

The Homefinding & Fostering Agency

Kent Homefinding and Fostering Ltd
67 College Road, Maidstone, Kent ME15 6SX
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The Homefinding and Fostering Agency is operated by a privately- owned limited company. It was registered on 30 October 2003. The agency provides emergency, short-term and long-term placements for children of all ages. It also offers parent-and-child placements. The agency ensures that sibling groups are placed together wherever possible.

Although a range of placements are provided, the agency places a strong focus on long-term placements for younger children, seeking permanence either through remaining with the same foster carers, moving on to adoption, or being reunited with their birth families.

At the time of this inspection, 43 fostering households were approved by the agency.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 October 2019

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be 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: 10 September 2018

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

Children and young people benefit from positive experiences while living with their foster families. A good number of fostering households have remained with the agency for many years; this statistic mirrors a good proportion of settled children and young people, with a low number of unplanned moves.

Improved matching processes seek to thoroughly examine referred children and young people's needs against the skills, experience and needs of prospective foster carers. This practice increases the likelihood of children and young people settling into their new foster homes with carers who can meet their needs.

Experienced foster carers actively encourage the children and young people to attend and participate in clubs and activities. Enthusiastic agency staff also organise regular activities that bring everyone together, including birth children. This gives the children and young people the chance to try new hobbies, build relationships and make new friends.

The agency staff are skilled at building relationships with the children and young people. The staff are very sensitive to children and young people's individual needs and take this into account when engaging with them. The children and young people know how to contact the staff directly and enjoy talking to them and showing them their newly learned skills.

There is a strong commitment from the agency staff to hear what the children and young people think about their experiences. This takes place both formally through annual questionnaires and informally when the supervising social workers visit them. While there was no opportunity to speak to the children and young people during this inspection, the information from these methods shows that they generally feel happy and safe.

Children and young people are supported by their foster carers and staff to maintain connections with their birth families. Access to a child-friendly, comfortable space at the agency's office enables them to spend planned time together. This helps everyone to relax and repair fractured relationships. The agency staff and foster carers are also very good at offering opportunities for siblings to remain living together when they come into foster care.

The agency staff place high importance on helping the children and young people to reach their full potential. Supervising social workers offer foster carers support and guidance on a range of subjects to meet the children and young people's individual needs. However, there is no evidence of children and young people being systematically prepared for independence. Managers are aware of this and have recently appointed an advocate to address this aspect. Further improvements in this area include a new foster carer supervision process that guides supervising social workers to better scrutinise the impact of the care and support being provided.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

The registered manager has responded to the areas of weakness identified at the last inspection. She is working hard to further develop the safeguarding systems, culture and practice within the agency. As a result, there have been some noted improvements across the service.

Written risk assessments are now in place and these are reviewed and updated annually. However, for some children and young people this has not been enough, particularly when there has been a significant event. The opportunity to learn from an incident and to consider improved ways of managing a specific risk is sometimes missed. In addition, the process of using dynamic risk assessment by agency staff and foster carers is not yet fully understood or embedded.

Safeguarding incidents and allegations are rare, and the registered manager ensures that relevant training is refreshed for agency staff and foster carers. This drive to strengthen the agency's safeguarding culture and practice is hindered, however, by gaps and shortfalls in the agency's policy guidance. Some information is not relevant and the guidance for staff on managing allegations is ambiguous. This lack of clarity undermines the ability of staff and foster carers to recognise and pass on information with sufficient urgency. On one such occasion, the registered manager was delayed in seeking advice from the designated officer because the allegation was not reported immediately by a foster carer.

In other examples, where referrals from the agency to the designated officer have been swift, the agency's own written records have not summarised the action taken and/or the outcome. This shortfall compromises the agency's ability to sufficiently monitor safeguarding incidents and concerns, and to be satisfied that all relevant action has been taken.

The agency staff and managers promote a culture of positive behaviour. Foster carers have access to regular support and guidance which they appreciate. This informs their approach to caring for the children and young people they look after. Recent training in de-escalation techniques has helped to reduce significant incidents and there has been no use of physical interventions. However, in the absence of working with, or access to, external professionals, there is an over-reliance on supervising social workers to come up with strategies or solutions for understanding and managing challenging behaviour. In one example, there was a tendency to focus on the impact of a young person's behaviour and an absence of securing direct support to explore this young person's experience of grief and loss.

