

Next Stage For Fostering Ltd

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Adlington Suite, Paragon House, Chorley New Road, Horwich, Bolton BL6 6HG

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned. It was registered in September 2016. At the time of the inspection, two approved fostering households were providing foster placements for three children and young people and one staying put placement. Five children and young people have been placed with the agency since it was registered.

The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short-term
- long-term
- respite
- parent and child.

Inspection dates: 13 to 15 September 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: this is the agency's first inspection since registration.

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children are safe in their foster families.
- Young people placed with the agency are not involved in risk-taking behaviour, such as going missing from home.
- All children and young people placed with the agency regularly attend school or college.
- Children and young people either benefit from living alongside their brothers and sisters or by having meaningful contact with them, supported by their foster carers.
- Children have positive relationships with their foster families and have a sense of belonging. Although the agency is in its infancy, one young person has been enabled to remain with her foster carers under 'staying put' arrangements.
- Good partnership working exists between agency staff and local authorities.
- Foster carers feel valued by the agency and feel that they work as part of a team.
- The small size of the agency means that all staff have good knowledge of the agency's foster carers and children placed. This helps them to provide effective support in an emergency.
- The agency's staffing levels are good. The agency is still in the early stages of development but staffing levels are at a level that will enable staff to provide high levels of support as the agency expands.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Ensure that feedback from stakeholders informs the development of the agency and is included in its internal review reports.
- Ensure that matching documents address the potential impact on children already living in the fostering household.
- Ensure that risk assessments include the action that foster carers should take in the event of young people being missing from home.
- Ensure that staff escalate concerns regarding lack of essential information on children to the relevant body.

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
Ensure that the system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authorities. (Regulation 35(3))	31/10/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that children’s safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. (National minimum standard 4.1)
Specifically, that young people’s risk assessments contain clear strategies about the actions to take if young people go missing from home; and that foster carers’ safe caring policies are shared with children and young people in a way that they can clearly understand.
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child’s assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to make sure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. (National minimum standard 15.1)
In particular, ensure that matching documents detail the potential impact on existing household members.
- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. (National minimum standard 19.2)
Specifically, this refers to records of all interviews conducted that document discussion about issues arising from application forms; and close examination and follow up when inconsistencies are evident.
- Ensure that the foster carer is given a copy of the child’s placement plan as soon

as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service follows up with the responsible authority. (National minimum standard 31.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Although the agency is in its infancy, children and young people placed with the agency's foster carers enjoy positive relationships with their foster families. They are benefiting from a consistency in care and are thriving within these stable placements. Those approaching transition benefit from learning independence skills that will help them in the future, such as how to manage their own money and how to cook a healthy meal. One young person has been enabled to continue to live alongside her brother and sister after her 18th birthday, because of 'staying put' arrangements. The registered manager has also commissioned an adult support worker from within the wider organisation to provide support to this young person, thus demonstrating the agency's commitment to ensuring positive outcomes for young people who are in its care.

The agency has child-friendly profiles on foster families that it sends electronically to placing social workers to share with children, prior to meeting their new family. This can help to reduce their anxieties. While placement stability is good, current matching documentation does not consider the impact that the potential placement may have on children already living in the family. If this was actively considered, strategies could be considered to alleviate the issues.

Children and young people feel part of their foster families. They are involved in the usual family activities and events, such as family holidays. Young people's individual interests and talents are also actively encouraged. Examples include going to cadets and a youth club and actively promoting young people's creative talents, such as sewing. Young people also receive support to gain work experience. These opportunities help to broaden young people's experiences, develop peer relationships, and assist them to gain employment in the future. They have grown in confidence as a result.

Children and young people are able to live alongside their brothers and sisters. Foster carers also promote meaningful contact between children who are unable to live together and with their family members. They support these relationships and do not undermine them. They are clear about their role and the importance of working together in the children's best interests. One parent commented in feedback requested by Ofsted, 'The foster carers are always very caring and encouraging. I have had no complaints. My children are lovely people and I'm proud of them.'

On a day-to-day basis, children's experiences in foster care, and because of the actions taken by the agency, are positive. Foster carers support children to attend school or college and to access appropriate services to meet their physical and emotional health needs. As a result, they are making good progress as they learn to address issues from their past.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is good. The registered manager undertook the assessment for both of the currently approved fostering

families. She has substantial experience in fostering and reports reflect appropriate challenge and analysis. Reports demonstrate the applicants' ability to care for children safely and competently. However, due to recent expansion of the team the registered manager is in the process of introducing new supervising social workers.

Support to approved foster carers is good. Foster carers speak positively about the agency and the support they receive. Inspectors received positive comments during the inspection and in the annual survey returns requested by Ofsted. Examples of these include:

- 'Everyone is very friendly and welcoming.'
- 'Everything up to now has been fully explained, and any questions have been answered to my total satisfaction.'
- 'The registered manager is very dedicated and driven to help all of us achieve the very best we can for the children in our care.'
- 'I feel every person in the family matters.'
- 'We have received 100% support and commitment from Next Stage for Fostering.'

