

Sunflower Fostering

Hillcrest Children's Services (2) Limited
The Old School, Weston-under-Lizard, Shropshire TF11 8JZ
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A large national provider of children's services operates this independent fostering agency. The agency mainly provides long-term and pathway placements. There are 52 carers in 29 households caring for 20 foster children.

Inspection dates: 6 to 10 November 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	requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 8 November 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children make good progress and receive personalised care.
- Education is a top priority and carers support children well with their learning.
- Children's emotional well-being receives a high level of attention. Consequently, children learn to come to terms with negative experiences.
- Children stay safe and learn to keep themselves safe.
- Carers establish strong and meaningful relationships with their foster children.
- Most children enjoy long-term placements and enjoy a positive experience of family life.
- Carers feel particularly well supported by their agency.
- Supervising social workers promote the needs of carers and children well. Staff feel supported and valued. There is minimal staff turnover.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- There are shortfalls in the organisation, monitoring and administration of the agency. Some records are not up to date and others are hard to locate.
- The agency does not always ensure that all of the relevant people receive the outcomes of complaints and allegations.
- Staff do not pursue other agencies for documentation vigorously enough.
- The training programme for carers has gaps and is not wholly effective.

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 statement of purpose is kept under review and, where appropriate, revise it. (Regulation 4(a))	01/01/2018
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 is with regard to obtaining relevant documents, such as care plans and statutory health assessment reports, from placing authorities.	01/01/2018
Provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1)). This is with regard to ensuring that the company's training programme clearly addresses foster carers' needs.	05/02/2018
Apply the system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals (Regulations 35(1)(b)). This is with regard to making the process sufficiently evaluative.	01/01/2018

Recommendations

- Ensure that records are kept of representations and complaints, how they are dealt with, the outcome and any action taken. (NMS 21.11)
- Implement a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children experience a good level of personalised support. Packages of care are highly dependent on each child's needs, as determined by relevant professionals. As a result of the support they receive, children make good progress in different aspects of their development.

The majority of children who originate from local authorities far away are on the agency's pathway project. This means that they previously lived in children's homes within the organisation. Some of these children have not settled into foster care easily. As a result, managers have reviewed the feasibility assessments of those children who are making the transition from living in a children's home to foster care. Furthermore, the agency is investing in research to improve the process further. Some carers provide children with practice families, which helps children move from children's homes in a gradual way.

Staff and carers ensure that children's moves to and from carers occur in a planned way, wherever possible. The vast majority of children are in long-term placements, and so experience high levels of stability.

The supervising social workers very successfully oversee the arrangements for matching children. When children do need to experience a move, children are fully involved in decisions. For example, some children have moved to live with carers who were previously their respite carers. Some have remained with their foster families into adulthood, but under different arrangements. For example, one young adult is likely to live with the foster carer's daughter in the long term. In this way, the agency aims to maximise continuity of care for children.

Children experience long-term care, often for the first time. An independent reviewing officer commented, 'I have to say it's one of the most positive experiences I have had. I can think of one situation in which the placement was breaking down, and the supervising social worker really got involved to make sure that it didn't. They were really focused on the child.' The commissioner for one placing authority that has several children in placements with this agency said, 'The staff are knowledgeable and are great advocates for our children. All our young people are progressing well and we have no concerns.'

Through the application process and, for some, many years after the agency approves them, foster carers feel exceptionally well supported by the agency. This is key to the high standard of carers' support of children. For example, some carers undertake research-based work with children who are preparing for independence. This helps children learn relevant skills, such as managing money and staying in work. The strong relationships between carers and children mean that carers have a positive impact when they raise sensitive issues with children. An independent reviewing officer said, 'In another placement [my child] may have said, "No, you are interfering", but because of the relationship [between them] the child listens.'

