

Foster Cares Ltd

Foster Cares Limited

Foster Cares Ltd, 7 Fern Court, Bracken Hill Business Park, Peterlee, County Durham SR8 2RR.

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework.

Information about this independent fostering agency

Foster Cares Ltd is a medium-sized, family-run independent fostering agency. It consists of a main branch based in Durham and an office that operates from Warrington.

There are seven supervising social workers and one recruitment social worker across the two offices. There is administrative support in both offices. The agency also employs independent social workers to carry out assessments of prospective foster carers. Other independent social workers undertake the foster carers' annual reviews.

The agency offers placements for children from birth to 18 years old. There are a number of 'staying put' arrangements for young adults.

The range of services offered includes short-term and long-term placements, as well as mother-and-baby and bridging placements. The service looks after children who have disabilities and a small number of children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers.

The agency currently provides foster care to 90 children with 68 fostering families. Eleven new foster carers have been recruited over the last year. There are currently another 17 prospective foster carers being assessed.

The agency has its own in-house respite care arrangements for providing fostering families with breaks, holiday support and short-term care in the event of an emergency.

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 October 2017

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: 27 June 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:

- The children achieve exceptionally good outcomes while living with their foster carers. They receive very high-quality, nurturing care.
- Children enjoy living with their fostering families and, in the overwhelming majority of cases, are extremely settled. There are very few unplanned endings to placements.
- Foster carers and the agency keep children safe from harm. There are well-written, easily understood safeguarding procedures. Foster carers and staff receive good-quality training in child protection.
- The large majority of children do not go missing from home, misuse drugs or alcohol or take unnecessary risks.
- Children of school age are all in full-time education. The agency prioritises good educational outcomes and understands that these are important indicators of the children's future life chances.
- The fostering service is very well managed by a permanent, qualified registered manager. She is ably supported by a responsible individual and team leader who are both very experienced. Monitoring by managers makes a major contribution to the children's improving experiences and outcomes.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- A requirement has been made because some staff and panel members' files did not contain full employment histories. Telephone reference verification conversations are not recorded in detail. These shortfalls were remedied during the inspection.
- Although the fostering panel minutes have improved since the last inspection, there is scope for further improvement.
- The responsible individual's supervision meetings are not yet recorded formally.

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
<p>Fitness of workers</p> <p>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, or allow a person to whom paragraph (2) applies, to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>In particular, the registered person must ensure that all staff and members of the central list have full employment history recorded, with an explanation of any gaps. (Regulation 20(1) and (3)(c) and Schedule 1).</p>	<p>31/12/2017</p>

Recommendations

- Ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members. In particular, improve the language style of the minutes so as to produce an easily understandable, professional record of the discussion. (NMS 14.7)
- Ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries made to each referee to verify the references should be recorded in full on the staff or panel member's recruitment file. (NMS 19.1)
- Ensure that suitable arrangements exist for the professional supervision of the agency's registered person. In particular, ensure that the responsible individual's meetings with their line manager are formally recorded. (NMS 24.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children receive exceptionally good levels of care. They live with highly skilled, experienced foster carers, who care for them as though they were their own. As a result, children show very good progress in their placements.

Three children from another country were described as 'completely wild' when they first arrived. There was a time when their behaviour was so extreme that there was a risk they might be separated. The foster carers showed exceptional skill and determination. As a result, the children now play with toys, attend school or nursery, and are learning to speak English. They have been able to stay together as a family.

Children receive genuine warmth and love in their fostering families. They feel part of the family and many have formed very positive relationships with the foster carers' birth children. One child commented, 'I have found my time with [my foster carers] amazing. I couldn't have had better people to live with for eight years. They have given me everything I need, and more. They have not just been my carers. They have been true inspirations and role models and I can honestly say I wouldn't have been where I am today, if it wasn't for them.'

Children enjoy a wide range of activities with their foster carers. The agency also organises group activities during school holidays. This enables the children to meet each other and enjoy being with others in a similar situation. For example, during the inspection, the agency organised a calendar and Christmas card activity. The children were relaxed and produced some lovely artwork. Some children enjoyed themselves so much that they asked if they could come to the office again.

The staff and the registered manager maintain productive relationships with parents and professionals. They support positive contact arrangements, in line with the placing authorities' plans. When contact proves not to be positive for the child, staff challenge arrangements appropriately.

