

Community Foster Care

Office 6-2-7 Level 2, Alston House, White Cross, South Road, Lancaster, Lancashire
LA1 4XF

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Community Foster Care is operated by an independent, not-for-profit charity. The agency has two registered offices in Lancaster (North) and Gloucester (South).

The Lancaster (North) branch oversees an additional office in Workington, Cumbria which does not carry out all the functions of a branch, so it does not have to be separately registered.

The agency recruits, assesses and supports foster carers who provide parent and child and short- and long-term placements for children and young people, some of whom may have disabilities. Emergency placements are also available.

The Lancaster (North) branch currently works with 12 approved foster carers and has 17 children placed. The manager was registered with Ofsted in August 2012.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 November 2018

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 **good**

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

Date of last inspection: 19 October 2015

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 and young people live with foster carers who are well trained and are skilled to meet their individual needs.
- The agency works hard to support children to stay healthy, to achieve in education and to feel safe.
- Placement matching and stability are key strengths, with many children and young people benefiting from secure, stable placements.
- Staff and carers advocate on behalf of children. This has led to improved outcomes for children and young people in many areas of their lives.
- Children and young people feel well cared for and loved. They feel that they are listened to and they can influence their day-to-day care as well as the overall development of the service.
- The agency undertakes all its key functions with rigour and thoroughness. Foster carers receive excellent levels of support, supervision and guidance and benefit from very good quality training.
- An independent, robust panel challenges the agency effectively.
- This is a well-managed agency. The newly appointed responsible individual brings a wealth of experience and a number of new initiatives. Both he and the registered manager make an effective team and are clearly ambitious and driven.
- Effective monitoring ensures that managers have a clear vision for the development of the agency and for the children and young people placed with foster carers.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Not all individual risk assessments for children and young people are reviewed and updated regularly.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. Specifically, that they are regularly reviewed with foster carers, children and placing authorities. (National Minimum Standards 4.5)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people are well matched to their foster carers and feel safe in their fostering households. They have their individual needs well met. They are well cared for and do not engage in risk-taking behaviours. They are supported by their foster carers to attend education and to lead healthy lifestyles. As a result, children and young people are making good progress.

Children and young people say that they feel treated as part of the family and have forged good attachments to their foster carers in a relatively short period of time. They trust their foster carers and value the guidance and support they receive from them. This was quite clearly demonstrated by the young people spoken with during the inspection. They confirmed that they are well cared for and happy in their home. One young person said, 'I love living with my foster carers. They are kind, funny and we have lots of fun. I love my big bedroom and it's full of toys and we go out on lots of trips and holidays. They have helped me lots and I know they care about me.'

Foster carers understand the importance of children and young people's contact with their family and friends. Foster carers work hard to develop positive relationships with children's families and some have successfully advocated for increased levels of contact. This helps children and young people to retain their important family relationships and their sense of identity.

Education is extremely well promoted and results in very high attendance and attainment levels. Foster carers challenge schools to support children and young people appropriately. For those children and young people who require further support, additional tuition is sought so that their chances of succeeding are maximised. As a result, children and young people speak positively about their education and have clear aspirations to proceed on to higher education, skills-based education or university. This undoubtedly enhances their self-esteem, confidence and overall life chances.

Foster carers actively support children and young people to live healthy lifestyles. All children and young people have access to health services that meet their physical, emotional and social needs. Foster carers have access to therapeutic support within the agency. An allocated therapist provides advice and support to foster carers and supervising social workers. Foster carers say that this has helped them to understand some of the presenting behaviours displayed by children and young people.

Children and young people's life chances are significantly enhanced because of the many and varied enjoyable opportunities that they receive. Examples include trips to places of interest, music and performing arts groups, sports clubs and holidays abroad. Fun activities are also organised frequently by the agency. These are well attended and are enjoyable experiences for children and young people. There is good evidence of children growing in confidence and developing new skills and

friendships through these events.

Children and young people can express their views through a variety of methods. This includes talking with their own social worker, by completing feedback forms for the agency, and by participating in group sessions run by the agency. Supervising social workers and placement workers know children and young people well. They spend time with children and young people doing direct work and encourage their participation through structured events. This enables children and young people to have meaningful input into how the agency operates.

Social workers and commissioners reported a high level of satisfaction with the service and the progress that children and young people have made. They confirmed that children and young people benefit from stable placements.

How the agency captures children and young people's progress has improved. Outcome trackers, supervision records and review reports clearly highlight the progress made by children and young people. This helps leaders and managers to have a good understanding of each individual child and young person placed with the agency.

Support to approved foster carers is good. Carers know that support is available by phone and in person at any time of the day or night. The quality of support is enhanced further by the excellent relationships that supervising social workers and placement support workers have developed with children, young people and foster carers. Many positive comments were received from foster carers during the inspection. Examples of these include:

- 'I am treated as a professional and a valuable member of the team.'
- 'We are really well supported. Foster carers are treasured by the agency.'
- 'It feels like we are part of a family. Our thoughts are always listened to. We have good support from other carers and all the social workers and staff are helpful and supportive.'
- 'We find our supervising social worker to be friendly, professional, approachable and knowledgeable. If we have problems, we know that she is there for us. She is great with all our children and we know they all really like her.'

