Next Stage For Fostering Limited

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Comtech House, 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
- children with disabilities
- parent and child.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 12 approved fostering households who were caring for 20 children.

The registered manager has been in post since the service was registered with Ofsted in August 2016.

This inspection was completed on site. Inspectors spoke with foster carers and children face to face and also received written feedback from them.

Inspection dates: 15 to 17 July 2024

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 September 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Foster families benefit from high levels of nurture and support that are offered by the agency. Consequently, children living with the agency's foster carers are flourishing. Foster carers value the supportive nature of the agency and the 'family feel' they enjoy there. One carer said, 'It really does take a village [to raise a child], and we have that here. This is our village.'

Children make exceptional progress living with their foster carers. Most children live with their foster families for many years, becoming an integral part of the family. Professionals and foster carers say that much of this success is due to diligent matching by the agency. The agency is careful to consider the needs of birth children alongside those of children who are looked after, which contributes to this stability. The agency and foster carers of older children are forward planning for when children turn 18.

Children's well-being is central to transition plans. When children are preparing to move into, or out of, foster homes, the agency works collaboratively with professionals, led by the needs of children. When children need to move quickly, the agency gathers as much information, as quickly as possible, to understand children's needs, which helps them to feel safe when they arrive. Children are welcomed into their foster homes with a thoughtful welcome box to help them feel safe and valued.

The stability and well-being of children and carers take priority in the agency. Foster carers describe the support from the agency as 'second to none'. Agency staff regularly go above and beyond to ensure that carers have everything they need to meet children's needs. This has included the manager purchasing and delivering equipment to carers' homes out of hours so they could take children on short notice, supporting foster carers with house moves and babysitting young children in the office to enable carers to attend training and support groups.

The agency regularly organises family fun days, where staff spend quality time with foster families in the community. Children and carers alike delight in the opportunity to interact with others in similar situations. Birth children are equally welcomed at these events, and managers ensure that facilities are suitable for all children, regardless of ability.

Foster carers champion children's health and successfully support children with complex health needs. Foster carers and agency staff work well with a range of professionals to ensure that children's physical and mental well-being are prioritised. Foster carers are supported to advocate for children's needs and raise appropriate challenge when children's health needs are not being sufficiently met.

Foster carers ensure that children of statutory school age are enrolled in school, and they support children to improve their academic abilities, both inside and outside of

school. Children's reading is actively supported, and they have opportunities to enrich their learning through activities. When children are older, foster carers help them to explore their options for education and employment. Carers persistently advocate for children to receive additional support when needed.

Foster carers promote positive family relationships, making time to 'go the extra mile' when it comes to building relationships with birth families. Many children live with their siblings and enjoy close bonds together. For children whose siblings have a plan of adoption, foster carers advocate for that sibling relationship to be sustained. Some children have started seeing wider family members after years of no contact because of the positive challenge that foster carers have provided to advocate for that relationship. This helps children to maintain important relationships and understand their family identity.

Children's views are central to agency practice. Supervising social workers speak regularly to children about how they are feeling and use their responses to inform the supervision and review of foster carers. One child said, 'They always listen to what we want and are always there if we need anything.'

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

Children feel safe living with their foster families. The warm and nurturing relationships that foster carers develop with children enable them to thrive and trust the adults around them. This promotes a secure and positive family environment for children, enabling them to grow up with adults who love them and are committed to their futures.

Foster carers benefit from comprehensive safe care plans that outline how the care needs of children will be met. Risk management plans are regularly reviewed to enable carers to have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, particularly when these relate to the intimate care of children.

The agency's supervising social workers see children regularly in their foster homes and at the office, and they also join foster families on days out in the community. Children are seen at unannounced visits that are completed in line with agency policy. This helps to create a naturally trusting relationship and ensures that children feel able to share any worries they may have.

Foster carers, social workers and managers know the children well and understand their risks and vulnerabilities. Children remain settled in their foster families, and high-risk behaviours are rare. When incidents occur, foster carers respond effectively to keep children safe, with excellent ongoing support from the agency. Foster carers know how to respond to safeguarding concerns, keeping professionals informed throughout.

Foster carers help children to manage their emotions safely and effectively. When foster carers struggle with their own well-being or a child's behaviour, they are

provided with access to an in-house therapist to talk through any difficulties and to help them think about the child's background and emotional presentation. This comprehensive service includes the supervising social worker and the foster carers, to facilitate further discussions following on from the therapeutic intervention.