The staff said that good-quality matching is the key to their success in maintaining stable, supportive placements. The staff and the registered manager play a key role in decision-making about whether to accept a referral. They also decide where children should be placed. Foster carers are closely involved in these decisions. They commented that they feel 'part of the professional team'. As a result, there is a very low level of placement disruption.

Many of the placements have continued for a number of years. This helps the children to develop attachments and achieve a sense of permanence. When placements have ended unexpectedly, some children have been able to move to known respite foster carers. This avoids the trauma of moving the child to an unknown family.

Children receive very good healthcare. For example, some children who are seeking

asylum in this country arrive with multiple health conditions. In some cases, these include high levels of tooth decay, requiring hospital admission. Foster carers support their children through difficult medical and dental procedures.

Some children who have disabilities have to attend numerous healthcare appointments. This is a huge commitment for their foster carers. They show exceptional dedication and, as a result, children make very good progress. Some are achieving milestones which were not thought to be attainable.

The agency's leaders and managers are justifiably proud that 100% of children of school age are enrolled in and attending education. Children have very high levels of school attendance. Foster carers prioritise education. Some pay for additional support to help children gain skills and confidence in core subjects.

One foster carer found suitable school and nursery places for three children who did not speak English. They displayed extremely complex behaviour as a result of not having previously experienced any boundaries in their lives. The foster carer used her local knowledge to find a suitable school that would cope. As a result, the children have made very good progress.

Foster carers, staff and managers have a very good understanding of children's rights. Foster carers and staff advocate strongly for children and make sure that they receive the services that they need.

Children enjoy a wide range of hobbies and activities. Many children have the opportunity to go on holiday with their foster carers and some have been overseas. One foster carer had a holiday home in Turkey. She took her fostered child there regularly. He was Turkish, so going back to his homeland helped him to keep in touch with his language and culture.

The agency has excellent arrangements for recruiting foster carers. There is a mobile recruitment office, which is a small camper van. The recruitment coordinator takes the van to any location where there is a need for additional foster carers. She has a warm, friendly approach, which puts people at their ease. The coordinator also carries out initial home visits. This provides continuity for the prospective applicants, because they have already met.

Foster carers receive exceptionally high-quality support from their supervising social workers. One foster carer said that their supervising social worker is 'always there, always caring, always chasing things up...our social worker goes above and beyond'.

The agency respects and values foster carers as professionals. They are always consulted about any significant changes to their child's plans. Foster carers are confident and assertive. They are empowered to make many day-to-day decisions about the children in their care. This helps children to lead normal lives and helps to avoid them being 'singled out' by their peers as a child who is looked after. Foster carers were full of praise for the agency's training programme. They can request training in any relevant area. Foster carers complete their training, support and development standards within the required timescale.

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

The agency has good safeguarding practice. The supervising social workers understand the children's safeguarding needs. They take necessary action to ensure that children are safe. This includes preparing and updating risk assessments. These cover the children's daily activities and specific areas of vulnerability.

Risk assessments do not always cover the use of corrective measures which are prescribed by medical professionals to improve certain limb conditions. If these measures restrict movement, they should be risk assessed because they potentially restrict children's liberty. This was addressed immediately, so no recommendation has been made.

A very small number of children have gone missing from their foster homes. Most of the incidents involve the same children. The staff and the registered manager have a good understanding of the reasons why these children go missing. Usually, it is because they are going through particularly difficult periods in their lives. This means that going missing is not connected with the quality of care provided.

When children do go missing, foster carers report this to the on-call supervising social worker promptly. The agency staff always act correctly in order to help the child to be found quickly. Children are helped to understand the risks involved in going missing.

Foster carers receive very good-quality training. This equips them with the skills necessary to support children when they struggle to manage their behaviour. For example, they are required to do safeguarding training before they are approved. This helps to ensure, from the outset, that they are aware of the risks that children face. Foster carers have considerable expertise in managing extreme distress and the after-effects of trauma. This has led to positive outcomes for individual children.

The agency works closely with placing authorities. The manager requests strategy meetings to help protect children from harm. When there are specific safeguarding concerns, the agency acts swiftly. All of the relevant authorities are informed. The agency sends notifications to Ofsted as required.

The agency has well-organised staff recruitment processes. Applicants complete detailed application forms, and are asked to account for any gaps in employment history. Two staff whose files were inspected had not completed this form in full. The missing information was obtained during the inspection.

