

# New Chapters Fostercare Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Ofsted registered this independent fostering agency in June 2015. This small private company provides mainly long-term care for 25 children. There are 40 carers living in 22 households. Five carer households are also shareholders.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious. All children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures, which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This is the first inspection since Ofsted registered the service in July 2015. It has developed to a reasonable size in a short period and mainly provides long-term placements.

The service benefits from strong leadership that focuses on the needs of each child. The directors apply a principled approach that influences how the service operates. There is, for example, a high level of involvement by carers, their children and foster children in the agency. An independent professional regularly tests whether or not the agency is adhering to these principles. This underlines the importance placed on these values.

Another highlight of the service is the exceptionally good engagement with other agencies. In addition, the staff and carers receive good support and guidance, and know the children well. This combination means that they create effective packages of support for children. Consequently, children make good progress overall. Children rarely raise concerns about their placements and they feel safe.

The agency works in a systematically safe way, which protects children and carers. The assessments of carers are thorough and are comprehensively tested by a well-run panel. Staff and carers address health and safety appropriately.

New children match their carers accurately. Children rarely experience breakdowns in their placements. This allows them to enjoy a high level of security on which to proceed with their education and individual interests. The organisation prioritises children’s emotional and psychological needs. This is one of the core principles.

This inspection makes three requirements and six recommendations. Primarily these are matters for fine-tuning the service. They relate to some aspects of recruitment and the need to ensure that records are tamper-proof. These are made to avoid potential hazards occurring rather than because they have arisen.

## Areas of improvement

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meets 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
Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to employees in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. This is with regard to section 4, verifying the reasons why previous employments or positions with children or vulnerable adults ended. Also, section 6, ensuring that there is a full employment history. (Regulation 20 (3))	01/11/2016
Keep any records or register maintained in accordance with regulation 22, 30 or 31 securely. This is with regard to them being tamper-proof. (Regulation 32 (5))	01/11/2016
Ensure that there is a system for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster carers and their placing authorities. (Regulations 35 (3))	01/11/2016

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the

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fostering service. This is with regard to adopting the foster carers' charter in consultation with carers. (NMS 1.7)

- Ensure that, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. (NMS 11.3)
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the impact of a new placement on existing household members is considered. This is with regard to considering and recording the likely impact of placements on carers' own children. (NMS 15.1)
- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This is with regard to ensuring that the authorship of references is verifiable. (NMS 19.2)
- Ensure that investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled fairly, quickly and consistently, in a way that provides effective protection for the child, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation. (NMS 22.9)

## Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Nearly all the children have lived with their carers much longer than this agency has been in operation. Their progress has therefore stabilised in most cases. External professionals confirm that the move between agencies has had no detrimental effect on the children. This agency has a tracking process in place, which promises to identify children's progress and deteriorations but will take more time to show changes.

The family support worker takes new children through a thorough welcome process. This helps them to understand fostering and their rights, and leaves them with information and gifts. This creates a supportive and promising start in their new homes.

Foster children establish good relationships with their carers. These critical attachments mean that children feel secure enough to try new things and develop skills. Children use a range of formal and informal means to influence decisions. When difficulties arise, staff use mediation or other measures to help the relationships recover. These sustain the placements well and help carers and children learn conciliatory strategies that they can use in the future. Children say that they fit their foster families well, and several live with their brothers and sisters. Children's contact with their own families also benefits from this nurturing approach. However, new children do not always have the benefit of a family profile of their carers with sufficient information, including photographs. This shortfall has had minimal effect on children.

Carers have a clear understanding about how to encourage positive behaviour. Additional training on the agency's therapeutic approach has supplemented this and has already proved to be effective. Children feel that carers treat them fairly and the number of major incidents is low. The directors have taken lessons from the early stages of the company's development. This has led them to invest in a new system of behaviour management, which they will soon roll out to carers.

Carers meet children's cultural and religious needs well. The vast majority of children and carers are White British. In those few households where there is not a cultural match between the carers and the foster children, children receive sufficient support with their identities from their families. Carers meet any practical needs, such as hair care and diets. Several different adults ask children for feedback. This gives each child many opportunities to raise concerns and for shortfalls to be identified. They say that their carers, 'always look after them'. Foster children are also increasingly involved with the agency, for example in interviewing new staff and drafting new documents. This meets a key aim of the service, develops children and provides valuable information to the directors. The manager intends to expand this through use of a foster carers' charter but this is not yet in place.

Children enjoy improved physical health, sustained by routine medical check-ups.

Carers control children's dietary intake in a responsible way and children learn to pursue healthy lifestyles. A central objective of the agency is to provide a holistic service that addresses children's therapeutic needs too. One of the directors manages this. She coordinates the support of children and carers, for example via the family support worker, independent speech and language therapists, and mental health services. The director will provide direct therapy in the near future when her own professional supervision is in place. A particular theoretical approach informs how the whole service works. This is a promising initiative that is galvanising staff and carers alike. Children benefit because they learn to focus on solving difficulties.

