

Fostering Solutions

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Fostering Solutions Limited, 1 Merchants Place, River Street, Bolton BL2 1BX

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

- Fostering Solutions North West is one of a number of fostering agencies owned and managed by the National Fostering Agency (NFA Group).
- The agency was registered with Ofsted on 3 November 2003. It has offices in Bolton, Burnley, Liverpool and St Helens, and covers the North West of England.
- On 1 October 2018, 378 children were placed with the agency and there were 295 approved fostering households.
- The agency provides short-term, long-term, permanent, respite and emergency placements. It also provides specialist placements for children with complex needs, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, children who present with sexually harmful behaviour, disabled children, step-down placements from residential care, parent and child placements and a 'staying put' scheme.

Inspection dates: 1 to 5 October 2018

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 **outstanding**

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: 10 August 2015

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 receive an extremely high quality of care that improves their lives. Foster carers have the warmth, expertise and resilience to provide vulnerable children with safe and nurturing homes. Children enjoy very positive relationships with their foster carers and have a strong sense of belonging.
- Thorough and careful assessments match children with foster carers who have the right skills, personal qualities and experience to meet their individual needs.
- The agency and foster carers have high aspirations for every child in their care. They work tirelessly with partner agencies to make sure that children get the best possible support and achieve excellent education and health outcomes.
- Foster carers are extremely well prepared, assessed, trained and supported to provide children with high-quality care and support.
- An exceptionally strong safeguarding culture throughout the organisation protects children from harm. Children feel safe and their concerns are taken seriously. Foster carers have the skills to recognise any signs that could indicate that a child may be at risk of abuse, neglect, radicalisation or sexual and/or criminal exploitation.
- The agency takes decisive action when it has concerns about children's safety. Social workers and foster carers ensure that their concerns are taken seriously, and that appropriate action is taken by safeguarding agencies to protect children.
- Foster carers have the expertise, skills, training and support to understand and help children with complex needs and challenging behaviour.
- The leadership and management of the agency are inspirational, efficient and effective. The ambitious vision to provide children with an excellent standard of care and to make a difference in children's lives is demonstrated in practice.
- Leaders and managers know the strengths of the agency well and the areas that they need to improve. They are developing the services and the range of placements that they offer to respond positively to the needs of children.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children, including those with complex and challenging needs, are making exceptional and sustained progress. The agency's excellent professional practice makes sure that foster carers receive the support and guidance that they need to make a difference to children's lives. Foster carers have the skills, knowledge, expertise, resilience, personal qualities, self-awareness and dedication to provide vulnerable children with high-quality care and support.

Children live in warm, nurturing, safe and stimulating homes. They enjoy reliable and trusting relationships with their foster carers. They develop a strong sense of belonging and very much feel part of the family. A child said, 'I have lived with my carers for a number of years and I am 'staying put'. They have provided me and my siblings with everything we need and more.'

Children receive an exceptionally high standard of care and support that is tailored to meet their personal needs and circumstances. Each child is seen and treated as an individual. Foster carers recognise the different and competing needs of brothers and/or sisters and make sure that each child has the help that they need to make progress. For example, foster carers have worked intensively with a child to improve significantly her language and mobility to meet her developmental milestones, while her brother and sister were at nursery. The foster carers have also succeeded in helping these children to learn to play together, to take turns and to get on much better.

Foster carers show a tremendously strong commitment to the children in their care. They provide children with compassion and reassurance to help them make sense of their lives and recover from trauma and negative experiences. A therapeutic life story worker said: 'It would be catastrophic to move this child from that placement. The standard of care that the foster carer has provided and continues to provide is outstanding. She is his champion. She has gone above and beyond for him. She has been exceptional in her support for him.' The agency matches children successfully with foster carers who can meet the child's assessed needs. Consequently, children are more likely to live in stable placements. Some children have lived with their foster carers for many years. The matching process is managed effectively by the placement social worker. Decisions are made collectively by foster carers and supervising social workers. The agency always makes sure that it obtains as much information as possible about children from local authorities before making the decision for a child to move to live with a foster carer.

The agency makes sure that children get as much information as possible about their new fostering family before they move. This helps children to settle and eases any concerns or worries that they may have. Where possible, children will meet their foster carers and visit their home to meet the rest of the family and to have a good look around before moving in. The agency recognised that this does not happen

when children move in an emergency and the agency has worked creatively with children to find a solution to this. Together they have developed an e-profile for each foster carer which can be sent to the child's mobile device.

The agency and foster carers encourage and support children to express their views and to influence the decisions affecting their lives. Children feel valued and know that their views count. Foster carers are strong advocates for children and help them to have their say. This includes recognising when children show their wishes and feelings non-verbally or through their behaviour. Supervising social workers see children regularly to find out about their placement. This gives children the chance to have a say about what is important to them in their day-to-day lives or if they have any worries. Children, including foster carers' birth children, contribute to foster carers' annual reviews.