Staff and carers ensure that children from overseas who do not speak English, and who have other communication difficulties, receive appropriate help. Some children who came from Africa received a weekly interpreting service until their mastery of English improved. They went on to integrate well and succeed academically, and one is learning to drive. A child who has hearing loss receives effective support. Recently, he has successfully moved to greater independence, having overcome many obstacles. Carers ensure that children receive other specialist help, too, such as that available to asylum seekers. This specialist help promotes children's rights and children have the security of knowing that their legal status is resolved. One boy's carers took him to visit the country where his family originated, which helped him to understand his cultural background. These important contributions help children to progress.

The supervising social workers ensure that they understand the views of each child well, including the sons and daughters of carers. The agency holds seasonal and other events, as well as seeing all of the children regularly at home. This means that supervising social workers oversee the welfare and safety of children.

Children rarely raise concerns and express satisfaction with their carers. One said, 'I don't know why I need meetings; I don't feel like I'm in foster care.' Children are complimentary about their carers, and have an understanding of the agency itself. Some attend a meeting specifically for foster children, at which they discuss issues and make suggestions. These discussions and suggestions support the agency's development. Children have recently helped to compile new documents and make improvements to their foster carers' annual reviews, and have planned social events. These steps help the agency, and show children that their views are valued.

The supervising social workers and carers support children's education placements well. The supervising social workers see themselves as an intrinsic part of the multi-agency team that promotes children's education. Professionals acknowledge how well carers and supervising social workers advocate for children, for example at the routine meetings, which they always attend. Carers report that staff do everything to ensure that children attend school or college regularly and receive help when required. Several carers have benefited from supervising social workers taking children to school. Consequently, children rarely change schools and they retain important social networks. Very few children require alternative arrangements for their education, or are persistently absent. Children progress markedly from their starting points, take examinations and experience success. One found that he was particularly good at mathematics and moved to a higher class; another achieved a high qualification in mechanics and went on to university.

Children lead active and interesting lives. They have new experiences and attend events and activities that provide lasting memories; they keep mementos of these for reference in the future. Carers ensure that children try different community activities, such as cadets and football. Carers integrate children thoroughly into family events, such as caravan trips and holidays abroad. Children have a positive sense of family and community life.

The agency places great importance on providing children with the support they need to progress emotionally. The supervising social workers are proactive in seeking input from other professionals, or arranging it through the in-house therapy team. The latter is a valuable resource. It complements other mental health services and provides guidance for staff and carers. Children learn how to come to terms with difficult past experiences. As a result, one child ceased harming herself, another felt more at ease about a bereavement and another no longer needed speech therapy. This demonstrates vital progress that benefits other areas of their lives

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

The agency protects children well. There are very few significant incidents. Children know how to raise concerns themselves and they receive strong advocacy from within the service and from outside agencies. One local authority's designated officer said, 'I have been pleased with the speed with which [the issues] were managed [by the agency] and the response of the supervising social workers.' The manager takes a principled position on issues of child safety. She clearly demonstrates that children's welfare is more important than commercial considerations.

Some children have made allegations. Carers naturally find managing these situations challenging, especially if there is a risk to other children in their homes. A small number of children have moved foster placements as a result. When a child makes an allegation, the agency refers the issue to the relevant authority to investigate. Not all parties receive notice of the outcome of the investigation and the agency does not always instigate an internal review to look at any lessons learned.

Carers receive comprehensive training on safeguarding children, and use specialised materials to help children protect themselves. For example, a small number of children have been at risk of sexual exploitation. Carers help children effectively by using specialised training materials. An independent reviewing officer said, '[The carer] has walked the line well between giving [my child] autonomy and recognising that she is vulnerable.' The agency's method of assessing risks is thorough and clearly shows children's progress. This is valuable information for children, their carers and their social workers. Consequently, children who have a history of going missing usually cease to do so, and the overall frequency of such incidents is particularly low. Children learn to stay safe. One girl reported her concerns about an approach made by someone online. This led to a police investigation. Staff ensure that relevant experts, including the police, are involved, when necessary, and that everyone, including the child, understands the level of risk. This has led to some carers receiving extra support to protect children online.