A strengthened approach to the agency's recruitment practice started with additional relevant training for those staff involved in this process. Pre-employment checks are diligently undertaken, sometimes resulting in positions not being offered. Good management oversight holds this process to account. The agency seeks only to appoint only those candidates who demonstrate safety and the skills and qualifications needed for the position. Senior managers have implemented a clear recruitment strategy that has resulted in smaller caseloads for supervising social workers. With a focus on improved safeguarding practice, this has enabled

unannounced visits to fostering households to be increased to two each year.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The fostering agency is run by a skilled and experienced registered manager and responsible individual who are leading the team through a period of significant change. Together, they have high expectations and a clear vision for the future. This includes building on the existing strengths of the agency which places a strong emphasis on supporting the foster carers.

Staff spoken to during the inspection are feeling invigorated by this approach and are embracing the new ways of working. Staff describe the registered manager's leadership style as, 'a good balance between supportive and directive' and 'the changes are not easy, but they are necessary'. Consequently, there is strong team cohesion and a shared vision.

Managers have a good general oversight of the service. They have introduced various new systems to check the quality of the work being completed. Supervising social workers are actively involved in these tasks and regularly carry out audits and peer reviews. Managers also invite feedback from a range of sources and embrace suggestions and new ideas. The recent appointment of a children's advocate is a good example of this. Some areas of monitoring need further refinement to ensure that all areas of weakness are captured and acted on, for example the management of safeguarding risks.

Some mixed responses about the support that foster carers receive were reported through meetings held with them and their survey returns. Managers are sensitive and aware of the impact of the current and ongoing changes. They remain focused and committed to continuous improvement. Out-of-hours support is generally positively reported on by foster carers. This support is provided 365 days per year, with the content of the calls and issues diligently explored by the staff team, to ensure the support provided was appropriate and that any necessary follow-up action is taken.

This drive is demonstrated by the registered manager's systematic approach in dissecting and rebuilding the training provision for foster carers. Swift and clear decisions about the quality of training providers has resulted in significant changes being made. Foster carers welcome these changes, stating, 'Training is well-thought-out and really interesting' and 'I am now more able and encouraged to think about the training that I need, rather than just being put on courses.' This approach is complemented by a renewed drive to ensure that foster carers receive good peer support and mentoring to complete their 'training, support and development standards' (TSDS) training.

Managers have recognised other areas of previous weakness and made improvements; for example, in the foster panel arrangements. The appointment of a new panel chair, agency decision-maker and panel members has strengthened the existing skills, experience and knowledge base of this core group. A clear understanding exists about how the function of the panel can be further improved and strengthened; for example, by ensuring a greater focus and contribution from

panel members on their own area of expertise at panel meetings. A further training day for the panel is already planned. This strong approach to chasing best practice mirrors the drive and ambition of the agency as a whole.

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
The registered person must maintain a system for— improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35(1)(b))	31/01/2020
The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents. In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child— has access to such medical, dental, nursing, psychological and psychiatric advice, treatment and other services as the child may require. (Regulation 15(1)(2)(b))	31/01/2020

Recommendations

- All foster carers, fostering service staff and volunteers understand what they must do if they receive an allegation or have suspicions that a person may have:
 - a. behaved in a way that has, or may have, harmed a child.

The fostering service ensures that the required actions are taken, or have been taken, in any relevant situation of which it is aware. (National minimum standard 22.1)
- The fostering service provider's child protection procedures are submitted for consideration and comment to Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) and to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for child Protection (or other senior officer responsible for child protection matters in that department). They are consistent with the local policies and procedures agreed by the LSCB relevant to the geographical area where the foster carer lives. Any conflicts between locally agreed procedures and those of other placing authorities are discussed and resolved as far as possible. (National minimum standard 22.4)
- Allegations against people that work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the LADO. This includes allegations that on the face of it may appear relatively insignificant or that have also been reported directly to the police or Children and Family Services. (National

minimum standard 22.6)

- 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 is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (National minimum standard 25.2)
- The fostering service ensures there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. This includes appropriate training and support to foster carers caring for young people who are approaching adulthood. Arrangements are consistent with the young person's care plan, including their placement plan, pathway plan and transition plan for children with disabilities and special educational needs. (National minimum standard 12.3)

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: SC036653

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Inspectors

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