The agency makes sure that children share their views about the quality of care and the support that they receive and that these views and opinions contribute to the development of the service. Regular and highly effective youth councils provide an excellent opportunity for a wide range of children to participate and influence the agency. Attending the youth council has helped children to find their voices and has given them the confidence to challenge adults when they feel that they are not getting the right support. The agency has continued to develop children's participation through the appointment of a care leaver, who is a qualified social worker, as a children's ambassador.

The agency and foster carers have very high aspirations for the children in their care. They work tirelessly to encourage and improve children's learning and development. For example, foster carers have helped pre-school children to develop their language skills and ability to play and engage with other children. Foster carers act as extremely good parents. They work collaboratively with teachers and social workers to support children's education. Children's school attendance and attainment levels are both significantly higher than the national average. This shows the agency's and foster carers' commitment to children's education. For example, 61% of children looked after by the agency are achieving at, or above, age-related expectations across key stages 1–4. This is almost double the published national figure of around 35%.

The agency's national lead for education works closely with foster carers and supervising social workers to monitor and improve children's outcomes. Foster carers value this excellent support. It is helping them to make sure that children are getting the support that they need at school to make progress.

The agency and foster carers work exceedingly hard to prepare children for adult life. They make sure that children continue to receive the best support possible to maximise their opportunities to succeed when they leave school. For example, foster carers make every effort to make sure that children have the practical life skills that they need for the future, such as learning to drive. Only two children (1.1%) were classed as not in education, training or employment. This is much lower than the national figure of 6.6% and highlights the commitment to children's successful and purposeful transition into adulthood.

Children have access to primary and specialist healthcare services that meet their individual health needs. Healthy routines are quickly established, and foster carers help children to achieve a healthy diet and lifestyle and a good quality of sleep. Foster carers successfully re-engage children with health professionals, such as the dentist, and ensure that any concerns are quickly identified and addressed. The agency has been innovative in the development and use of children's health passports for children with complex healthcare needs who may at times require hospital admission, such as children who may experience autistic spectrum disorder. Collaborative work with health colleagues has meant that children are able to access the necessary services with as little disruption to their lives as is possible. As a result, children enjoy much improved health and emotional well-being outcomes.

Children have excellent opportunities to build their social skills, their confidence and to develop their talents. Foster carers make sure that children enjoy a wide range of fun social, educational and leisure activities in the local community. Children regularly take part and achieve in sports, dance, creative arts, horse riding, cycling, trampolining, Brownies and cadets. Children take part in after-school activities and school trips. For example, one child had a highly enjoyable 3-week school trip to Malaysia. They also enjoy regular family holidays, including trips abroad, with their foster carers.

Foster carers understand how important it is for children to continue relationships with significant people, such as parents, relatives and friends. Foster carers support children to keep in touch with important people in a safe and planned way. Foster carers work hard to develop good relationships with birth parents to ensure that children have positive experiences when they see them. A social worker said: 'At contact, the foster carer provides mum with feedback about the children's experiences, health appointments and progress at nursery. This willingness to work with mum and have a positive relationship has been helpful in managing a stressful situation.'

The agency's arrangements for recruiting, preparing and assessing prospective foster carers are thorough and carried out in a timely way. Detailed and analytical assessments clearly show people's suitability to foster. Assessments are informed by a comprehensive understanding of current research and practice. Meticulous management oversight makes sure that assessments are completed to a consistently high standard. Foster carers take part in high-quality training that is relevant to the needs of the children in their care.

Foster carers, including new carers, are extremely well supported by the agency. The quality of the support provided is the reason given by foster carers for choosing the agency. Foster carers greatly value the practical and emotional support that they receive from the experienced foster carers with the agency's Helping Hands scheme. Foster carers said: 'They [the experienced carers] have extensive knowledge and experience and with this have been able to support us with not only practical ideas and advice to support the child but also how to support each other as a family.' Foster carers also said: 'Helping Hands were a lifeline to us both when a very complex little girl was placed with us. We were dealing with behaviour we had never

come across before and were unsure how to react to certain situations. She is still with us after nearly three years.'

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

A strong safeguarding culture is embedded throughout the agency. Children feel safe and have a strong sense of safety and well-being. They have trusted adults they can talk to about any worries. Adults listen to them, take their concerns seriously and act to keep them safe.

Managers, social workers and foster carers make sure that children live in safe and supportive homes. Their professional practice and the safeguarding arrangements protect children from harm.

Foster carers have an in-depth understanding of the vulnerabilities of the children in their care and any current concerns about children's safety. Foster carers are extremely vigilant and curious. They have the skills to recognise any signs that may indicate that a child may be at risk of abuse, neglect, radicalisation or sexual and/or criminal exploitation. The agency makes sure that foster carers receive high-quality safeguarding training and have the information that they need to protect children.

