

Lorimer Foster Services

Lorimer Foster Services Limited
2a Carrington Lane, Sale, Cheshire, M33 5ND
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Lorimer Foster Services was registered in 2004. It operates in the north west region from its office in Greater Manchester. It provides foster placements for children and young people from birth to 18 years. The range of placements include short term, long term, bridging and parent and child.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 39 fostering households providing foster care to 35 children.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 August 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **requires improvement to be good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be good**

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

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 7 November 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is judged as requires improvement to be good because:

- Children who move to the agency are ill-prepared. The agency does not routinely provide children with information about their foster family, the agency or other important services.
- The number of unplanned endings is high in this agency. This means that some children are moved in emergency situations with no, or little, preparation.
- Risk assessments and safer caring plans are weak and lack clear guidance on how to keep all children in the fostering household safe.
- Matching assessments do not consider all potential risks to children and this compromises placement stability and children's welfare.
- Missing from home records lack detail and do not demonstrate robust responses from the carer or the agency.
- Independent return home interviews are not being arranged when children return home having been missing from home.
- The agency's statement of purpose does not provide sufficient information. Ofsted has not been provided with updated copies of the agency's statement of purpose.
- Not all agency staff receive professional supervision or have their work appraised annually. All staff's annual appraisals are out of date.
- Foster carers' supervision records do not reflect in-depth discussion, reflection and, when necessary, challenge.
- Panel members do not have their work annually appraised and they are not given the opportunity to take part in training with the agency staff.
- Ineffective monitoring and auditing are preventing continued improvements in the agency.
- The agency has not taken sufficient action to address all the shortfalls raised at the previous two inspections.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- Most children benefit from stable, nurturing foster care.
- Most children make measurable progress from their starting points.
- Foster carers feel well supported and guided by the agency's staff.
- Social workers and commissioners speak highly of the agency, recognising the progress that the children have made since living with their foster families.
- The agency is enabling brothers and sisters to live together.
- The agency is well resourced and has a team that is stable, suitably qualified and experienced.
- Leaders recognise the agency's strengths and areas that need to improve.

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
The fostering service provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service ("the statement of purpose") which consists of a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements) provided by the fostering service. The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3 (1)(b)(2)(a))	28/09/2018
The fostering service provider must provide a copy of the children's guide to the Chief Inspector, to each foster parent approved by the fostering service provider, and to each child placed by them (subject to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 3 (4))	28/09/2018
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))	28/09/2018
The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation. (Regulation 18 (4))	28/09/2018
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	28/09/2018
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 system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority).	28/09/2018

(Regulation 35 (1)(3))	
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Recommendations

- Ensure that all foster carers are supported to develop the skills and resilience to care for children who display very challenging and unsafe behaviour. (NMS 3.7)
- Ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. (NMS 11.3)
- Ensure that the decision-maker records a considered decision and takes account of all information available. (NMS 14.9)
In particular, foster carers' annual reviews.
- Ensure that all approved foster carers attain the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)
- Ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's staff. (NMS 23.10)
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors 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. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)
- Ensure that when children return from being missing from home that they are offered an independent return interview. Independent return interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing or from risk factors in their home. ('Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care 2014', page 14, paragraph 31)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

Undoubtedly, the agency has high aspirations for the children in its care and most children are benefiting from living in stable foster placements. From the discussions with foster carers and observations of carers with children, it is evident that many children experience warm, nurturing care.

The agency enables brothers and sisters to remain living together whenever possible. When this is not possible, the agency ensures that the children keep in touch, safely, with their family.

Children make continued progress from their starting points in all areas. Carers work collaboratively with schools to ensure that each child's educational needs are properly assessed and met. Some children have made exceptional progress in education and they have achieved impressive GCSE results. For example, one child achieved three A's in her GCSEs. This has enabled her to attend college and to pursue her chosen career.

Children's health needs are addressed well. Carers are competent in seeking support and guidance from relevant health services to ensure that the children receive the help and support that they need. The agency has improved how it monitors children's health. As a result, the number of children who attend their annual health assessments has increased. Furthermore, when children experience emotional trauma, the agency and carers support them to access appropriate therapeutic support. Additionally, the agency support workers are skilled at building trusting relationships with children and this provides them with another adult in whom they can confide.

Although many children are living in stable and lasting foster placements, some children have experienced unplanned moves. The number of unplanned placement endings for this agency is higher than the national average. For example, in 2016/2017 unplanned endings were 50% higher than the national average for independent fostering agencies. Children's challenging behaviour is the reason behind most of the children's unplanned moves. The agency can improve how it matches the needs of children with foster carers. It can also improve how it prepares and supports foster carers to increase their skills and emotional resilience to manage very challenging behaviour and situations.

Children do not always receive information about their fostering families before they move in. Only a small number of fostering households have a profile available to share with children before they move in. Additionally, not all children receive the agency's children's guide that informs them about the agency, how they can make a complaint and other relevant services. Children are not being provided with relevant information about their foster families, the agency and other important people who can help and support them.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

In the main, children in this agency do not engage in high-risk behaviours, such as going missing from home. Furthermore, children report positive and trusting relationships with their foster families and the agency's staff. Despite this, there are areas of safeguarding practice that need to improve.

