

Compass Fostering Central Ltd

Compass Fostering Central Limited
Mountfields House, Epinal Way, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3GE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Compass Fostering Central Limited is an independent fostering agency based in Loughborough, Leicestershire, with additional office premises in Newmarket, Suffolk. The agency was established in 2005, and is one of four branches of Compass Fostering Services, which is part of Compass Community Limited, a private limited company.

Compass Fostering Central Limited offers a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, respite, short-term, long-term, and parent and child placements. At the time of the inspection, it had 182 fostering households and 236 children in placement. Over the last year, the number of fostering households has increased by 20%.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 20 June 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- Children are at the heart of this service. Leaders and managers demonstrate a huge amount of passion, ambition and commitment to ensuring that children achieve the best outcomes possible and improve their life chances. As a result, children make exceptional progress from their starting points. They experience stable family life and form extremely positive relationships with their foster carers. Placement stability is very good, and children achieve permanence.
- Children become safer as a result of living with their foster carers. The incidence of risk-taking behaviour decreases, and children increase their levels of confidence and self-esteem. Regular consultation with a clinical psychologist helps foster carers to understand their foster children's behaviour and develop appropriate strategies to manage this effectively.
- Foster carers benefit from a high level of support from the agency, including a responsive out-of-hours service. The range and quality of training available to foster carers are exceptional. Training is used effectively to improve foster carers' understanding and competence and, thereby, the care and support they provide to children.
- The education service is developing highly effective, innovative ways of supporting and promoting educational outcomes. Consequently, children's education attendance and attainment are above the national average for children looked after.
- The agency uses a research-based, therapeutic model to underpin the provision of care and support to children. This is embedded throughout all aspects of the service. It also uses learning from recent research and serious case reviews to inform and develop its practice.
- Leaders and managers have well-developed, sophisticated monitoring systems that enable them to be fully informed of the outcomes of the service and the progress that children are making. This is used effectively to drive improvement.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- There are shortfalls in the operation of the fostering panel. On one occasion, the fostering panel was not quorate, and this omission was not identified. On another occasion, an assessment was scrutinised by the fostering panel before all the required checks and references were available. Although the risk to children was minimised because no children were to be placed until the required checks were received, this is not a robust process and it calls into question the quality assurance mechanisms for the fostering panel.
- The minutes of the fostering panel do not give an accurate reflection of the meeting, and the role of panel members is not clearly detailed. It is therefore difficult to be assured of both the quoracy and the rigour of the panel meeting.

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 with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel: either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs, one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience, and three other members. (Regulation 24(1)(i)(ii)(iii))	28/07/2017
Where a person (X) applies to be a foster parent and the fostering service provider decides to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. The fostering service provider must, as soon as reasonably practicable, obtain the information specified in Part 1 of Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family. (Regulation 26(1)(a))	28/07/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that the minutes of the panel meeting are accurate and clearly record the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for the recommendation. (National minimum standard 14.7)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children make exceptional progress from their starting points as a result of the excellent quality of individualised care and support provided by the foster carers, who in turn receive an outstanding level of support and training from the agency. For example, some children have made enormous strides developmentally, some have improved their communication, some manage their anger much better, and others have significantly reduced their risk-taking behaviour. All needs, including those relating to religion and culture, are identified and met to a high standard.

Children build positive and stable relationships with their foster carers, who know them well and who are extremely committed to helping children achieve the best possible outcomes. Children speak extremely positively about their foster carers, and recognise the impact that the foster carers have had on their improved outcomes. One young person said: 'My foster carers are amazing. They are so supportive. They give me help when it is needed, and they are very understanding. My confidence has increased from zero to eight.' Another young person said: 'I really like it. We get on well, and I am treated as part of the family.' This provides the springboard for children to engage with other services, move forward and make progress.

There is a strong focus on permanency, which demonstrates the agency's commitment to children. Placement stability is good, and the percentage of unplanned endings in the year ending 31 March 2016 (2%) is below the national comparator of 4% for that year. Placement support meetings are used effectively to support foster carers to carry on with placements when they are struggling. Permanency is also promoted through the use of long-term placements, and some foster carers adopt their foster children, or care for them through special guardianship arrangements. This promotes children's sense of belonging, attachment and emotional security. Staying put arrangements are also supported when young people reach 18, so that they can continue benefiting from the stability of family life, as they become young adults. In the year ending 31 May 2017, 12 young people benefited from those arrangements.