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

Children say that they feel safe in their foster families. They receive information about how to make a complaint or raise any issues of concern when they are initially placed with the agency's foster carers. Those spoken to during the inspection expressed confidence in the registered manager and were confident that they knew how to contact her. Supervising social workers ensure that they see children regularly. In addition, twice-yearly, unannounced visits help ensure that children are receiving high-quality care when the foster carer is not expecting a social worker to visit.

Each foster carer compiles a safe-caring policy. This outlines how they will undertake the care of a child safely on a day-to-day basis. This reduces the potential for their actions to be misinterpreted. While the agency shares these with placing social workers, it has not always done so with children, or in an age-appropriate way, so that children clearly understand the rules of the home. In addition, while risk assessments outline known risks for each individual young person, they do not always contain sufficient detail to ensure that foster carers are equipped with clear action plans in the event of an emergency, such as the action to take if a young person fails to return home as arranged. Foster carers are reliant on making contact with the agency, rather than having an agreed strategy already in place to reduce delay. Although at the current time young people placed with the agency are not engaging in risk-taking behaviours, an amendment to practice now will ensure a more robust system, supporting good safeguarding practice.

Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities to keep children safe. They all attended training in safeguarding, paediatric first aid and behaviour management prior to having a child placed. In addition, specialist training on topics such as e-safety, radicalisation and child sexual exploitation are available. The agency does not promote the use of restraint. However, if physical intervention is required, as part of a child-specific behaviour management policy, foster carers will receive specialist

training. Foster carers talk positively about the quality of training they receive. They feel well equipped for the task of fostering.

The agency undertakes a range of suitable vetting checks on foster carers, staff and fostering panel members. This includes verification of the reason why an individual who has previously worked with children has left that position. This is good safeguarding practice. However, on occasion the registered manager has undertaken an interview of a staff member prior to obtaining their application form and made no record of this discussion. Hence, it is difficult to be assured that appropriate issues were discussed or that information given on the application form was explored. On another occasion, a discrepancy on an individual's certificate of qualification had gone unnoticed. The registered manager immediately explored this during the inspection and a satisfactory explanation obtained.

The agency is clear about its safeguarding responsibilities. It shares its policies with relevant local authorities and notifies appropriate bodies of any safeguarding concerns. However, there have been no allegations or complaints since registration.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

A qualified and experienced registered manager manages the fostering service effectively. She was fully involved in the registration of the agency in 2016 and is a dynamic and enthusiastic leader. She has been involved in the development of the agency from the start, demonstrating a commitment to foster carers and to improving outcomes for children.

In the early days of its registration, the registered manager took responsibility for all the tasks within the agency, including the recruitment of, assessment of and support to foster carers. However, there is now a small team of qualified social workers undertaking these tasks alongside her. They receive regular, good-quality supervision, which enables them to reflect on their practice. They receive encouragement to express their views about the development of the agency and the registered manager is keen to utilise their individual skills and interests. This helps individuals feel valued and they commit to the ethos of the agency.

The central list of fostering panel members brings a range of experience, both professional and personal, to the panel. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably qualified and experienced. The agency has provided panel members with good induction training, with a focus on safeguarding. This includes lessons learned from serious case reviews concerning foster carers. This helps to remind panel members about the degree of independent scrutiny that their role brings to the agency. Panel minutes do demonstrate a good degree of scrutiny and challenge. The agency decision is made promptly, with the decision-maker clearly listing his own reasons for reaching his decision.

The agency's records are of a good quality, demonstrating the high degree of support offered to foster carers and children. Foster carers feel valued and supported by the agency. They receive monthly supervision visits, with the content of these meetings being documented and agreed by all parties. They also have

access to an agency-operated out-of-hours service, so staff are familiar with them and their situation. Foster carers appreciate this.

The agency is in its infancy and consequently some elements of support are not yet fully developed. For example, a support group for foster carers and one for children and young people have yet to take place. However, one meeting has recently taken place for foster carers' birth children. This was successful and agency staff are keen to continue this. It provides these children with an avenue to share their own experiences, as well as a direct link with agency staff, as they are crucial to the success of the fostering household.

The agency produces comprehensive monthly progress reports on children and young people that document the month's achievements and challenges. Social workers appreciate this helpful overview. The registered manager is in the process of developing a number of tracking systems that will help her to monitor children's progress, as she is aware that this will become more difficult as the agency grows.

Leaders and managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the service. The agency has a business plan, which loosely outlines the planned developments for the forthcoming year, although this would benefit from being more target-specific to drive forward improvement in a timely manner. The registered manager has recently completed a review of the agency covering the first year of its operation. However, this does not currently include all the information required by regulation, as it did not include any feedback taken by the agency following consultation with stakeholders.

Social workers describe communication with the agency as good. They feel that they are kept up to date. However, on occasion there has been insufficient challenge made to local authorities when they have not produced the required documentation on children at the time of placement, such as the child's essential information and care plan. Staff have not escalated their concerns to senior managers and, consequently, some documents remain outstanding.

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: 1241412

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