

Unity Foster Care

Unity Foster Care Ltd

Unit 16, Carlisle Business Centre, Carlisle Road, Bradford, BD8 8BD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Unity Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Bradford, West Yorkshire. A range of placements are provided, including long-term, short-term, emergency, respite and parent and child fostering placements. The agency is responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers.

At the time of the inspection, the agency was providing placements for 19 children and young people with 14 fostering families.

Inspection dates: 7 to 11 August 2017

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 **Good**

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

Date of last inspection: N/A

Overall judgement at last inspection: This is the agency's first inspection.

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- This is an effective fostering agency that has a defined family feel and keeps children and young people at the heart of its work. Consequently, children and young people have happy, stable lives, and build trust and positive attachments with their foster carers, which helps them to resolve some of their past negative experiences.
- Children's and young people's life chances have been significantly enhanced due to the good care and support that they receive from committed, caring and well-trained foster carers and fostering agency staff who all advocate strongly on their behalf.
- Placement stability is high and children and young people can live with their foster carers after their 18th birthday.
- Safeguarding children and young people underpins all aspects of service delivery and threads through the recruitment, assessment, approval, training and supervision of foster carers. There are no current safeguarding concerns. Children and young people spoken to rated their safety as '10 out of 10'.
- Children and young people are positively engaged in education and make good progress, which improves their future prospects significantly.
- The voice of the child is well integrated into the care planning process and service developments.
- Children and young people are involved in fun, interesting and relaxing activities that promote their interests and talents, and boost their confidence.
- Foster carers feel valued by the fostering agency. They receive high levels of support from the qualified fostering agency staff and they have a mutually high regard for each other.
- Children and young people, foster carers and the fostering agency benefit from visible and effective leadership and management that promotes a learning environment, delivering the best possible outcomes for the children and young people through the promotion of high-quality foster placements.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- The fostering agency has not checked out as far as reasonably practicable the reasons why the employment or position of applicants has ended.
- The report to the senior managers does not include information that shows how the agency satisfies itself that the service is achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

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
Where a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults verification, so far as reasonably practicable, of the reasons why the employment or position ended. (Regulation 20(3))	30/11/2017

Recommendations

- The executive side of the local authority or the independent foster service's provider/trustees, board members or management committee members:

 - receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every three months;
 - monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children;
 - satisfy themselves that the provider is complying with the conditions of registration. (National minimum standards, standard 25.7, page 51)

In particular, ensure that the report to senior managers indicates that the agency is satisfied that it is achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people experience a highly bespoke quality of care and protection in safe and secure foster homes that integrate them into family life. This view is epitomised by a foster carer, who said, 'I want her to have a great experience. She is part of my family.' A social worker said, 'The young person in question feels part of the family and has indicated this on a few occasions. He sees this as his home and his family.'

Children's and young people's exposure to a diverse range of opportunities considerably improves their outlook on life and experiences. Consequently, they thrive from some very disadvantaged starts. They are developing positive relationships with their foster carers, building trust and positive attachments, which enable them to progress from strength to strength. A young person said about his care, 'It's very good, it feels good.' A parent described the care of her child as being 'absolutely fantastic' and said that her son is 'definitely a changed boy'. A social worker said that a young person has made, 'A lot of progress. For one child, there has been a vast improvement in their speech and in their development overall. They are now at the age and stage of development that they should be.'

Children and young people are welcomed into the fostering homes. This follows careful planning as far as possible. The strong matching between foster carers and children and young people makes for a compatible and effective dynamic that results in a minimal number of unplanned endings. A foster carer said, 'The matching was perfect, to be honest.' Information for children and young people is available in different languages and this informs them about key aspects of being looked after. Children's handbooks are available to children and young people. A foster carer said, 'The fostering agency provides a children's handbook which I go through with them and I answer any questions they have. If I can't answer them, I find out for them or ask the supervising social worker or allocated social worker to speak to the children about their queries. The children know that they can write to the office or ring to ask questions.'

Children's and young people's cultural and other identity needs, heritage and health conditions are promoted and celebrated by the fostering agency and reinforced by foster carers. Similarly, foster carers understand the importance of children's and young people's contact with family and friends and may facilitate contact, which they sometimes do under difficult circumstances. An independent reviewing officer said, 'I was quite impressed that [Name of supervising social worker] came forward to support contact.'

Advocacy is very strong. The children and young people have access to an advocate who is employed by the fostering agency. This provides another independent adult with whom children can share ideas or raise any concerns. Regular consultation with children and young people affords them good opportunities to shape their own care and the services delivered to them. For example, fostered and birth children's participation at fun events has engaged them in sharing their views about what it is like to live with their foster families. This has resulted in feedback that is now

included in the prospective foster carer packs. The missing from care policy has been revamped following consultations with children and young people about how they want foster carers to respond to them when they return from being missing. Young people's involvement in reviewing the children's guide provides useful information about living with foster carers. A young person's feedback at the fostering panel positively informed her foster carers' annual review. Children's and young people's involvement in their reviews promotes their rights to an excellent standard and respects them, thus keeping them firmly in the centre of their plans.

