

Freedom Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC037304
Inspection date	1 May 2007
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Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	14 August 2006

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Freedom Fostering is a limited company operating as an independent fostering agency. It was established in 2002 by a group of social workers, foster carers and teachers who sought to develop a service for children based on principles of high quality foster care and effective support systems. The agency was registered in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 on 18 December 2003. Freedom Fostering's statement of purpose indicates that they aim to provide a child centred approach to fostering which is offered in a professional and ethical manner and is compliant with the regulatory frameworks for fostering. It offers short term, long term and respite placements. In addition the agency seeks to provide placements for mothers and babies, unaccompanied minors and sibling groups. Foster placements are supported by a specialist support team and a qualified teacher. It is the declared intention of Freedom Fostering to maintain a small, skilled foster carer group. At the time of the inspection Freedom Fostering supported 10 fostering households with 14 children and young people in placement.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Freedom Fostering has made significant improvements since the last inspection and has demonstrated commitment to ensuring the service meets National Minimum Standards. There have been improvements in securing information for foster carers on children and young people to be placed with them. Foster carers felt that this had helped them to do a better job with the children placed. The agency has improved its staff vetting processes to ensure that staff employed are suitable to work with children. The agency has provided training for staff undertaking assessment of prospective foster carers and shown foresight in including administrative staff in this training. Assessments have been of a much improved standard. The agency has recruited adequate numbers of suitably qualified staff to carry out its functions and has provided them with the necessary training. The agency has invested in review and evaluation of its practices, contributing to its quality assurance responsibilities. Foster carers are now provided with regular supervision and have indicated that it is of a good standard. They are also being provided with a good range of training opportunities and are expected to attend mandatory training. The new health book has provided a useful tool for recording health interventions and guiding foster carers in meeting the health needs of children. The children's guide has been further improved to provide a readily accessible and informative document. Standards of record keeping across the agency are greatly improved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The health needs of children are addressed at the initial referral and matching stages. Freedom Fostering ensure that they acquire full health information from the placing authority. The agency has introduced a health record which is maintained on each individual child. It is held by the foster carer with a copy retained on the child's file within the agency. This enables a comprehensive record of health interventions to be maintained and readily passed on when the child leaves placement. Foster carers have ensured that newly placed children are registered

with health care professionals without delay. They ensure that outstanding immunisations, dental checks and eye tests are undertaken. There is evidence in the children's records of work undertaken to secure Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service assessments for relevant children. Interviews with foster carers indicate that they prepare and support the children who are going through these assessments. Freedom Fostering maintain clear records of medical consents. The foster carers have copies of these and demonstrated in interview that they understood the process of establishing permissions for treatment. All foster carers undertake mandatory first aid training. Case tracking demonstrated that children's health outcomes are being improved by the practices and procedures of Freedom Fostering and its foster carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The manager of Freedom Fostering has been registered by the Commission for Social Care Inspection since the last inspection. He has commenced an National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 in management and has regular, professional supervision. He has a career history which has prepared him for managing the tasks involved in the protection of children and young people. Freedom Fostering provides foster carers who are able to meet the task of caring for children and young people placed with them. The four foster homes visited were comfortable and welcoming. The foster children visited expressed satisfaction with their accommodation. Issues about the sharing of bedrooms by siblings were being closely managed by Freedom Fostering in co-operation with the placing authority. The agency operates a presumption that all children have their own bedroom. Foster carers have been trained in, and demonstrated knowledge of, their responsibility to maintain the health and safety of children placed. Health and safety checks are carried out on foster homes annually. The agency has not systematically recorded the achievement of remedial works indicated by those checks. Eleven of 14 foster children were met during this inspection. All, except the youngest, stated that they had been well matched with their foster carers. This was echoed by the foster carers who were interviewed. The agency has very successfully matched children to meet their cultural and identity needs. The children are also well-matched in terms of the ability of the foster carers to meet their health, education and contact requirements. All foster carers interviewed reported that they felt no pressure to take placements which they believed they were unsuitable for. Through careful matching Freedom Fostering has been able to secure appropriate, positive placements for children. The agency has developed a new matching proforma which should better reflect the work which is being undertaken in relation to matching and provide a useful tool in guiding the process. For some children case tracked there were risk assessments in place undertaken by Freedom Fostering. Those in place were comprehensive. However they were not in place for all children and the review mechanism for those in place was not clear. It is intended that the agency's new matching tool will seek to ensure that a risk assessment is considered, recorded and reviewed in relation to every child. The agency accepts that the risk assessment, matching and safe care policies should be viewed as contingent on one another to produce an integrated and comprehensive approach to the safeguarding of children. The agency has been successful in gathering full Looked After Children (LAC) documentation from placing local authorities since the last inspection. This paperwork forms the foster placement agreement, being supplemented by an agency foster placement agreement where full LAC information is not available. The combination of the documents did not meet all of the demands of Schedule 6 for foster placement agreements. The agency has now developed a fully compliant foster placement agreement which it intends putting in place for all placements. Freedom Fostering has not had to deal with a child protection allegation in the last year. The records indicated

