

# Next Stage For Fostering Limited

28 Manchester Road, Westhoughton, Bolton BL5 3QJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency was registered in August 2016. The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short term
- long term
- respite.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 14 approved fostering households. These families were caring for 21 children.

The registered manager has been in post since the service was registered with Ofsted.

This inspection involved both on-site and off-site inspection activity. Foster carers and children were enabled to take part by video calls.

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: 20 to 23 September 2021

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account</b>	<b>outstanding</b>
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:** 13 September 2017

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

The agency has grown slowly over the last four years. Staff have worked hard to ensure that they have solid foundations on which to expand. The agency has only recruited foster carers that it is confident have the resilience and skills to care for children safely.

There is a strong family feel to the agency. All the foster carers spoken to commented on this, as well as those who responded to the inspection announcement letter, and to the Ofsted surveys earlier in the year. One foster carer commented: 'Very friendly, supportive, accessible staff and managers. Great communication and excellent on-call service due to all staff knowing the foster carers and children really well.' This typifies the comments received. Foster carers do feel valued. They also share the ethos of the agency, which is extremely child-centred.

Children benefit from secure, trusting relationships with their foster carers. Children make significant progress when placed in their foster families. All children are attending school and were supported to continue with their education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their achievements and successes are celebrated. One young adult is just about to start at university, and another is learning to drive. Children receive encouragement to achieve their potential and think about their future. This motivates them to succeed.

The majority of children are living with foster families where they will remain on a permanent basis. One child commented in response to an Ofsted survey: 'We're a family; though not biological, we are treated like we belong.' Children feel like they are part of the family, which allows them to thrive. A number of young adults have also been able to remain living with their family under 'staying put' arrangements, providing them with additional security and support until they are ready to move to independence.

The agency is proactive in enabling brothers and sisters to live together. Over 75% of children live with at least one sibling. This helps children to sustain a positive family identity. Children are also supported to keep in touch with those important to them in line with their plans. Children were able to keep in contact with family members during the pandemic, for example using virtual contact and meeting in the park. Children and their families appreciated this.

When possible, children are supported to move into foster homes in a planned way. Matching is robust, with the manager ensuring that she has a good understanding of the child's needs prior to approaching the foster carer about the potential placement. This includes speaking with the child's current carers and requesting additional written information. This means that the decision to place a child is made on sound and up-to-date information. Consequently, placement stability is strong. There have

been no emergency disruptions and only a very small number of unplanned endings, which included one placement ending due to the unforeseen change of circumstance of the foster carers.

Agency staff demonstrate a real commitment to children and foster carers. They go above and beyond. The supervising social worker or a manager is always present when a child arrives at the foster home. They ensure that the child receives a welcome box of gifts. This includes a photo frame for the child to place a photo of their birth family in and a soft blanket, as well as the children's guide to the agency and a reply-paid postcard for the child to return to the agency should they need to contact anyone with any concerns. Foster carers value the emotional support that staff provide during this important move. The agency staff also become familiar to the child from the point of placement.

Foster carers spoken to during the inspection had a very real appreciation of the child's history and the impact that a move to foster care may have on the child. They do not have unrealistic expectations and prepare their own children well for the arrival of a new child. One carer spoke about how her own children had put together a welcome box for their child. They had thought about the things that would be important to them and consequently may help the child settle. This empathetic approach helps children understand how others are feeling.

During times of national restriction, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the agency creatively engaged with children and foster carers. Staff kept in frequent contact, using a range of both virtual contact and face-to-face visits, including discussion on the doorstep or in the garden. They have continued to engage children in activities, such as bingo, virtual quizzes and scavenger hunts. This has recently progressed to the return to face-to-face activities, such as a family bowling event. Foster carers speak highly of the support they received, reporting that it continued throughout the restrictions at an equivalent level.

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

Children say that they feel safe living in their foster families. They develop trusting relationships with their foster carers, and this underpins the progress they make. One child said: 'I feel welcome and safe,' and another commented: 'I can always talk to my carers about anything that may be bothering me.'

The identification and management of risk is effective. Children's known risks are identified and understood prior to them moving into the foster family. Robust risk management plans include strategies for foster carers to manage behaviours safely. These documents are swiftly updated if new concerns emerge. This ensures that children are responded to in the most effective manner and their risks reduce.

Foster carers understand children's vulnerabilities and risks. Although the frequency of children presenting high-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home, is very low, carers are vigilant to these risks and understand how to respond. On one

occasion when a child did go missing, the foster carers reacted quickly, searching the local area, contacting the child's friends, and working in partnership with her parent. This enabled them to locate and return the child swiftly. The child appreciated that her carers were looking out for her safety. Similarly, foster carers are alert to children's vulnerabilities and have responded swiftly when alerted to potential child sexual exploitation concerns. This has meant that the child and potentially others in the community have been protected from harm.