Placement matching is very well considered, and the low level of placement disruption is testament to this. The placements team is very passionate about making good and successful matches, and staff are very diligent in trying to get as much information as possible about a child prior to placement. Children receive child-friendly profiles of the carers prior to moving in where possible. This provides them with reassurance and helps them to settle. There is also evidence of very well-planned placements, and a lot of time and attention are given to ensuring that the foster carers have the skills and support to meet the needs of the child, and to ways in which any deficits can be met.

The education service is highly effective in supporting educational progress, and is a notable area of excellence. It is now a national service, and its main focus is to

empower supervising social workers and foster carers to support children and to challenge education providers when necessary. It provides training and written guidance so that foster carers and staff are fully aware of children's legal entitlements and the correct processes. It has also developed some foster carers to be education ambassadors to provide peer support, advice and guidance to other foster carers. If children require some educational input, the service can provide experiential education as a short-term measure to support a child and the foster carers. The success of the service is demonstrated through a below-average number of permanent and fixed-term exclusions, a below-average percentage of persistent absentees (2.3% compared with 9.1%), a 0.5% higher-than-average attendance (97.4%) and above-national-average attainment in GCSEs or equivalent, ranging from 11% to 25% above, depending on what is being measured (compared with children looked after national data produced by the Department for Education March 2017). Attainment is monitored and reported at a senior management level so that the profile of education is high on the agenda, and achievements can be celebrated. All except two of the current children placed have appropriate education placements, and work is ongoing to assist the two remaining ones. One young person, who had an unsettled education experience prior to coming into foster care said: 'If it wasn't for my foster carers, I wouldn't have done my GCSEs. They encouraged me and prompted me with my revision.'

Foster carers are supported to ensure that children's health needs are met to the highest standard. Foster carers benefit from extensive training that encompasses all aspects of a child's development, including their emotional and psychological well-being. Foster carers have an excellent understanding of the therapeutic parenting approach, and they benefit from regular consultation with a clinical psychologist. Children are encouraged to engage with appropriate support services, such as the child and adolescent mental health service, because their foster carers understand the positive impact that this will have on children's emotional well-being. When discussing a young person who used to have significant behavioural and emotional problems, a social worker said: 'It is the foster carers who have caused this change. They listen to her and respect her and they are always there for her. She has said she feels loved and treated like one of the family.'

The voice of the child is strong. There are excellent mechanisms to obtain children's views in a fun but effective way, and the results of these consultations have been used to inform practice and influence the service. Children have contributed questions for the fostering panel and staff recruitment, they have developed the welcome pack and their views and experiences have informed the training for foster carers on bullying. The agency is also committed to hearing the voice of children who find it more difficult to communicate, and the disabled children's group has been established to look at how communication and consultation can be more effective for these children. Children are also well aware of how to complain, and any issues raised are taken very seriously.

Children benefit from stable, happy family life. They feel genuinely loved and cared about, fully integrated into family life, listened to, understood and respected. A young person commented: 'They help me through everything and they treat me like I am their family.' Another young person said: 'To me, foster care is the best thing

that has ever happened to me. I've learned a lot, and grown.' Children engage in a wide variety of activities to improve their experiences, such as becoming members of clubs, going to the gym, playing football and cricket, cycling, meeting friends and being part of family events such as holidays. Carers are fully supportive and encourage this. Foster carers also support the development of independent living skills, so children are fully prepared for adulthood.

Children, wherever their home local authority or, in the case of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, their country, receive the same level of support as a child from a more local area. Any arrangements to support the maintenance of important relationships are facilitated, and any services that are needed are transferred to the local area.

