panel. Specifically, ensure that: the fostering panel is quorate; when a foster carer is presented to a fostering panel for a review of their continued suitability to foster after an allegation, that panel makes a recommendation and the agency decision-maker makes a decision on the matter; that the quality assurance function of panel includes a process for providing feedback to the panel members; that there is an annual training event that involves both the agency and the panel members.	11 August 2023

Also, ensure that where a foster carer is caring for children above the usual fostering limit, that their approval allows for this.

Also, ensure that managers take action to strengthen matching processes, ensuring that, where possible, current information from the supervising social worker is considered when reaching matching decisions.

Also, ensure that the responsible individual undertakes training and development to strengthen their understanding of legislation and regulation relating to fostering, and the role of the responsible individual.

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that recruitment checks for staff working under contract or as consultants to the agency are the same as those implemented for permanent staff. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.2)
- The registered person should ensure that, in parent and child placements, the placement plans and risk assessments clarify the respective roles and responsibilities of the foster carer and the parent in relation to the child. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering services', 2.14)
- The registered person should ensure that the children's guide contains information about how the agency responds to complaints from children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 16.4)
- The registered provider should ensure that all staff understand the policies of the fostering agency and implement these consistently in their practice. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.4)

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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Inspectors

Tracey Coglan Greig, Social Care Inspector
Natasha Skinner, Social Care Inspector

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