that where a foster carer had not reported an injury to a child appropriately the agency took immediate remedial action and ensured that the foster carer had appropriate training and support to address this shortfall. There is a management system to monitor allegations. It has not been kept adequately distinct from the carer management system. Training in child protection ranges from entry level to more advanced and is mandatory for all foster carers. There has been a high take up of the training since the last inspection. Foster carers have been trained in the Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures for the area in which they live. Foster carers interviewed demonstrated knowledge of the actions they should take if a child reported abuse to them. They were also aware of what would happen if they were accused of abusing a child in their care. Case records indicated that foster carers were aware of procedures for dealing with bullying and were able to effectively operate them to protect children who were being bullied. Each fostering household has in place a detailed safe caring policy. These cover all the critical matters in relation to safer caring within the foster home. In interview with foster children they were able to articulate the rules of the house for safer caring. The supervising social workers described how these policies were reviewed and amended when a new child joined the household. The records did not provide documentary evidence of the process. Placing social workers are able to consider the household safe caring policy before making a decision to place a child. The agency has applied its policies and procedures for recruitment and selection to meet the demands of the fostering regulations in relation to staff vetting. No social workers have commenced work since the last inspection without the required information in place. Although personnel records indicated that evidence was available in relation to verification of the reasons for leaving previous employment involving children the agency had not sought this information directly itself. Those responsible for recruitment and selection are trained in and operate the agency's policies and procedure. All staff interviewed demonstrated experience and knowledge in relation to child protection, current child care policies and law, child development, equality and the roles of other professionals involved in children's lives. They take responsibility for ensuring that their knowledge of these areas is maintained and updated. All staff are appropriately qualified. Support workers are well qualified and skilled. They are supervised by qualified social workers. All social workers involved in the assessment of potential foster carers have undertaken training in the process. The agency is to be commended for including the senior administrator in this training to enable her to better support the social workers in carrying out this function. National Minimum Standards in relation to the function of the fostering panel were not inspected at this inspection. The agency had just established a joint fostering panel with another fostering provider. The panel will be inspected in an additional inspection later in the year to ensure that it is compliant.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency demonstrates strength in meeting the demands of diversity through relevant policies, appropriate recruitment of carers and supporting children in building self-confidence and a clear sense of identity. Training on valuing diversity is provided for foster carers. Children are matched to same race placements and foster carers have been able, in interview, to articulate very clearly the advantages this presents for the children. The agency has continued to broaden its pool of foster carers to ensure it can meet the requirements of diversity for all children seeking placements. The agency has a demanding policy on meeting the needs of children with a disability which includes substantial financial provision where necessary. Foster carers case tracked had taken clear responsibility for meeting the educational needs of children placed. They identified appropriate educational provision and worked to secure the placements for

