

Sunflower Fostering

Hillcrest Children's Services (2) Limited

The Old School, Weston under Lizard, Shropshire, TF11 8JZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A large national provider of children's services operates this independent fostering agency providing long-term and short-term care.

The agency has been without a registered manager since April 2021. A new manager has been appointed. The manager will apply to register with Ofsted.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency was providing placements for 37 children living in 28 fostering households.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 October 2021

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: 6 November 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: None

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make progress from their starting points because of the care they receive from their foster carers. Some of the children placed with this agency have lived with their foster carers for many years. Foster carers welcome children into their families. They prepare welcome videos for social workers to share with children before they move into placement. Children enjoy opportunities such as holidays and after school clubs and become part of the family. One child for example has achieved the silver award through the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme.

New foster carers joining the agency feel welcomed into the agency family. Assessments are thorough to consider whether carers are suitable to foster for this agency. Carers feel that they were considered with sensitivity by the assessor and the fostering panel. This adds to the positive view of the agency that carers have when they arrive and was shared with inspectors.

Foster carers advocate for children. Carers support children to become more aware of sensitive issues and to understand their own and others' identities. For example, when one child needed support around sexuality and gender identity issues, the foster carer made sure that additional learning and guidance was available. This helps to achieve individualised care and best outcomes for children.

Children's social workers value the support children receive from their foster carers. They recognise the importance of care planning to help children to feel secure in their foster families now and in the future. Plans are in place for a number of children to remain with their foster carers after their eighteenth birthday. Children continue to receive encouragement while studying or training. This supports children to prepare for adulthood.

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

Foster carers understand risks for children and are proactive in keeping children safe. Foster carers discuss their concerns with professionals and receive support from the clinical team. This helps foster carers to implement additional care strategies, which reduce risks for children. One social worker said about a carer, 'The carer has worked very hard to keep [child] safe, working with myself to agree safety measures around vulnerabilities'.

Children are supported to progress with independence skills in a safe and planned way. One child is encouraged to travel to college by train as part of her independence. Foster carers are available to pick her up during darker nights so that she does not have to travel alone. The foster carers balance their support to encourage independence and confidence building while ensuring that the child feels safe.

The fostering panel chair makes sure that assessments of prospective foster carers include all necessary checks and explore issues related to fostering. Fostering panel members prepare for panel by identifying areas of vulnerability to explore with the assessor and prospective foster carers. This allows for robust consideration and recommendation on the prospective foster carer's suitability to foster.

The agency has a newly appointed agency decision maker, who is social work qualified and provides a clear rationale when approving foster carers. This gives further assurance that foster carers who are recruited have the skills and resilience to care for children and keep them safe.

Foster carers are provided with additional training to meet the complex of needs of children such as epilepsy training. However, some foster carers have not completed their mandatory training in timescale within the agency's statement of purpose and training plans. This includes safeguarding and safe use of medications. This does not support the foster carers to have the required level of knowledge and skill to understand and promote the needs of children in their care.

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

This agency is led by a newly appointed manager who plans to be enrolled on the appropriate management training course. This will help him to develop the management skills required to lead this fostering agency. The manager is ambitious for children and carers and has a clear vision of where he wants the agency to be and knows the strengths and weaknesses of the agency.

Managers have not acted to rectify all of the shortfalls identified at the last inspection. For example, the statement of purpose remains out of date containing incorrect details of the responsible individual, manager and agency decision maker. This means that misleading information about the service is being provided.

The foster carers, supervising social workers and manager receive regular supervision. Supervisions for foster carers are reflective and offer guidance where needed. Records for supervising social worker's, however, do not show challenge, direction, or reflection. The supervision records also highlight that they have been 'copied and pasted' from the previous month. This does not show how effective management oversight of supervision is improving the agency and its outcomes for children.

Foster carers have annual reviews within timescales. The agency presents all annual reviews during panel meetings where the agency decision maker has oversight of these. Managers have not always coordinated the annual review process effectively. In one case, there is no evidence that a decision has been made to continue the approval of two foster carers. Because of this, no confirmation has been provided to the foster carers of the decision that they continue to be approved as suitable to foster for the agency.

Foster carers feel unsupported by the agency during times of crisis. Most foster carers informed the inspectors that 'the agency is very friendly, and the staff are lovely people with the agency now getting better'. Foster carers report that now that the agency is owned by a large provider, the family feel to the agency is now lost. Out of hours support for the foster carers is impersonal and nationwide. Carers calls are answered by workers based around the country who at times do not have access to information relating to the carer or child which results in advice given to call an emergency duty team. This leads to carers not receiving sufficient guidance and support during times of crisis.

There has been a period of inconsistency within the agency. During the agency's takeover, all supervising social workers left the agency which has impacted on the support for foster carers. One foster carer stated, 'Some families did not even have a supervising social worker for a period of time' and another carer informed inspector's that, 'During the past 4-5 months the communication from the agency and in particular our new supervising social worker has been awful'.

The manager audits case files and identifies where documents are missing. Action plans are given to staff to request the information from children's placing authorities. The manager has a process to escalate when documents are not returned in a timely way. This provides foster carers with the information they require when caring for children.

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
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide, and</p> <p>notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4(a)(b))</p> <p>This is in relation to updating the statement of purpose on the fostering agency’s website to include details of the new management arrangements and making the updated statement of purpose available to Ofsted.</p>	03 December 2021
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This is in relation to facilitating suitable out of hours support to carers during times of crisis and ensuring that foster carers complete required training in a timely way.</p>	17 January 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them—</p> <p>Receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))</p> <p>This is in relations to ensuring that all supervising social workers receive effective and appropriate supervision. In addition, ensure that the quality of supervision improves to provide a clear audit trail about matters discussed.</p>	03 December 2021

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', page 31, paragraph 14.10)

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: SC398387

Registered provider: Hillcrest Children's Services (2) Limited

Registered provider address: Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: Pamela Larsen

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspectors

Kev Brammer, Social Care Inspector

Lydia Isaac, Social Care Inspector

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