Children speak excitedly about the wide range of new activities that they enjoy with their foster families, both on their own and with other foster children. Some have become successful in sports, such as running, and others attend regular dance classes. During the current summer holidays, many have enjoyed going to new places. The seaside has been a favourite. One girl went into a church for the first time and many have tried new sorts of food. These interesting experiences broaden their horizons. Carers know what decision-making authority they have from each placing authority, for example to take children abroad. The agency has its own document to use in the event that such guidance is lacking. This helps children to avoid frustrating and embarrassing delays while authorities make decisions about everyday events.

The vast majority of children attend school regularly and achieve their academic targets. Several are currently awaiting their examination results. All children receive a high level of advocacy from their carers and the supervising social workers who speak to teaching staff about issues such as negative behaviour to reach a resolution that meets the child's needs for education and support. This successfully reduces exclusions and gets best value from the Pupil Premium. They help to compile programmes of support for those children who need extra support, particularly in the areas of reading and mathematics. Mentors provide direct support to some children in schools. This extra support has made a significant difference to the examination results of some children. A team member of a virtual school commented that agency staff are particularly knowledgeable and proactive regarding education issues. Another professional said, 'They are on it!'

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Twenty of the 22 households have recently fostered for another company. The agency did not initiate this movement but addressed the transfers in an appropriate way. Independent social workers thoroughly reassessed each household. This was especially important because of the sensitive nature and large scale of these transfers. The assessors investigated any new or previously unknown issues. They also considered the unusual implications for shareholder carers. One assessor said, 'The manager does not cut corners. He goes over and above.' A clear recruitment strategy is in place that will now take the service into new geographical areas. This will help to diversify the carer group culturally and geographically.

The vast majority of children are with their carers on a long-term basis. This gives both parties a high level of security and cements their relationships. The supervising social workers know most carers and children well too. This is because they worked for the carers' previous agency. Carers feel very confident about these relationships. One said, 'The staff know us so well, we can speak to anyone.' Respite and other support is available, as necessary, to carers, and they share information via the website and social media. A mentoring scheme operated by carers for other carers is currently being trialled. Another carer said, 'The team will always go above and beyond what is expected of them to help a child or carer. They are always there for us.' Staff are alert to minute changes in carers' circumstances and act accordingly. They use this knowledge effectively when matching new children with carers.

The supervising social workers engage the sons and daughters of carers very well, which contributes to the overall longevity of placements. However, it is not always clear that this consultation starts prior to the admission of new foster children. This area of weakness poses a minor potential risk to new placements. Carers' own children are involved in all the social events and contribute to the service in other ways, as appropriate. This is an important contribution to the inclusive feel of the service.

Carers speak very fondly about the family feel of the service and the support provided by staff. Most carers can compare this agency to others and consider this a particular strength. Five households have a financial investment in the company. These factors contribute to what one director described as a 'pioneering' spirit. One carer said, 'If it wasn't for the shareholder carers the service wouldn't be here – I'm so grateful to them.' Appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that there is no conflict of interests.

Children know that they may be able to remain with their carers when they reach adulthood if the circumstances are right. Several young adults continue to live with their foster carers under a variety of arrangements. Carers endeavour to teach children independence skills and suitable plans are in place for the children who need them. Carers compile memory boxes of photographs and other items for children to take when they leave. These steps help children to feel confident about their futures.

Since registration, the agency has experienced a small number of unplanned endings. In all cases, carers and staff reduced the effect as much as possible. In one case, for example, the child moved to another carer within the agency whom he knew. This substantially reduced the disruption to him.

The supervising social workers and carers understand each child's needs well and approach other agencies to obtain the best packages of support. When other professionals are slow or reluctant to cooperate, the manager takes reasonable but progressive measures to reach a resolution. This particularly applies to mental health services because of the importance of meeting children's emotional needs. This process is a positive reflection of the aim of the agency to provide a therapeutic service to foster children. The plans for each child are clear in nearly all cases, whether it be their education, day-to-day care or transition to independence. One child does not have a clear plan for her education next term. The agency did not

cause the delay and staff are making strenuous efforts with professional partners to resolve it.

The agency gives training a high priority and all carers have completed the induction standards. Some carers sit on the training review group, which has influenced the choice of courses. The responsible individual coordinates the training and delivers some of the courses. The agency goes to the trouble of providing one-to-one training in certain circumstances. An extensive programme is in place that prepares carers well for a wide range of children. Some courses specifically help carers to work with the small number of children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. However, it is not clear what amount of training or development carers must complete each year to address their developmental targets. Carers' engagement in the training is good and this issue is particularly relevant to secondary carers who usually have different needs to their partners.