Children have up-to-date individual risk assessments. Managers, social workers and foster carers continually assess the risks for each child and take every necessary step to manage risks safely. Foster carers support children to be aware of risks and to manage their own safety. This has included helping children to take reasonable risks as part of their development, such as spending time with their friends in the community and having sleepovers.

Managers, social workers and foster carers act decisively when they have concerns about children's welfare and always follow the agency's safeguarding procedures. They respond appropriately when children go missing from home. This includes finding out the reasons for why children may have gone missing and then taking any necessary steps to reduce the risk of it happening again.

The agency has strong and effective relationships with local authorities, designated officers, the police and other safeguarding agencies. Concerns about children's safety are shared immediately with the relevant local authority. The agency is assertive and tenacious in making sure that the concerns are taken seriously. When the agency has not been satisfied with the response from the local authority, it has escalated its concerns appropriately. Investigations into allegations about foster carers are well coordinated and thorough. They are handled fairly and quickly in line with the statutory guidance.

The agency makes sure that foster carers have the expertise, skills, training and support to understand and help children with complex and challenging needs. Foster carers work positively and confidently with children to find the best way possible to support them. For example, a fostering family's use of a consistent, nurturing and research-based approach is helping two children to make remarkable progress in

managing their feelings. The children are now less likely to be aggressive and the times when they need to be restrained have reduced significantly. The foster carers are highly in tune with the children's needs. The foster carers understand and can anticipate when the children are likely to feel anxious or unsafe. Therefore, the foster carers have created a reliable environment that has helped the children to feel secure and to build trusting relationships with them. The foster carers have helped the children to find creative ways of coping with strong emotions. For example, ripping up paper or using an anger thermometer when they feel upset. The children are happier, and their quality of life has improved. For example, the children now have the confidence to enjoy going out to busy places, such as Legoland and the Sea Life Centre.

The agency provides foster carers with an exceptionally good standard of support and scrutiny. Social workers provide foster carers with practice-related supervision at least once a month as well as undertaking unannounced visits. This makes sure that foster carers are working in the best interests of the children in their care and that they receive the right support, advice and guidance. This enables them to provide children with a high standard of care and protection.

The agency's extremely careful recruitment and selection of foster carers, panel members and staff help to protect children from unsuitable adults.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The registered manager has worked for the agency since February 2018. She has the necessary vision, drive, experience and expertise for the role. Leaders and managers are inspirational, confident, forward-thinking and effective. They are dedicated to improving the lives of the children in their care. Their ambitious ethos of high expectations and aspirations for every child is demonstrated in practice. It is visible in the professional practice of foster carers, social workers and staff, as well as in the consistently high standard of care and support that children receive and the positive experiences and improved outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers have created a warm and friendly working environment for foster carers, social workers and staff to help them to provide children with an excellent standard, and consistency, of care. Foster carers, social workers and staff are knowledgeable, experienced, skilled and highly motivated. They are passionate, resilient and do not give up trying to make a positive difference to children's lives.

Leaders and managers value foster carers' expertise and professionalism. They are open to new ideas and sharing best practice throughout the organisation. For example, the successful Helping Hands scheme for providing peer support to foster carers has expanded across the whole of the north west and is now being adopted nationally.

Leaders and managers provide social workers and staff with excellent support, guidance and encouragement. Social workers and staff have regular opportunities through practice-related supervision, team meetings and training to reflect on children's progress, their own performance and to share and develop their skills and

knowledge. For example, training and learning about the risks to children from criminal exploitation has been shared with social workers and foster carers. This has helped them to think about what the risks might be and to know what to do if they have any concerns.

Leaders and managers have an in-depth understanding of the agency's strengths and key priorities for development. They make sustained improvements that benefit children. Clear and efficient management and monitoring systems provide leaders and managers with excellent oversight of the agency's activities, performance, quality of care and children's progress. Leaders and managers are quick to identify when foster carers and children are struggling. They take suitable and targeted action to support fragile placements and make decisions in the children's best interests.

Leaders' and managers' productive working relationships with local authorities mean that they have a detailed understanding of local needs. The agency responds effectively to current and predicted future demands. A targeted recruitment strategy is helping to attract foster carers who can meet the specific and diverse needs of children. Also, the agency is working in partnership with a local authority to develop a step-down service for children from residential care placements. Leaders and managers are developing new and innovative ways of supporting foster carers and enhancing their confidence and skills caring for children with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Following the success of a pilot scheme, the agency has introduced a therapeutic and practical support service to assist foster carers looking after children with very challenging behaviour. Also, foster carers now have opportunities for advanced training in working with children who have suffered from poor attachments and trauma. This equips foster carers with the skills and knowledge to understand how best to work with these children and to manage and resolve the issues that influence their behaviour.

The fostering panel and agency decision-maker make safe, timely, extremely thorough and careful decisions about people's suitability to foster children. The agency benefits from panel members with a wide range of skills and knowledge about meeting children's needs, including people from education, health and social work as well as foster carers and previously looked after children.

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: SC033219

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