The agency has excellent and innovative ways of attracting enquirers. It has a national recruitment team and a digital marketing team, to ensure that all methods of reaching potential applicants are used. It has a highly effective and well-developed recruitment strategy, informed by trends and referrals. It is underpinned by stringent service standards, so that enquirers receive an extremely prompt response. Enquiries are always analysed if they fail to progress at any stage, to see what can be learned from them to improve the service.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers are robust, timely and effective, and result in foster carers who are well equipped to meet the many and varied needs of children looked after. Foster carers' competence is enhanced by an excellent induction and training package that is extensive in content and delivered to a very high standard. One social worker confirmed the impact of this, saying: 'The foster carers are excellent, the best carers I've come across.' Foster carers also highlight excellent support, including the 'fantastic' out-of-hours service, as one of the strengths of the agency. They feel well supported, consulted, highly valued and part of the professional team around the child. This enables them to provide the excellent care and support to children to help them make progress. Foster carers demonstrate an enormous amount of resilience, and the support of the agency is a big factor in enabling them to carry on in difficult circumstances.

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

This agency places safeguarding at the centre of its practice, as demonstrated by the high profile it has within the organisation. The responsible individual chairs the safeguarding board, which meets regularly to consider all aspects of safeguarding. This ensures that leaders and managers at the most senior level are fully aware of all issues that affect the safety and well-being of children and can take appropriate action.

The identification and monitoring of risk are areas that have improved since the last inspection. Known risks are identified prior to placement, and these continue to be monitored and evaluated on a regular basis. Risk assessments are also updated to include emerging risks. If children are at risk of self-harm, sexual exploitation, extremism or going missing from care, their names are included on the agency's

high-risk register, to facilitate accessible and more effective managerial oversight and risk management. Currently, 10 children have been identified as having these risks, although the number fluctuates as children become safer, or leave their placements.

Foster carers demonstrate an excellent understanding of their roles and responsibilities when children go missing from care. They have access to clear written guidance that underpins a raft of training on related issues, such as sexual exploitation, self-harm, extremism, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. Foster carers feel extremely well supported by their supervising social workers and by the out-of-hours service. One foster carer said of her supervising social worker: 'She is amazing. I can't praise her enough.' Foster carers develop extremely positive relationships with the foster children and they demonstrate a significant level of resilience, so that placements are sustained and children remain with them. Consequently, children have become safer. For example, the frequency of children going missing from their foster homes has significantly decreased. The anxiety of some other children has reduced because their foster carers understand how to manage it, and, as a result, the incidence of self-harm has diminished. A placing social worker commented: 'The foster carers are excellent. They manage the young person really well.' The young person reinforced this by saying: 'This is the longest placement I have had. It is well better than other placements, and my foster carers do a good job.'

A research-based therapeutic model of practice underpins the care and support that foster carers provide. This informs the assessment and foster carer approval, and is the basis for the training, supervision and support. Foster carers also have access to consultation with a team of clinical psychologists, as an additional avenue of support and to help them consider alternative strategies for managing behaviour. This enables them to understand the reasons for children's behaviour and to respond in a more therapeutic way. Physical intervention is used rarely.

Leaders, managers, staff and foster carers have an excellent understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each other, and of the other safeguarding agencies. The designated officer for the relevant local authority is contacted for advice when there is concern about a carer's practice, or an allegation about a person in a position of trust. In addition to making sure that children are protected during any investigation, the agency also provides foster carers with access to independent support when there is an allegation, in recognition of the emotional impact that this has on foster carers. The agency takes robust action when there are concerns about a foster carer's practice. This includes increased supervision, more frequent unannounced visits, action planning, return to the fostering panel for consideration of the foster carer's approval, and potentially deregistration. Leaders and managers use learning from serious case reviews to improve their practice. This includes changing supervising social workers to prevent collusion, having a different supervising social worker undertake an unannounced visit, being aware of previous unsubstantiated concerns about foster carers, and taking into account behaviour such as avoiding supervision and training. This ensures that the service is as robust as possible.

Children feel safe and protected from harm. They have a variety of ways they can contact adults if they have any concerns about their placement. The supervising social workers visit children every six weeks, in addition to the visits they undertake to supervise the foster carers. Children have written information in their welcome packs about whom they can contact, and this includes independent advocacy services. As a result of consultation with children, the welcome packs now contain pre-stamped envelopes and postcards that children can send to the agency to signal that they would like to talk to a social worker.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is strong, competent and effective leadership at all levels within the agency. The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She provides good leadership and has very high standards. Leaders and managers demonstrate passion, commitment and ambition to deliver a service of the highest quality, to ensure that children achieve the best possible outcomes. This is underpinned by the commitment of the organisation to a research-based approach to the provision of care, which takes account of trauma, attachment and neuropsychology. There is a significant emphasis on the training, skilling and support of foster carers to deliver this model effectively.