The agency's risk assessments and safer caring plans do not provide clear guidance on how to keep all children in the fostering household safe. Safer caring plans are not individualised to the children's or fostering household's needs. As a result, foster carers do not have access to robust safeguarding plans that inform them about clear protective procedures to keep children safe and the agency's expectations of foster carers.

Matching assessments do not consider the potential risks that children may pose to all existing household members, for example foster carers' grandchildren. As a result, some children are inappropriately matched with foster families, which compromises placement stability and children's welfare.

The agency's recording of missing from home incidents is weak. Missing from home records lack detail, such as the action taken by the carer and agency and the circumstances around the child's return. Poor recording hinders the evaluation of the agency's response to missing from home incidents.

Children are not being provided with the opportunity to confide in an independent person about the reasons why they went missing from home. Therefore, the agency is overlooking opportunities to assess, learn, plan and prevent further incidents. Additionally, the agency does not challenge placing authorities when they fail to arrange an independent return interview when children return from being missing from home.

The agency support workers help children to learn how to keep safe, for example when using the internet. Through this regular direct work, children are learning how to identify risk and to keep themselves safe. Risks are reducing for the children who receive this level of support from the agency.

The agency responds well when allegations are made against foster carers. Such concerns are reported promptly to the relevant safeguarding bodies, including the local designated officer. This enables a swift investigation into the allegation.

The agency provides safeguarding training to staff and foster carers. This includes safer caring and training around child sexual exploitation and radicalisation. This training is supporting carers and staff to recognise potential dangers and to equip them with the knowledge and skills to identify and manage risk.

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

The registered manager is supported by an experienced team manager who is actively involved in the day-to-day running of the agency. The registered manager and team manager are suitably qualified, and they have both worked in fostering services for many years.

A stable and suitably qualified team provides regular support to foster carers and children. Foster carers speak highly of the agency and the support that they receive. Although the process for developing consultation with foster carers has been slow, there is evidence of this improving. Foster carers' support groups now provide carers with the opportunity to meet up at least twice per year. This enables carers to share their views with each other and to give feedback to the agency.

Foster carers receive regular support and supervisory visits from experienced and suitably qualified social workers. However, not all foster carers' supervision notes reflect an in-depth discussion with their supervising social worker or necessary challenge to some foster carers' practice. For example, when children's placements end in difficult circumstances, there is very little evidence of any reflection with the carer to reflect on the circumstances surrounding the placement ending and the carer's thoughts and feelings. The agency does not monitor or evaluate unplanned placement endings or learn from past experiences.

The agency establishes effective partnerships with placing authorities. Social workers' and commissioners' views of the agency are positive. A social worker described the care provided to a child as 'brilliant'.

The team members feel supported and have manageable workloads. However, not all members of the team are receiving support and guidance through professional supervision. Staff and panel members have not had their performance and development appraised annually. Additionally, panel members are not provided with the opportunity to attend annual training with the agency staff. As a result, opportunities to monitor practice and to develop the agency's workforce are being missed.

Since the last inspection, the number of fostering households and children placed with the agency has decreased. Foster carers have left the agency for various reasons, including retirement, de-registration and transferring to local authority and other independent fostering providers.

The agency has not been successful in recruiting new foster carers to sustain its number of fostering households and capacity for placements. Furthermore, the agency is not recruiting a sufficient number of foster carers from minority ethnic backgrounds to enhance placement choice. The leaders acknowledge that the agency has not continued to grow. Therefore, carer recruitment is a current priority in the agency's development plan.

The agency's statement of purpose does not provide sufficient information. It does

not state the type and range of placements that the agency provides, but the manager has updated the statement of purpose to reflect staff changes. However, updated versions are not always provided to Ofsted as required. Consequently, the regulator is not being updated about developments within the agency.

The management and recording of complaints requires improvement. On one occasion, a complaint raised by a child's social worker had not been logged as a complaint. Complaint records do not provide a clear account of the action taken by the provider in response to the complaint, any investigation or the outcome.

The agency has recently appointed a new independent reviewing officer. The reviewing officer has introduced a stronger focus on evaluating foster carers' training and development. Furthermore, carers' lack of attendance at training is being challenged more robustly. Consequently, foster carers' engagement with training is improving. However, not all foster carers are attaining the training, support and development standard within the required timescale.

The registered manager is also the agency decision maker. Although he is an experienced fostering service manager, at times, he lacks knowledge and understanding of the agency decision maker role. Consequently, he has not recorded the agency's decisions following each foster carers' annual review.

The system for monitoring and improving the quality of foster care can improve. The quarterly monitoring reports prepared by the registered manager lack evaluation. Furthermore, these reports do not provide an evaluation of all relevant matters, such as how well each child's care plan is achieved, staff recruitment records, staff appraisals and staff meetings.

Despite some improvements in the agency's record-keeping, ineffective auditing of the agency's records is undermining this progress. Important documents are missing from some children's files, for example care plan review minutes. Consequently, children's progress and any change to the child's care plan are not evident in the agency's files. Additionally, the agency does not always robustly challenge placing authorities that have not provided the required documents.

The agency has not taken sufficient action to address all the requirements and recommendations from previous inspections. Consequently, some requirements and recommendations have been carried over from the previous two inspections. Delays in responding to the shortfalls raised at inspections are hindering the agency's improvement journey.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: SC059742

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Inspectors

Marina Tully: social care inspector

Mandy Williams: social care inspector



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