

Fostering Hearts Limited

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Epping Civic Centre, 323 High Street, Epping CM16 4BZ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is part of a wider organisation that recruits and supports foster carers. The agency was registered in May 2020 and is expanding to offer a range of placements in regions north of London, including Essex, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Luton and Northampton.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was supporting 20 fostering families and 23 children.

The agency provides a range of placements, emergency, short, medium and long-term placements, assessment and parent and child placements.

The manager registered with Ofsted on 10 October 2024.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 November 2024

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 **outstanding**

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

Date of last inspection: 14 February 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

This is a good agency with outstanding leadership and management. The agency has many strengths including the supporting children to identify and achieve their aspirations.

Supervising social workers provide high levels of support to children and foster carers. Foster carers said:

- The care and consideration provided to me and the children in my care has been fantastic’.
- ‘They truly understand how important it is to include the whole family in the fostering journey’.
- ‘My supervising social worker has been an absolute lifeline for me. I feel so much more confident in my role because of her’.

Supervising social workers have a good knowledge of the children's needs and their experiences. This informs the personalised support and guidance offered to the foster carers. As a result, children make good progress across all areas of their development.

Most children enjoy stability and are settled in their fostering families. Supervising social workers are responsive to children's changing needs and work with relevant professionals to increase children's stability when needed. When children move on in unplanned ways, supervising social workers meet with the foster carers to reflect on the ending and capture any learning to help inform future placement decision-making.

The agency provide high levels of support and advocacy to help children enjoy and achieve at school. All children attend an appropriate education provision and receive the additional support that they need. A lead education consultant monitors children's attainment to ensure proactive help is offered. As a result, children make good, and in some cases, excellent progress in their learning.

Children are supported to build their independence skills. This includes children learning to drive, using public transport and budgeting effectively. The agency runs regular workshops that enhances children's knowledge and preparation for adulthood. This includes sessions on first-aid, vaping and rights and entitlements. Children's participation in learning, and their achievements are celebrated and rewarded by the agency.

Foster carers have a good understanding of children's physical health needs. This helps to ensure that children access the health interventions they need. Foster carers provide sensitive care to improve children's emotional well-being.

The agency supports foster carers to encourage children to regularly attend and enjoy hobbies, events, and holidays. This provides children with enriching experiences. These memories are captured by foster carers.

Supervising social workers ensure children have access to their records by sharing regular progress reports. These reports summarise children's experiences and highlights their achievements. Some children add their views to these recordings.

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

There are clear systems in place to assist supervising social workers to identify, assess and reduce risks. Assessments of risk are reviewed regularly by the team of agency staff and social workers who bring different expertise. This enhances the quality of the review process and ensures that where risks are increasing there is a proactive, planned response.

Staff escalate concerns appropriately and work well with other agencies to implement multi-agency safety plans. Supervising social workers undertake additional unannounced visits to fostering households to provide increased monitoring of the children's care when needed. Allegations and concerns about foster carers are managed well.

The agency benefits from a consistent team of supervising social workers who regularly spend time with children alone. This allows children to build relationships with trusted adults who they can share any worries with. In addition, the agency created pocket sized cards for children that can be carried discreetly with the details of people they can contact to share any worries or to make a complaint.

Foster carers are supported to feel confident to talk to children about their safety. They have access to child-accessible resources to support these discussions. This includes talking to children about exploitation, consent, and online safety.

Supervising social workers help foster carers develop safer-care plans that are individualised to each child. These plans offer foster carers helpful guidance to implement appropriate boundaries and provide safe care. However, some safer-care plans lack a clear assessment of potential risks, including risks of children sharing a bedroom, and the supervision levels required during a holiday.

The recruitment of staff and foster carers is vigorous. The agency has appointed a well-experienced fostering panel and agency decision-maker. Both have a comprehensive understanding of their roles, including when reviewing the suitability

of foster carers who have been subject to allegations of standards of care concerns. This provides an effective additional level of scrutiny and safeguard.

The agency has summarised their policies and procedures for keeping children safe into easy to access reference cards. This helps to ensure that foster carer have easy access to the information they need when unexpected incidents occur. This helps to ensure that their responses are in line with the agency's expectations and guidance.

The agency ensures that any adults identified as enhanced support carers are subject to safety checks. They are also required to undertake mandatory training to ensure they understand the role and their responsibilities for the safety of the children they are caring for. This increases the safety of these informal arrangements, allowing children to stay with familiar adults.

Foster carers benefit from access to a wide range of training. During applicants assessment period they can undertake training up to being approved that helps to equip and prepare them for the role and ensure children's safety. The agency commissions training to meet foster carers' specific support needs. This includes training for managing physically challenging behaviours when foster carers need guidance and support quickly.

Foster carers training is considered at the point of considering new referrals. However, this is not always captured in foster carers' development plans. Consequently, foster carers do not always complete the training identified.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The agency is led by a strong and skilled management team. The recent change of manager was well planned and implemented providing consistency for staff and foster carers. The manager has the required qualification and fostering expertise. She leads a child-focused culture, that is successfully embedded throughout the agency.

The agency is arranged to provide responsive support and resources that help ensure children's needs are well understood and met quickly. Additional support is well-coordinated to help children succeed in education and reach their aspirations. A dedicated team tracks all children and ensures that they are provided with the resources and opportunities to achieve their individual goals. These include supporting children with aspirations for baking, becoming a flight attendant, and exploring their heritage at cultural festivals around the country. One staff member described the agency focus for aspirations as 'us cheering the child on'.

Leaders and manager's focus on retaining supervising social workers has been successful. The staff team has high morale. The staff receive regular, good-quality practice supervision sessions. This is enhanced by regular reflective groups, and the provision of mentors for new staff. Staff are unanimous in their praise for the manager and the leadership team who are 'supportive' and 'caring', resulting in staff feeling valued.

Leaders and managers have formed a fostering panel that is diverse in relevant experience. The agency decision-maker brings a high level of fostering expertise. Together, they provide an enhanced level of quality assurance, assessment and social work practice that contributes to the agency's learning culture.

The management team are highly consultative with staff, foster carers and children. Changes are based on what matters most to children. The agency ensure that children have access to interpreters to share their views when needed. Many children attend the agency's Youth Council who have developed questions for the fostering panel, shared good practice guidance on welcoming a child to your home and independence planning. The agency has recently worked with foster carers to agree a sensitive approach to monitoring finances and have introduced a financial contribution toward foster carer's council tax payments as part of their reward package.

Leaders and managers share their good practice in the fostering sector. They have established positive relationships with local authority commissioners. One local authority commissioner said the agency is 'creative' and 'child-centred'.

The agency has embedded highly efficient management monitoring systems that assist the manager to maintain excellent oversight of children's progress, incidents and social work practice. The agency's escalation process assists supervising social workers to obtain the information needed from local authorities. However, this is not consistently used to inform foster carer reviews.

The manager is extremely competent and efficient and responded quickly to address shortfalls identified during the inspection.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements. This specifically relates to ensuring the assessment of risk, and actions to mitigate these, are fully explored to support arrangements for children sharing a bedroom, and when children go on holiday. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 14, paragraph 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. In particular, ensure that learning and training identified at the point of accepting a referral is captured in foster carers' development plans and actioned. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 40, paragraph 20.5)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service. This specifically relates to ensuring that the escalation policy is utilised to obtain children-in-care review meeting minutes and local authority social worker feedback for foster carer reviews. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.2)

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: 2572055

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Inspector

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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