The panel members' files did not contain a detailed application form. As a result, none of the three panel members' files inspected showed their employment history. A requirement has been made. The registered manager took action during the inspection to issue panel members with much more detailed application forms.

Six out of the seven staff and panel members' files examined had a signature and

date to show that the agency verifies written references by phone. One file did not have this information recorded. Practice could be further improved by recording the conversation with the referee in more detail. A recommendation has been made.

All social work staff have enhanced, up-to-date DBS checks. These have, in the past, also been obtained for the administrative staff. The agency recently applied to renew an enhanced DBS check on an administrator. The application was turned down on the grounds that the role did not involve unsupervised contact with children. The registered manager was advised that they should be eligible for a standard DBS check. She acted on this information immediately.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

After the last inspection, the former team manager made a successful application to be registered with Ofsted. As a result, there has been a considerable improvement in the quality of monitoring by managers. This has led to further improvements in the children's experiences and outcomes.

The fostering service is a family-run business. The board includes the company's owner and the responsible individual. This means that the company retains a 'personal touch'. Foster carers and staff commented on the advantages of this. For example, the agency can make important decisions about resources for children very quickly. Foster carers therefore feel 'listened to' and connected with the company's leaders.

The company has grown steadily since it was established. This has been managed in a sustainable way, which ensures that the service remains financially viable.

The board of directors receives a quarterly report on the agency's development. These reports have improved considerably since the last inspection. They are very detailed and concise, providing a very thorough overview of progress.

Leaders and managers prioritise children's needs at all times. They use the agency's electronic data systems to report on specific targets for the children. The registered manager can demonstrate how the children's outcomes have improved over time. For example, for the year ending in April 2017, 99.1% of children were so settled in their placements that they did not require respite care.

The agency's managers produce a detailed and accurate statement of purpose. The registered manager updated this document recently and sent it to Ofsted. There is a very good children's guide, which was written in consultation with children. Leaders and managers use their annual report to summarise the progress that has been made over the year.

The registered manager uses consultation with children, foster carers and professionals to improve the service. For example, children are asked for questions to put to prospective foster carers when they come to the fostering panel meeting. There is wide consultation before every foster carer's review. Children are also

consulted about their group activities and the agency's annual group events. The inspector saw many examples of feedback from children, foster carers and professionals. For example, some social workers said, 'The care provided by [the foster carers] has been to an exceptionally high standard. They ensure they have everything the children need to be comfortable and happy'; and, '[The young person] is very close to his carers... he states that he is the happiest he has been for a long time.'

Staff receive regular, good-quality supervision. This includes a review of training and development needs. Staff value the open-door policy with regard to consultation with managers. They describe them as accessible and approachable.

The registered manager receives regular supervision from the responsible individual. Both are based in the Peterlee office. There is an experienced team manager in the Warrington office, who supervises the small staff team based there. She is also very accessible to staff.

The registered manager visits the Warrington office approximately every two weeks. This is a round trip of approximately five hours. At other times, she is available by phone or email to support the Warrington team leader. The responsible individual is very closely involved with the day-to-day running of the agency. This helps to support the registered manager's demanding role across the two distant sites.

The requirement from the last inspection about the situation of the Warrington office has been met. The Warrington office provides training and support for foster carers. It does not fulfil all the functions of a fostering service branch. Leaders and managers are aware that if the Warrington service continues to grow, it may require separate registration. At the moment, service growth does not justify this major financial commitment.

The recommendations made at the last inspection, about the matters listed below, are all met:

- recruiting panel members to a central list
- the timeliness of the decisions made by the agency decision-maker
- management monitoring
- written reports to the agency's board of directors
- the timeliness of safeguarding notifications.

The final recommendation has been repeated. This is because the panel minutes have not improved sufficiently to meet the national minimum standard. They include some subjective and, at times, colloquial language. They do not always reflect the business-like and professional conduct of the panel meetings.

The responsible individual has quarterly meetings with the company's owner. Both are qualified, registered social workers. These are supervisory meetings, but are not documented as such. Recording these meetings is important for accountability. It is

also requirement of the Health and Care Professions Council registration process. A recommendation has been made to formalise the responsible individual's supervision arrangements.

The registered manager also undertook to make minor changes to the agency's complaints and panel procedures. These are not the subject of recommendations, as there is no impact on children.

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: SC036057

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Inspector

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