Children are at the centre of the service. Half of the board's members are social workers, and this ensures that the needs of children are prioritised and promoted at all times. This is evident in the agency's support of appropriate permanency plans, such as adoption, specialist guardianship and staying put arrangements. Although fostering placements are effectively lost through these plans, if it is right for the child, then the agency celebrates this.

Carers are exceptionally well supported to ensure that children make progress and remain in their foster families whenever possible. Because leaders and managers are aware of the progress that children are making, they are able to provide additional support promptly if this seems necessary. This includes placement support meetings to look at what additional support is needed to help the foster carers continue. This could be a foster carer buddy, an ambassador, the use of consultation with a clinical psychologist, additional training or increased supervisory visits. If placements disrupt, meetings are always held to consider what learning, if any, the agency can use to prevent disruptions in the future.

Staff are also well supported by regular, reflective supervision, access to good-quality training and annual appraisals. This enables them to provide good-quality support to their foster carers. Staff access the training that carers receive, so that they can discuss the learning in supervision visits. This also promotes a team approach to supporting the children in placement. Leaders and managers have supported staff to have manageable caseloads, despite the growth in the service, by using independent social workers to undertake some initial visits and assessments, and by appointing more staff. Staff retention is a high priority, and exit interviews are always analysed to see where improvements can be made.

Extensive and sophisticated monitoring systems ensure that the service is constantly

evaluated and, when shortfalls are highlighted, there is immediate action planning to resolve the issue. There is excellent analysis of all the information and feedback to inform the well-thought-out development plan for the agency. The responsible individual takes her responsibilities very seriously, and adopts a systematic approach to ensuring that she is fully aware of what is happening. This includes face-to-face discussions with staff, foster carers, and children, as well as data reports and a variety of effective and outcome-focused managerial meetings. There is a clear understanding of the ethos and principles that underpin the service.

Leaders and managers actively promote equality and diversity very well. The agency demonstrates an inclusive approach to foster carer recruitment. The agency uses a multi-media approach that is engaging and informative. This ensures that a wide range of potential applicants are targeted. Staff also feel well supported if they have particular requirements arising from their religious observance or disability. Children's diverse needs are recognised and met. The agency has a group for children who have a disability, the aim of which is to improve the effectiveness of consultation with children who are less verbal. The agency is re-establishing a group for the foster carers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to identify specific support and training needs, to enable the agency to provide the best and most appropriate care and support to meet these specific needs.

There is good and effective partnership working at all levels. The registered manager meets regularly with local authority commissioners, to ensure that she is fully aware of their placement needs. The quality of professional relationships is good, and children's social workers speak highly of the communication, information sharing and support for placements. One social worker said: 'Compass was really helpful. They coordinated everything and made sure the foster carers had the right support so that they felt confident.' Another social worker said: 'My interaction with Compass has been very good. I am always able to get hold of someone.' However, this does not prevent appropriate challenge when partner agencies are not acting in the best interests of children. This includes escalation procedures, contact with independent reviewing officers and the use of advocacy services.

The fostering panel comprises a good variety of members who bring personal and professional experience of foster care and related areas. The panel is chaired by an experienced and competent panel chair, supported by a membership that is committed, well prepared and able to challenge. Agency decision-making has also been strengthened by using a senior manager from another branch, as an added layer of independence. This promotes safe placements. However, there are some areas of weakness. On one occasion, the panel was not quorate, and the quality assurance mechanisms did not identify this shortfall. Additionally, a fostering household was approved without all the required checks. The agency mitigated any risk to children by ensuring that no children would be placed until the checks were received and were deemed suitable, but approving foster carers without the availability of full information is not good practice and it breaches regulations. The panel minutes do not always provide sufficient detail to reflect the full discussion, so it is difficult to see the rationale for some recommendations. The agency has already started to plan to rectify these issues.

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 difference 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: SC065772

Registered provider: Compass Fostering Central Limited

Registered provider address: Mountfields House Off Squirrell Way, Epinal Way,
Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3GE

Responsible individual: Bernadine Gibson

Registered manager: Melanie Aked

Telephone number: 01509 221310

Email address: admin@compasschildren.co.uk

Inspector

Ros Chapman, 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: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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