Foster carers are skilled at de-escalating difficult situations. This means that children rarely have to be held to keep them safe. When this does happen, recording is clear, and managers consider the appropriateness of this response. When other strategies could have been used, the manager creates a robust action plan to support the foster carers in developing these skills.

Foster carers receive high-quality, purposeful support and training to help them to continue to develop their understanding and skills. Carers are expected to revisit key training regularly to ensure ongoing insight and to enable them to apply their learning to the children in their care. When foster carers would benefit from training that is not offered internally, the agency sources this training from external providers to ensure that children's changing needs are met.

The manager and staff team are receptive to feedback and demonstrate a strong desire to learn and improve. This has created a safe and open culture where foster carers and staff feel able to share mistakes and reflect on learning from incidents.

Safer recruitment practices are followed when recruiting staff, panel members and foster carers. Thorough checks are completed, including when foster carers have transferred from other agencies. Assessments on the suitability of prospective foster carers and foster carer reviews are robust, with clear analysis throughout. This helps to ensure that those who are caring for children in this agency are safe and knowledgeable to do so.

The fostering panel is composed of experienced members with differing backgrounds, including care-experienced adults, safeguarding professionals and professionals from health and mental health services. The panel provides independent scrutiny and appropriate consideration of strengths and vulnerabilities of applicants and foster carers to ensure that only those who are suitable to care for children can foster for the agency. The agency decision-maker is experienced and adds an additional layer of scrutiny and oversight of agency practice.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager has been in post since the agency was registered in 2016. She has the skills and experience to manage the agency effectively, and she has the dedication to ensure that children remain at the centre of all practice. Staff, carers and children commented on the positive relationships they have with the manager, with one carer saying, 'You're never on your own with Next Stage.'

Foster carers benefit from being supervised by experienced social workers who provide them with sufficient challenge and have the skills to support them through challenging times. Social workers are provided with excellent support from the

manager and feel that their ideas and input are valued within the agency. Supervision sessions provide a reflective space for social workers to continue their development. However, when the manager has taken on casework, she has not benefited from the same reflective supervision to discuss social work practice. This is a missed opportunity to ensure that the manager is supported to reflect on practice and consider her own development.

Staffing changes within the agency have been well managed, with the manager and staff remaining available to children and carers. Carers and professionals confirm that these changes have not impacted on the high levels of quality support offered to foster families.

Social workers continue to develop their skills and access ongoing training to ensure that they can support children and carers with up-to-date knowledge. Training courses cover a wide range of topics to ensure that the knowledge social workers gain is beneficial for children with varied needs. However, when children who are non-verbal have joined the agency, staff have not received specialised training to enable them to communicate more effectively with children and understand their needs. This has not currently impacted on children's safety or well-being.

The manager knows all the carers, children and families well and has a prolific understanding of key issues for each child and family. The manager maintains clear oversight of care, practice and incidents. However, she does not always record or critically evaluate incidents to inform practice development. In addition, the manager does not always complete the monitoring report within expected timescales. This limits management oversight of practice across the agency and reduces opportunities to identify and respond to any patterns and trends.

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, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and; improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. 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. 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)) Specifically, the registered person must ensure that feedback from children and stakeholders is included within the report. Additionally, the registered person must include their evaluation within the report and ensure that reports are sent to Ofsted in a timely way. This requirement was made at the last inspection and is restated.	19 October 2024

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that they regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. In addition, they should ensure that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring and that patterns and trends are analysed and robustly recorded. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)

- The registered person should ensure that managers, staff, volunteers and foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities. The level of delegation and responsibility of the manager, and the lines of accountability, should be clearly defined. Specifically, the registered person should consider whether social work supervision would provide independent scrutiny and support to the manager. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the service has the facilities to work with children with physical, sensory, learning impairments and communication difficulties. They should ensure that oral and written communications are made available in a format which is appropriate to the physical, sensory, learning impairments and communication difficulties. The procedures should include arrangements for reading, Makaton, pictures, tape recording and explaining documents to those who are unable to understand the document. Staff in the agency should have the skills and understanding to communicate with children who do not communicate verbally. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.12)

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: 28 Manchester Road, Westhoughton, Bolton BL5 3QJ

Responsible individual: Paul O'Rourke

Registered manager: Lynda Hardman

Telephone number: 01204 201203

Email address: enquiries@nextstageforfostering.co.uk

Inspectors

Aislinn Cooper, Social Care Regulatory Inspector
Michelle Greenhalgh, Social Care Regulatory 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
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