Children and young people pursue leisure interests, such as reading, watching films, outdoor activities, swimming, and scouts, ice skating, trips out and holidays both locally and abroad. A young person said that the best thing about living with his foster carers was, 'Going out places and Toby's carvery.' Foster carers go the extra mile to ensure that children and young people with specific talents can follow their dreams. One young person said about her experience at summer camp, 'I really don't want it to end.' Lasting memories enrich children's and young people's lives and make for such positive experiences.

Children and young people are making good progress in their education placements, with a number securing college placements. A young person said, 'I'm doing quite well at school, catching up since moving schools.' A member of the fostering agency staff said, 'We have had children with 10% attendance at school, and this is now 100%. When school attendance has not been possible, tutors are used in the fostering household (up to three sessions per week). Several children have extra tuition, and (Unity) have an independent teacher who visits, advises and ensures that the right level of educational support is being offered. If not, she contacts the relevant schools/local authorities.' Children's and young people's educational achievements are celebrated and rewarded. Their life chances improve significantly, as they develop in confidence and belief in their abilities.

Foster carers actively support children and young people to live healthy lifestyles. Consequently, no children or young people are knowingly involved in smoking, drinking alcohol or partake in misusing substances. All children and young people have access to health services that meet their physical, emotional, social and psychological needs. Foster carers are diligent at making sure that they share children's and young people's specialised health needs with the relevant professionals so that they receive targeted services without delay. Foster carers have specialist training to support children and young people with health conditions. The fostering agency also supports foster carers in sourcing additional services to meet identified needs. Remarkably, this has extended some children's and young people's life expectancy beyond expectations.

Children and young people develop essential skills that help them to live richer and more fulfilling lives. Foster carers support them to achieve independence, and the fostering agency has developed a practical workbook to help young people achieve their goals. Young people have the option to 'Stay put' with their foster carers after they become 18 years old. This reinforces a strong sense of family life and helps them to move progressively into adulthood.

How well children and young people are helped and protected:

Children's and young people's safety and welfare are central to how the agency operates. The safeguarding culture threads through the assessment, approval, training and supervision of foster carers. Children and young people spoken with during the inspection rate their safety highly at '10 out of 10' and they can identify trusted adults to talk to in times of difficulty. A foster carer said, 'I am aware of safeguarding and safer caring and how to manage bullying issues within the placement, school or community. I also am aware of the fostering agencies' policies in regards to this issue and what agencies can help a young person with this issue such as NSPCC, Kidscape, etc.' A professional said, 'Yes, I feel that the children are safer in the care of their foster carer. In addition to this, one of the children has recently begun to make disclosures about what was occurring while she was at home and, therefore, I would suggest that she also feels safe.' Parents consulted raised no safeguarding concerns.

Training for foster carers in a range of safeguarding matters raises their awareness and empowers them to help and protect children and young people effectively. It also helps foster carers to identify and act swiftly on any signs and symptoms of abuse.

Good risk management enables children and young people to take controlled risks, thus allowing them to explore and develop independence skills and resilience. Individualised risk assessments and safe caring family plans capture and counter the differing needs and vulnerabilities of each child or young person. No children or young people are the subject of child sexual exploitation and radicalisation and they rarely go missing. This is due to their good protection and feeling sufficiently settled to have no cause to run. On the occasions when children and young people have been missing, or an unauthorised absence occurs, there has been compliance with the agreed protocols. A professional said, 'I have seen evidence of foster carers notifying the agency if the child has made any comments about running away or not coming home.'

The consistent routines and boundaries in fostering households offer children and young people positive reinforcements that support them to self-regulate. This is also helping them to overcome personal barriers and develop socially acceptable mannerisms. Foster carers show strong resilience towards children's and young people's challenging behaviours. They have good support from the fostering agency and the therapeutic consultation sessions that help them to explore behaviour management strategies, which contribute to the strong placement stability. The absence of restraint or physical intervention is testament to the success of the individualised strategies that foster carers use to parent the children and young people effectively.

Supervising social workers conduct a minimum of two unannounced visits to fostering households a year. Health and safety checks ensure that foster carers' homes remain safe. The supervision of foster carers by qualified supervising social workers from the fostering agency provides continuous support and maintains a clear child focus. Children and young people are often present during these visits and supervising social workers consult with them. A professional said, 'Unity know

the children within the fostering agency well. They are visited regularly and asked for their thoughts and opinions. They build a relationship with them, appropriate humour and banter is used, and the activity days are well attended.' These visits provide an opportunity to observe children and young people with their foster carers, and this acts as a further safeguarding mechanism.