There have not been any physical interventions reported by the agency, and positive behaviour management training is provided to all carers. However, foster carers can access specialist training at short notice, via the wider organisation if it were to be required. Similarly, supervising social workers and foster carers have access to a psychologist for advice if required.

The recruitment of foster carers and staff has a strong emphasis on safeguarding. A comprehensive range of reference checks are completed on foster carers. This includes contacting carers' former partners if applicable. This prevents those who are unsuitable having access to children.

There is a strong emphasis on equipping foster carers with the skills they will need to provide safe and effective care for children. During the pandemic, 'skills to foster' training was delivered virtually and on a one-to-one basis, giving carers the opportunity to talk freely. In addition, post-approval training includes attachment and trauma; internet safety and social media; racism and discrimination and child sexual exploitation, thus ensuring that carers have the knowledge they need to deal with these issues.

Safeguarding remains at the forefront of practice in this agency. Two unannounced visits are made to foster carers' homes each year, to ensure that the standard of care remains high even when a social worker is not expected to visit. These visits continued throughout lockdown periods, with agency staff being more imaginative regarding the format of these.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The registered manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She set up the agency in 2016 and has led on the expansion of the agency from that point. Growth has deliberately been slow and steady, ensuring that both staff and foster carers share the child-centred ethos of the agency. The registered manager is a dynamic and enthusiastic leader, who knows all the foster carers and children well. She leads by example and remains involved in day-to-day practice. She has high standards and expectations.

The agency is well supported by its fostering panel. The panel chair is suitably qualified and experienced. However, currently, the central list of panel members is largely constituted of practising or retired social workers. The agency is in the process of recruiting new panel members, to help address this imbalance. The panel provides a robust quality assurance role, ensuring that foster carers are only

approved when its members are satisfied that all the necessary checks have been performed adequately. Panel minutes reflect robust exploration and discussion. The agency decision-maker makes his decisions promptly, clearly listing his own reasons for reaching his decision. This ensures a clear audit trail of decision-making.

The registered manager produces quarterly review reports on the quality of care and operation of the agency. However, there is a delay in sending these reports to Ofsted. Also, they do not include details of any consultation the agency has conducted with carers, children or social workers, despite some consultation taking place. It is not clear how this is being used to inform the agency's practice. These issues were identified at the last inspection of the agency, but the required changes have yet to be made.

A small team of qualified supervising social workers undertakes the supervision of foster carers. Social workers have manageable caseloads and are in weekly contact with their foster carers. Foster carers also receive fortnightly support visits during their first year of fostering. This ensures that any problems are quickly identified and addressed. This high level of support to foster carers is key to placement stability.

Social workers receive regular reflective supervision. Management decision-making is clear and recorded on the foster carers' records. Social workers feel well supported by the registered manager. One commented: 'My manager is extremely supportive and there is always someone available for support if required.'

The recent introduction of an electronic record system now means that staff and foster carers can access what they need in one place. Foster carers are now able to record the child's daily diary straight into this system. Records sampled were of good quality, highlighting the child's achievements that day, with carers being mindful that the child may choose to access their records in the future.

Monitoring systems enable managers to have oversight of the service. Local authorities are approached for missing documentation and there is a process for escalating concerns if this is required.

Children's social workers and commissioners are extremely positive about the agency. Their comments include:

- 'The agency is extremely child-focused.'
- 'They are amazing. They are very thorough and as a result matching is excellent.'
- 'The communication from the fostering agency and foster carers has been excellent.'
- 'Being a small agency, the level of support for the carers I feel is exceptional. Carers are able to build up professional relationships with all the staff.'

Inspectors received no negative feedback about the agency, which is held in high regard by social work professionals. The one requirement and one recommendation arising from this inspection do not detract from the high-quality service provision.



## 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 registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and;</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))</p> <p>Specifically, that consultation is included and evaluated and that reports are sent to Ofsted in a timely way.</p> <p>This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	<p>12 November 2021</p>

### Recommendation

- The registered manager should ensure that those on the central list reflect a more diverse range of experience, particularly individuals with expertise in education and health. (National minimum standards 14.8)



## **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:** 1241412

**Registered provider:** Next Stage For Fostering Limited

**Registered provider address:** Next Stage, 28 Manchester Road, Westhoughton, Bolton BL5 3QJ

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## **Inspectors**

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Dawn Parton, Social Care Inspector

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