children in those schools. Records indicated that they had ensured that children were supported in their education. A head teacher's report on foster children stated that they had very good attendance, punctuality and behaviour. The agency does not have a strategic method of monitoring and recording outcomes in education. Foster carers interviewed believe that foster children are entitled to a quality education and should not be relegated to failing schools. One set of foster carers were undertaking considerable work to ensure that a child placed with them would gain a place at a good school with a reputation for social support in the transition to secondary level education. The agency has made good efforts to acquire Personal Education Plans and previous educational records for children placed. The agency provides teaching and support packages to children who are not in local authority educational provision although they have sometimes been frustrated in meeting this need because of the failures of the local authority. The agency's education policy is not current.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency continues to perform strongly in relation to contact. Arrangements for contact are clearly established and recorded at the outset of placement. They are reviewed in the course of the placement and records revised. The agency has helped foster carers to represent the views of children about contact and in a number of cases children reported that contact had been changed to reflect their wishes. The foster carers receive training on the function and importance of contact in their preparation training. In interview they expressed a positive attitude to contact despite the sometimes onerous demands it was placing on them. They spoke with empathy about the position of birth parents and had developed imaginative ways to ensure the birth parents were kept involved in their children's lives. The agency did not have documentary evidence that the placing authority had undertaken risk assessments before contact could begin. Freedom Fostering has taken significant steps since the last inspection to embed consultation into their processes. Children's views are now routinely elicited for foster carers' reviews. All children are able to attend a forum which will happen four times a year. The forum was observed during the inspection and was seen to offer an opportunity for foster children to inform the agency of their views. Children were encouraged to give their opinions on issues key to the Every Child Matters agenda. The agency has provided a number of recreation days or days out which the entire fostering family can attend and which afford further opportunity to engage with the opinions of foster carers, foster children and birth children. The agency has developed a room which can be used as a crèche, a contact room, a hang out zone, or a meeting room. It is child friendly and well-resourced. One young person interviewed said they felt very comfortable in the offices of the agency. All children observed were familiar with the staff and appeared comfortable in the environment of the agency's offices. Children interviewed reported that the supervising social worker spends time with them and listens to what they say.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

At present Freedom Fostering do not have any young people in placement who are nearing the age of independence. Foster carers are provided with training in preparing young people for independence and are supplied with guidance on the process. A young person and their foster carer were able to describe the learning which is being encouraged to develop life skills - cooking, managing money, laundry, negotiating difficult social environments. Likewise some

younger children and their foster carers described how they were expected to help with the household tasks, appropriate to their age and learning. Children and young people took a pride in their involvement. Freedom Fostering employ a finance specialist who indicated that the agency has been able to maintain good financial health in the last year. There were no concerns raised by foster carers about payments of allowances or incidental expenses. The documentation relating to payments and allowances in the foster care handbook is out of date.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear statement of purpose which reflects its ethos and practices. It covers all the matters required by regulations. The children's guide combined with an easy to understand complaints leaflet is of a good standard and enables children and young people to understand what is happening while they are in foster placement. The registered manager is currently undertaking an NVQ Level 4 in management which is expected to conclude by the end of the year. It is acknowledged by the agency that the manager has some gaps in experience. To enable him to achieve the full remit of his role he is being provided with regular professional supervision and support in addition to training. He has expressed his satisfaction with supervision and the skills it has enabled him to develop. The manager has demonstrated strong social work values and good leadership skills. He has undertaken considerable work since the last inspection in building a competent, enthusiastic and cohesive team. In interview the manager demonstrated that he understood the key areas for development within the agency and had identified strategies and resources for addressing them. The agency is managed in a way which has enabled it to meet its obligations to carers in terms of supervision, training, quality matching and safeguarding children. The responsible individual takes responsibility for much of the monitoring within the agency of matters required by the Fostering Regulations, including allegations, complaints and compliance of foster carers with their foster placement agreements. A recording system is in place to address the requirement to maintain separate records on complaints and allegations. These records are on occasions blurred with those relating specifically to carer management. There is no system in place to monitor the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of foster children. The responsible individual has placed a clear expectation on staff to maintain recording in a way which supports the monitoring process. The agency has employed an external consultant to undertake a quality assurance exercise over eight weeks. Whilst the work of the responsible individual has established numerical data the agency believes this exercise has been useful in translating this empirical evidence into evaluation and learning about opportunities for improving practice and service delivery. A comprehensive report at the end of this period is intended to provide a programme for improvement as well as a template for continuing longitudinal evaluation of statistics gathered through monitoring. The agency has a conflicts of interest policy in place. However it has a narrow remit and requires reviewing. The service is managed effectively and efficiently. For historical reasons, and to support the manager while he undertakes training, the responsible individual has been involved in a number of social work functions including matching, providing out of hours support to foster carers and deputising for the manager in his absence. The agency accepts that, for clarity and accountability, there should be a clear delineation of roles between the business and social work personnel and functions. The foster carers and staff have indicated that they have found this arrangement beneficial during this transitional period. The manager indicated in interview that the agency has started to review some of the functions within the agency. The agency has provided good levels of support and training to staff and foster carers since the last inspection. Learning and development is embedded into many processes for the social work staff and