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

Children and young people's safety and well-being are prioritised and promoted. They enjoy happy and stable placements. There are very few significant incidents. Foster carers help children and young people to take age-appropriate risks, according to their individual circumstances and needs. As a result, children and young people become independent, confident and resilient individuals.

Relationships between carers, children and young people are extremely positive. Carers build strong bonds with children and young people, and are clear about their

boundaries and expectations. As a result, children and young people develop trusting relationships with their carers and feel comfortable talking about things that worry them.

All foster carers complete a safe-caring policy that is subject to regular review. This ensures that foster carers do not place themselves in vulnerable situations. However, there are shortfalls in risk assessments. Not all are regularly reviewed and updated. To date, the impact of this shortfall is minimal, as it is mitigated by the positive support and guidance that carers receive from their supervising social worker and registered manager.

Foster carers understand how to manage challenging behaviours. Records demonstrate that since being placed with this agency, children and young people develop safer and more constructive behaviours. The challenging behaviours that they used to engage in have either stopped or significantly reduced in their intensity and frequency.

Missing from home episodes are extremely rare, with only three recorded incidents in the last 12 months. However, when incidents do occur, foster carers are proactive and work alongside the placing authority to ensure that the young person understands the risk they may be placing themselves in. In addition, the agency monitors such incidents and ensures that concerns are escalated if required.

Supervising social workers undertake regular visits to foster carers. This enables foster carers to discuss the support they need to ensure that they offer the best possible care to children and young people. Foster carers report high levels of satisfaction with the training on offer. They feel that training is focused and relevant. This provides them with an understanding of the impact of early trauma on those children and young people in their care.

Effective systems are in place to ensure that foster carers provide safe and comfortable homes for children and young people to live in. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least annually. In addition, health and safety visits are regularly reviewed. These arrangements ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people are closely monitored by the agency.

Allegations and disclosures are immediately referred to the appropriate safeguarding body. The agency works well with other agencies in these circumstances and appropriate bodies are notified of the outcome of any investigation.

Staff, panel members and foster carers are recruited using effective procedures to ensure that they are safe and suitable people to work with and have access to children and young people.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is managed well by an experienced and qualified registered manager. She has been the registered manager since 2012. She has high expectations of what all children and young people can achieve and has a clear vision for the development of the agency.

A new responsible individual joined the team in January 2018. He brings a wealth of experience to the agency and has successfully developed a number of new initiatives. He provides effective strategic leadership necessary to ensure that the agency is true to the aims of the service.

The agency is well resourced, and caseloads are small. Consequently, supervising social workers can provide a high level of support. Staff are extremely positive about working at the agency. They feel well supported by the registered manager and their colleagues. One member of staff said, 'I feel very well supported by the agency, carers, staff, senior management colleagues and trustees. All staff and carers are focused on doing what's right for the child. There is a very positive and "upbeat" culture within my team, and we all work together well.'

Staff benefit from regular and in-depth practice-related supervision. Staff confirm that team meetings are creative and interactive and enhance their knowledge of guidance and legislation.

New staff reported positively about the induction process and said that they feel well supported in their roles. Staff morale is high, and there is good communication between staff to ensure that foster carers, children and young people are well supported. The approach of the staff team is professional, caring and committed, as confirmed by a number of professionals spoken with during the inspection.

The registered manager recognises that the agency has not grown as hoped since the last inspection. Recruitment of foster carers has been slow. However, the registered individual and the registered manager are working hard to embed the new recruitment strategy. This includes a greater focus on creative marketing. Together, their enthusiasm and commitment have helped inspire a new confidence and focus for the service.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is child-centred, with a strong focus on safe care and safeguarding. Foster carers report that the quality of the preparation and training is excellent and provides them with the skills and understanding to meet children and young people's needs.

The agency ensures that approved foster carers are offered appropriate support and training. The agency offers a wide range of relevant training through a rolling and ever-growing programme that supports carers to develop their skills and knowledge. As a result, many children are thriving in families where the foster carers understand how to meet their needs.

The fostering panel is made up of members from a range of backgrounds and experience. The panel chair is very knowledgeable and confident in his role. The panel gives good-quality assurance recommendations to assessing social

workers and the registered manager. As a result, good-quality carers are recruited.

The panel members receive documentation in good time before the meeting. This ensures that they are fully appraised of information before making their recommendations. Minutes from the meeting are clear and concise and record the reasons for decisions made.

The panel has active engagement with the agency. Its members have regular training events and annual appraisals. This ensures that the panel remains effective.

The agency decision-maker demonstrates a thorough approach to her role. She carefully considers all the information available, and challenges when appropriate. The agency decision-making process is robust. The decisions made about foster carers' approval status are clearly recorded and made within the required timescales.

Placing authorities acknowledge the good quality of support that staff provide to placements and the positive achievements of children and young people. The registered manager provides robust challenge to local authorities where the needs of children and young people are not being met.

Monitoring systems are rigorous, and there is a clear focus on driving improvement and maintaining high standards of care. Quarterly reports are shared with the board of trustees and these inform ongoing development and review of the agency.

The registered manager makes timely notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant event that takes place.

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 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: SC387213

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Inspector

Ceri Evans, social care inspector



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