

County Fostering Service Limited

County Fostering Services Limited

Flexspace, Unit 22, 4 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton, Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is privately owned and provides a wide range of placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term and parent and child placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 11 fostering households and 23 children placed with foster carers.

The manager has applied to register with Ofsted.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 July 2024

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: 2 August 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Experiences for children are generally positive. Good liaison between the agency and local authorities ensures that relevant information informs decisions about placing children with carers and that decisions are made in children's best interests.

Carers and supervising social workers carefully plan the transition for children to their foster family, to support children to settle. Child-friendly information is shared about carers and households, and children visit the home where possible. For one child with specific communication needs, school helped to prepare a social story to support the child to understand and contribute to plans for their move to the foster family.

Children benefit from established positive relationships with foster carers and their extended families. This agency has a good track record of supporting siblings to live together. Foster carers support children to maintain relationships with their family and friends. Two children talked about enjoying sleepovers with friends.

Some children have been settled with their foster families for many years. They say they are part of the family. One child spoke about preparing a presentation for her foster carers when they celebrated the 10-year anniversary of joining the family.

Attendance and participation in education and training are promoted by the foster carers and the agency. There is clear evidence of children's progress from their starting points. Two children spoke about having recently taken exams. They have plans to go to college and aspire to going to university. The agency commissions extra tuition for children, particularly in English and mathematics, where it is agreed there is a need. Supervising social workers and children's social workers referred to carers proactively advocating for children's educational needs to be assessed and for them to be in the best education setting to meet their needs.

Supervising social workers and foster carers ensure that children's physical and emotional health needs are identified and are being met. One child has complex disabilities and conditions that affect her communication and mobility. Her foster carers ensure that she has access to activities and services. They maintain records of the impact of her needs to inform her plans and health appointments. She has made significant progress in several developmental domains, including language and communication.

Foster carers for another child recognised that he had several unmet health needs when he initially moved in. They were tenacious in seeking advice, information and health appointments. He has been diagnosed and treated for two health conditions, which are now improving.

Some foster carers are approved to provide short breaks for children. The use of short breaks for children in this agency is not yet evaluated in terms of its impact for children.

Children approaching transition to leaving care are supported to learn about independence and life skills. There is an offer of an enjoyable weekend course where children are taught independence skills and participate in activities such as water sports. Children also receive a teen-friendly independence skills workbook.

Foster carers are aspirational for children and provide opportunities for their wider education, such as activities, holidays and driving lessons. Foster carers support children to get part-time jobs.

Carers provide good-quality monthly reports to social workers, made up from the daily records they maintain. They include the progress children are making and children's views.

One social worker said:

'The impact for this child's care with his foster family has exceeded all expectations. He is thriving, he is healthier, his language has significantly improved, he has learnt to feed himself. He goes to a range of toddler groups, participating in singing, gymnastics, meeting other young children. Most importantly, he is happy and settled.'

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

Foster carers and supervising social workers work closely with each child's network of professionals. Information is shared to inform children's risk assessments and safe care plans, such as if behaviours change or risks emerge. Consideration is given to referrals to specialist services to support meeting children's needs and responding to risks.

The agency recognises the additional vulnerabilities for disabled children and the importance of seeking children's views.

Supervising social workers carry out unannounced visits as part of safe caring plans.

Most children have reduced risks because of positive relationships, good routines and consistent boundaries. For some children, incidents self-harm and of going missing have reduced.

Since the previous inspection, on a small number of occasions, children have gone missing from care. Foster carers and supervising social workers follow the relevant procedures and risk assessments. They report to police and children's social workers in a timely way. Multi-agency strategy meetings are convened as appropriate.

Foster carers welcome children when they return home and check on their welfare. Children's reasons for going missing from home are always explored and assessed.

Significant incidents have been appropriately notified to Ofsted. On some occasions, learning has been identified and followed up for foster carers and the agency. For example, there has been learning from two occasions of risk of harm to children when the families were on holiday. Risk assessments and guidance around planning for holidays have been made more robust.

This inspection found that learning has not been sufficiently robust or consistent following some serious incidents and unplanned endings for children. There has not always been a clear audit trail of actions taken, learning disseminated or of the fostering panel's involvement in learning, to reduce or prevent similar incidents happening again.

There have been appropriate and timely referrals to the local authority designated officers in response to a small number of allegations. There are no open referrals.

Children's records include chronologies of significant events, which supports identifying any trends or emerging concerns. They include an evaluation of carers' and supervising social workers' responses to keep children safe.

Some records have included blaming language and intrusive information that is not sensitive to the privacy of the child. Monitoring of records by managers as part of the review of the quality of care has not identified poor recording.

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

This is a relatively small agency. Carers, children and social workers are positive about the care for children, support for carers and information-sharing.

The manager is suitably experienced. Since she joined the team, staff have said that she is accessible and is making positive changes to enhance management oversight of the quality of care for children and support for carers.

The manager has, with the responsible individual, started to make changes that will support improved oversight of the quality of care and clear lines of accountability in the service.

This inspection found that there have been two occasions when recruitment practice has not adhered to safe recruitment guidance and regulations. The management team has reviewed this during the inspection and has developed an action plan to address the concerns.

The agency received a complaint about a member of staff. This was investigated and referred to a regulatory body. The investigation recommended that Ofsted should be notified. Ofsted was not informed. The investigation has concluded.

Managers have shared with Ofsted annual reports regarding the agency's activities and the quality of care. The manager is developing monitoring mechanisms, to ensure effective evaluation and analysis of outcomes for children.

The fostering panel generally functions well. There is timely independent oversight of assessments and reviews. There are plans in place for regular meetings with the panel chair and the agency decision maker to enhance the quality assurance function of the panel.

Carers have a strong training offer. However, oversight of carers' compliance with training expectations and the impact of training on the quality of care requires strengthening. The responsible individual and the manager have recently introduced incentives for foster carers to attend training and support groups.

There have been gaps in regular supervision for some staff. The quality of supervision is mixed. Records of recent supervision sessions show more thorough discussion considering children and the impact of the care provided. Records include evidence of performance management of staff. The manager has discussed with staff the purpose of supervision and clear expectations about being prepared with relevant information. The small team is supported by the commissioning of an independent reviewing officer and assessor.

Carers are receiving regular supervision. Supervising social workers follow up any recommendations from children's planning meetings and panel meetings. They also see and talk to children during visits.

Foster carers and children are consulted with about the development of the agency. One carer said, 'I would say the agency managers and staff are 100% supportive. I honestly believe if we need anything a (supervising) social worker will visit straight away.'

There is positive, constructive partnership working with commissioning bodies, health, and education partners.

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
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. (Regulation 20 (3)(c))	2 September 2024
The fostering panel must also give advice, and make recommendations, on such other matters or cases as the fostering service provider may refer to it. (Regulation 24 (4)(c))	2 September 2024

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that managers, staff, volunteers and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and the lines of accountability, should be clearly defined. This relates to the responsible individual and the manager being clear about roles and responsibilities in the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.4)
- The registered person should take action to address any issues of concern that they identify, or which are raised with them. This relates to notifying Ofsted of a complaint about an employee which was investigated and reported to a regulatory body. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 51, paragraph 25.8)
- The registered person should ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third-party information and are signed and dated. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.5)
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child 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 should be 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', page 52, paragraph 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints

about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.1)

- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.2)

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

Registered provider address: Flexspace, Unit 22, 4 Summerhouse Road, Moulton Park, Northampton, Northamptonshire NN3 6BJ

Responsible individual: Marie Archer

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01604 438581

Email address: marie@countyfostering.co.uk

Inspector

Cathey Moriarty, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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