The panel operates well and panel members have a wealth of relevant experience. The panel is organised efficiently and there is thorough attention to detail. Some carers have been to the panel for their first annual reviews and are positive about the experience. The manager acts as a panel adviser but this will soon change to an independent person to reduce the appearance of a conflict of interests. Foster carers are on the panel and the manager is seeking someone who has been through the care system. The manager has reviewed the operation of the panel and made improvements. These include receiving questions from panel members about assessment reports prior to the meeting. As a result, members are ready for each meeting. He also plans to improve the quality of panel minutes.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Carers and supervising social workers understand children's risks well. In addition, the manager and supervising social workers have substantial relevant experience. The manager uses this experience by applying a high level of inquisitiveness to all childcare, and he aims to 'prepare the service for the unthinkable'. He uses findings from research and serious case reviews. For example, training courses and policies reflect the recent national concerns about radicalisation.

The manager worked previously in local authority safeguarding children teams and has a high-level qualification. This knowledge translates well into proactive measures to reduce the levels of risk to children. This requires a greater level of skill than simply reacting to problems. In practice, it has meant providing additional training for carers where it was likely to improve their skills. In a very small number of cases, their thorough understanding of the emerging patterns has led staff to consider alternative placements. These steps contribute substantially to the long-term security and well-being of children. All children say that they feel safe in their placements all the time. The evidence of children's progress with risk-taking behaviours is satisfactory and the manager is considering ways to assess changes more accurately.

There have been very few allegations or complaints since the agency opened. The staff liaise promptly with safeguarding agencies when concerns about childcare practices emerge. This protects the children well. Internal investigations are systematic but are not always timely, and contact with the carer is less formal than desirable. This potentially increases the pressure on carers unnecessarily. Supervising social workers complete two unannounced visits every year, in addition to the routine visits, to satisfy themselves that carers are maintaining appropriate standards.

The recruitment processes for new staff are satisfactory, although there have been some administrative teething problems. Minor variations have occurred and a new administrator is now in post to address these. Of more importance is that the written references for new applicants are not verifiable. The lack of signatures, letterheads or company stamps means that the information is not sufficiently robust. In addition, there is insufficient attention to applicants' previous employment histories and the reasons they left those posts. In practice, however, the directors know all the successful candidates very well and the risk is low. A carer and a foster child were involved in the recruitment of the latest member of staff. This conforms well to the agency's ethos of participation and makes the process as effective as possible.

A small number of children have gone missing since the agency opened. Carers are knowledgeable about the correct procedures. The placing authorities and agency staff follow up all such incidents to understand the causes. In all cases, the level of risk is low. One young man wishes to live elsewhere and his social worker is looking into this. No children are subject to sexual exploitation. When staff and carers consider a child to be at risk, they promptly consult the relevant agencies to devise a support plan. The manager influences the strategies agreed in multi-agency meetings well. For one girl, this meant that the police amended their investigation process to keep her engaged and sustain her progress. Carers also keep children safe online and give them clear guidelines. One boy said, 'I'd like to play age 18 games online, but my carers won't let me because I'm only 11.'

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The manager has previous experience of managing a successful fostering agency in the independent sector. He has a social work diploma and a level 5 qualification in the management of care services. His contribution to the service is imaginative, highly informed and stimulates those around him. He and the other two directors are particularly keen to keep the agency focused on their core principles, one of which is to provide a child-centred, rather than an investment-centred, service. This is an important part of their strong leadership. Unusually, they use an independent person as a critical friend to help them to achieve this. This adds a level of monitoring, which helps the agency adhere to its statement of purpose.

Detailed and regular monitoring of the service makes the service as secure as possible. The service has achieved financial security quickly because of the transfer of established households. The directors are familiar with patterns and trends inside

the service as well as outside. They are up to date with professional developments and their ambitious development plan uses this information effectively.

The staff collaborate particularly well with other professionals about routine issues as well as serious ones. Although the service is young, social workers, their managers and independent reviewing officers say that the team is unusually proactive in seeking solutions to children's difficulties. One senior officer in the local authority described 'really good dialogue', which helped them to understand the agency and children's needs. Team members identify new patterns well and bring these to the attention of colleagues. As a result, for example, children receive prompt and coordinated attention to educational or emotional issues. However, the systematic use of other professionals' views to improve the service is not in place.

The excellent collaboration with other agencies extends to inviting them to certain training events. This helps professionals to have a common understanding of children's issues. All the staff receive thorough induction training and support. There are two experienced supervising social workers in post. They come from a patch-based service and feel very positive about the extra support available in this office-based service.

Staff benefit from a clear electronic filing system. However, it is not sufficiently secure because most records are in a format that permits alteration afterwards. The registration visit also identified this shortfall. The newly commissioned replacement recording system has the capacity to address the problem.

Overall, the service is developing well, along a positive trajectory. As one member of the team said, 'It's an exciting project, which offers much hope.'

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## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.