

County Fostering Service Ltd

County Fostering Services Limited

Flexspace, Unit 28, 4 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton,
Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency provides a wide range of placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term and parent and child placements.

At the time of this visit, the agency had eight fostering households and 15 children placed with foster carers.

The manager has been registered since 2019.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

We last visited this setting on 1 and 2 December 2020 to carry out an assurance visit. The report is published on the Ofsted website.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 August 2021

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: 10 February 2020

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

The agency provides a high level of support to foster carers. Supervising social workers have small caseloads, which means that foster carers receive the emotional, practical and financial support that they need without delay. This helps foster carers to maintain good levels of care even when situations are challenging. Foster carers are positive about the support provided. One foster carer, who had transferred from another agency, said, 'It was the best move I ever made.' Another foster carer said, 'I can't fault the support on offer.'

Most children enjoy stable, long-term placements. Foster carers help children to feel settled and valued. Children also enjoy good relationships with extended members of family who they spend time with. This provides children with a sense of belonging. One child, who had previously found it difficult to settle in foster care, said that they 'feel part of this family'. A child's social worker said that they 'couldn't ask for better foster carers'.

There is a strong commitment at all levels of staff at the agency to achieve stability for children. When children are unsettled, agency staff support the foster carers and children with additional visits and regular support calls. Agency staff work with external professionals to help identify and address difficulties for the child. This supports the foster carers to help stabilise the child's placement.

When children do move on, the agency aims for these moves to be planned and to give children the opportunity to say goodbye to foster carers in a positive way. Agency staff contribute to disruption meetings with the local authority. More recently, the agency has implemented their own reflective groups to explore any unplanned endings and to take any lessons that can be learned to improve practice.

Children's moves to foster carers are well planned. Foster carers introduce children to their new homes sensitively. The manager completes matching assessments that are shared with placing authorities. This helps inform matching decisions and quickly identify any needs that cannot be met. One child's social worker said that the matching assessment was 'impressive' and that the timing for the move for the child was 'totally child centred'.

All children are in education. Foster carers make sure that children receive the support and entitlements they need to help them reach their full potential. Foster carers are skilled in meeting additional learning needs. Their support has helped children to make excellent progress with their communication and personal care skills. Foster carers identify and work with the school to quickly resolve any incidents of bullying. When children refuse school, foster carers and the agency work with the child's school to find solutions. This means that most children are enjoying their education and making good progress.

Foster carers help children to be active and healthy. They ensure that children access specialist services when needed to help meet additional physical and mental health needs. Agency staff designed and ran a well-being project during the COVID-19 lockdown. This provided foster carers with research and ideas for motivating the children to remain active when activities were limited. Children were challenged to try new foods and exercises that improved their physical and emotional health. Children's efforts were recognised and rewarded by the agency.

Foster carers encourage children to be as independent as they can, based on their age and ability. They talk about children's progress with pride. Children help with household tasks and some children have part-time work. Children enjoy spending time with their friends unsupervised when they go out to play or access more planned activities. These opportunities provide children with new skills and help build their confidence.

Agency staff and foster carers support children to share their views about the care they receive and about the agency. Children regularly attend children's forums that are led by senior managers. Children contribute to foster carer reviews and are helped to be involved in their own meetings with social care and education. One child said that their carers 'respect their decisions'.

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

Children feel safe in their foster homes. Foster carers attend relevant training that helps them to understand and respond to concerns about a child's safety. This includes safeguarding training that focuses on the risks to children that can occur outside of the family home, such as criminal and sexual exploitation.

There has been a low level of incidents reported by the agency since the last visit. The agency is responsive to the foster carer and child's needs when incidents take place, including when incidents occur outside office hours. The agency ensures that information is shared with the placing local authority and, when required, the designated officer.

Risk assessments for children identify the presenting risks and some strategies for reducing these risks. The manager has developed missing-from-home profiles for each child to ensure that agency staff can access essential information quickly. However, safer caring household plans are too generic and do not provide sufficient information about how to meet children's individual needs safely.

There have been two incidents of children going missing from where they were supposed to be for a short period of time. Foster carers acted quickly on both occasions and alerted the appropriate professionals. Children had the opportunity to speak to their social workers and foster carers and have not repeated this behaviour. One child was frightened by the experience. The foster carer used this as an opportunity for the child to learn about safety, alongside offering the child lots of reassurance.

The manager routinely contacts children's schools for feedback about the carers and how they are supporting children. This provides an additional safeguarding measure and allows the agency to identify the need for any additional support early.

The agency's recruitment policy does not clearly outline the required checks for new staff and does not consider when overseas checks may be required. Gaps in employment and reasons for leaving previous care roles have not been explored for one new member of staff who has already started working for the agency. This practice increases the risk of unsuitable people working at the agency.

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

The agency is led by a committed management team with a shared vision for the agency. Foster carers feel confident in the leadership of the agency as the directors have many years of fostering experience. Managers know the foster carers and the children well. Foster carers receive a personalised response when they contact the agency, which helps them to feel valued.

The manager has developed systems that help her track essential information. She has also developed new templates to improve recording across all functions of the service. However, information is missing from the children's plans and some plans are not updated after incidents. The dates on foster carer supervisions are incorrect. Children do not have access to their records and some of the language used in the records is not appropriate for the age or understanding of the child.

Foster carers have personal development plans that identify their learning needs in relation to the children they care for. Training is monitored by the manager and reviewed annually at the foster carer's review. Foster carer reviews are carried out by independent reviewing officers who offer appropriate challenge around foster carers' engagement in training and support.

Children are now able to meet face to face at the regular children's forums. These meetings provide children with the opportunity to have their say about the agency. These meetings also maintain a direct link between the managers and children. The children refer to the managers by their first names.

The managers also lead initiatives that encourage children to participate in caring for others. Initiatives include adopting animals, giving to a local children's hospice and coordinating children to take part in the shoebox appeal.

The agency has received one complaint. The manager dealt with this formally and in a timely way. However, the complaints policy lacks guidance for the manager on who should respond at each stage of the complaint. The management group has formally reflected on the complaint and identified actions for improving their policy and approach.

The fostering panel benefits from a diverse range of experience, including a care-experienced adult. An independent, experienced panel chair has been appointed to start at the next panel. The panel minutes do not clearly show the rationale for all decisions and their recommendation.

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>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must establish a written procedure for considering complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency, and by foster parents approved by the agency.</p> <p>The procedure must, in particular, provide—</p> <p>for an opportunity for informal resolution of the complaint at an early stage,</p> <p>that no person who is the subject of a complaint takes part in its consideration other than, if the registered person considers it appropriate, at the informal resolution stage only,</p> <p>for dealing with complaints about the registered person. (Regulation 18 (1) (2)(a)(b)(c))</p>	<p>4 October 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should oversee that the panel chair ensures that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and the reasons for its recommendations. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable statutory requirements and guidance. This relates specifically to the recruitment of staff and panel members. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 19.2)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers understand how safer caring principles should be applied in a way which meets the needs of individual children. In particular, safer caring household plans should reflect children's individual needs and contain guidance on how carers should respond to these safely. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 20.9)

- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This specifically relates to ensuring that children's plans are completed and contain up-to-date information and that the dates contained in foster carer files are accurate. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that information about children is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards,' 26.6)

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: 2484185

Registered provider: County Fostering Services Limited

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Responsible individual: Marie Archer

Registered manager: Shirley Bowron

Telephone number: 01604 438581

Inspector

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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