There have been no allegations against foster carers since the fostering agency's inception. However, foster carers understand the allegations procedure and feel confident that the fostering agency would support them in such an event.

Recruitment and vetting procedures for staff, panel members and foster carers take place to ensure that suitable adults have access to the children and young people. However, the process is insufficiently robust with respect to the fostering agency checking, as far back as reasonably practicable, the reasons why the employment or position ended. The provider is addressing this issue.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

This is an effectively led fostering agency. Leaders and managers are visible and accessible to the staff team, foster carers and children and young people. They have high aspirations for children and young people and show a clear footprint of child-centred practice that promotes family life and motivates insightful, decisive and resilient leadership. One fostering agency worker described the ethos of the fostering agency as, 'Brilliant, I wouldn't work for anyone else.' Leaders, managers and staff show a good balance of challenge and support. This enables them to challenge local authorities that may fall below expectation, as well as providing support and nurture to all involved in caring for children and young people. One staff member said, 'As a member of staff I think this is at the right level, and we do not hesitate to challenge if issues become apparent, and yet we are very supportive of foster carers and their role.'

There have been some changes in the management team since the registration of the fostering agency in June 2016. The registered manager now acts as the responsible individual and agency decision-maker. A new fostering manager has been in post since April 2017. Her application to register with Ofsted has been approved following this inspection, which means that the fostering agency has a registered manager who is suitably qualified, has a number of years' experience in fostering work, and is highly committed to improving outcomes for children and young people. Her steer in achieving an 'outstanding' judgement during an inspection at another fostering agency makes her an asset to this fostering agency. New staff in various positions in the fostering agency have defined roles and they are promoting a high-quality service that supports further growth without compromising the care and protection of the children and young people. A professional said, 'There have been a number of staff changes and the organisation is growing and developing. The organisation is very open to using us to think about managing anxiety regarding change in the carer group. There is a high level of awareness about dynamics and feeling states, both in the staff team and carer group.'

Fostering staff feel valued by their managers and they speak highly of the foster

carers, children and young people. Team morale is positive, despite some supervising social workers being new to fostering work. This has been a huge learning curve for them; however, they are learning through training courses and incorporating their transferable skills from safeguarding and current practice to develop their knowledge and to enhance their skills. That said, fostering staff feel very well supported, supervised and trained to carry out their role. Regular supervision, performance appraisals, team meetings, training and ad hoc discussions promote supportive and cohesive team players.

Foster carers express positive views about the support and advice that they receive from the fostering agency. They confirm that the fostering agency views them as 'part of the team' and values them as professionals. Typical comments include, 'I feel very much part of the team' and 'I get all of the support I need. Anything small/big, all training... without them, I don't know what I would do' and 'The agency uses all foster carers' skills well. I have been included in some training and asked to deliver it to other foster carers. This is something I enjoy doing and it is better coming from someone doing the job currently. I feel listened to and valued and definitely part of a team.'

Foster carers benefit from the range of training courses that enhance their care of the children and young people. They comment positively about their learning and development. One foster carer said, 'I am a specialist foster carer and a qualified social worker. As such, I have received training in parent and child placements and this has helped me meet the specific needs of this group' and 'diverse training that meets your learning style' and 'It's fun, not mundane.'

Leaders and managers clearly understand the strengths and weaknesses of the fostering agency. They make effective use of consultation with foster carers, children and young people, fostering agency staff and professionals to continually review and improve the services provided to children and young people. Leaders, managers, staff and foster carers form part of a listening agency that learns from practice and strives for continuous improvement. However, the report to the directors does not confirm satisfaction that the agency is achieving good outcomes for children and young people.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers are good and there is a clear emphasis on safeguarding children and young people. This includes the scrutiny of prospective foster carers' backgrounds, including positive disclosure and barring feedback to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. New foster carers comment positively about the assessment process. One foster carer said, 'We found everything really clear and good' and 'The assessor was able to listen and analyse our strengths and areas of support as foster carers.' The independent panel chair is suitably experienced. A fostering panel member said, 'Assessments are generally of a good standard. If, on rare occasions, they fall below a workable standard, this is communicated to the agency management who take steps to remedy.' An advanced practitioner from the fostering agency, who is new in post, has oversight of the assessments to ensure consistently good standards of reports. The fostering panel operates effectively to ensure that only suitable recommendations are made to the agency decision-maker for approval or their continued suitability. The managers accept that the minutes following some of the

panel presentations do not fully reflect key questions and deliberations, and the managers have taken action to improve quality in this area.

External professionals express positive views about the services provided by the fostering agency and they raise no safeguarding concerns.

The minimal number of safeguarding notifications sent by the fostering agency confirm the majority of settled placements. However, those that are sent to Ofsted demonstrate the appropriate action taken by them.

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: 1228523

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Inspector

Jacqueline Malcolm, social care inspector

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