All carers receive training in managing challenging behaviour. Physical restraint is rarely used. However, some children need more input than others need. The supervising social workers carefully assess the restrictions placed on all children. This good practice draws attention to areas where children's rights are infringed. The supervising social workers take steps to address this, for example by providing carers with bespoke training. One family learned to hold their foster child in a particular way that kept him safe. Carers receive training in a variety of other

subjects too, including identifying and preventing radicalisation. No such issues have occurred.

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

The registered manager has a suitable qualification and Ofsted registered her in 2011. She provides the team with clear and ambitious leadership. However, a new manager was in post for several months this year before resigning. Because the registered manager had remained with the company, she returned to her position. This and several other minor issues have unsettled the organisation of the service. A positive development is that the agency has recently been part of an amalgamation of two companies. The new chief operating officer is now providing the scrutiny and strategic leadership necessary to ensure that the agency is true to the aims of the service.

The statement of purpose is not up to date, and gives misleading information about the service. Furthermore, managers do not yet pay sufficiently close attention to the processes of monitoring and evaluating the agency.

The agency has received very few complaints. However, the administration of complaints is poor. Records are not coordinated and outcomes are unclear. This means that the manager has inaccurate data to monitor. There is therefore a high risk of information not receiving the attention it requires. For example, some carers have not received a response to their concerns. The statistical data in certain management reports is incorrect. The fact that the filing system is in transition has made this worse. Information is not always readily available.

The agency has recently moved to a new site, which is for its sole use. This significant improvement gives the service a clear identity that staff and carers heartily appreciate.

The service has six supervising social workers and a family support worker, an office manager and two administration assistants. Given the scale of the service, this means that they have manageable workloads. Adequate deputising arrangements are in place. The modest size of the service means that all of the staff know all of the carers reasonably well. This allows the staff to provide effective cover for each other, for example during recent and current maternity leave. The recent arrival and departure of a new manager unsettled the team and plans are in place to avoid a repetition of this. Staff feel that the current manager is excellent. She is a key factor in the low turnover of staff.

The overwhelming majority of carers feel extremely well supported by the whole staff team. They appreciate the family feel, which remains even after years of growth. One carer said, 'It was made clear that I would be part of a team, which is what I wanted. The fostering service gives unlimited support to me so I can support my foster child.' Another said, 'My [supervising] social worker is truly amazing!' A third noted that foster care is often difficult, and said, '[Sometimes] it's easy to

become blinded to the good things that happen and this is where [our agency] supports us. We don't feel the need to be perfect.'

Foster carers feel fully integrated into the service. They enjoy a high level of collaboration with staff. In particular, they have a clear decision-making role in new placements. This helps them to feel confident and committed to their role.

All of the carers are fully familiar with each child's targets. The supervising social workers keep children's progress under close review and the family support worker provides additional help, if required. The manager is considering ways of summarising children's progress more succinctly.

Staff do not pursue local authorities as vigorously as necessary to obtain children's documents in a timely way. This causes unnecessary delay and some inefficiencies. As a result, children's files do not contain the required records.

The foster carers' training programme has gaps. It does not include certain courses, such as medication administration, as required. In addition, carers say that the content of some of the training courses is not relevant to them. This is because some of the training provided is aimed at staff who work in the organisation's children's homes. Staff identify the training needs of each carer, but some carers do not achieve the targets. This does not serve to confirm the ongoing competence of carers or their compliance with the agency's foster carer agreement.

The rate of recruitment of new carers is below the target set by the organisation. However, this process is under review. The short-term goal is to consolidate rather than expand. New carers feel very satisfied with the agency, and are pleased with how well they have integrated into the agency.

The agency benefits from a well-established and well-organised fostering panel. It meets regularly and contributes to the development and improvement of the agency. The manager continues to seek the desired mix of members to ensure that the panel is suitably diverse. This task is ongoing. Panel members are subjected to scrutiny themselves during their annual appraisals. This meaningful process has served to make some members review their positions. This review process complements the training that panel members attend and serves to keep panel energised.

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, 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: SC398387

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