training is undertaken alongside carers as appropriate. Staff reported high levels of satisfaction with supervision arrangements and outcomes. There has been a high take up of training by foster carers and those interviewed indicated that the training was of a good standard. All foster carers now undertake NVQ Level 3 training in childcare. Eight of the current foster carers have just commenced the training. The training officer presented as skilled in the development and provision of training. He aimed to present training within the context of the Every Child Matters agenda and recognised the need to link training to National Minimum Standards and Fostering Regulations. Training is reviewed and evaluated. All staff have clear contracts of employment and work within a work load management system. This system is sophisticated enough to allocate work according to a wide range of factors rather than just numerically. In interview staff demonstrated understanding of policies and procedures within the agency and understood the lines of accountability in operation. They reported satisfaction with the support and employment conditions which they are offered by Freedom Fostering. The agency has recruited a number of new staff members over the past year. The staff team is sufficient to meet the needs of the service and sufficiently qualified and experienced to undertake its tasks. The quality of assessment of prospective foster carers is improved and the agency's recruitment strategies have been effective in establishing the right blend of foster carers to meet need. The work of the social workers is supported by able administrative support. It is also increasingly supported by the work of two support workers who are well qualified, skilled and very much appreciated by foster carers and children alike. The agency has in place a whistle blowing policy. It does not reflect the relevant legislation, including the Public Interest Disclosure Act (1998). Foster carers are clear about the support which Freedom Fostering contracts to provide, including out of hours support, supervision, respite care and training. The agency does not have a single document strategy for this provision and other matters outlined in National Minimum Standard 21.2. Foster carers are provided with good levels of supervision outlined in a supervision agreement with the agency. This was reported by the foster carers to be regular, demanding and supportive. Records indicated that it is rarely postponed and is supplemented by a considerable amount of other face to face and indirect contact with the foster carers. Case records provided evidence of ongoing work on practice issues being undertaken by the supervising social worker and the foster carer. The records of supervision are slight and do not adequately reflect the level of work which is being undertaken through supervision. The foster care agreement does not include all the elements outlined in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Regulations. The agency has now developed a fully compliant foster care agreement which it intends putting in place for all foster carers. There was no indication on foster carers' files that unannounced visits were being undertaken. Annual reviews have not been undertaken annually in the past. The agency has sought to remedy this and it is now an expectation that all foster carers will be reviewed and their approval reconsidered by the fostering panel, six months after approval, and annually thereafter. Continued approval requires attendance at training and the process provides an opportunity to review training needs. Foster carers and children are clear about how to complain to Freedom Fostering. The agency has been responsive to concerns raised over the last year and has documented interventions in response. The records do not clearly indicate that all concerns are logged as complaints through the complaints system. Children's and foster carers' records are well maintained within the agency. They are up to date and easy to navigate. Records within the agency are quality controlled through monitoring and auditing processes. Foster carers are trained in, and are aware of their responsibility, to maintain adequate records. On occasion foster carers have retained children's records after a placement has ended. The registered manager indicated that he would clarify the need for all records to be returned at the close of a placement and all relevant records to be given to the local authority

at this point. Registers relating to foster carers, children and staff comply with regulations. The premises which are used as offices by the agency are entirely suitable and secure for their needs.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
6	retain documentary evidence that remedial work identified in the annual health and safety check is carried out and that all fostering households have an annual check.	17 August 2007
8	ensure that risk assessments are carried out for every child being placed by the agency.	17 August 2007
8	ensure that the new, compliant foster placement agreement is put in place for all placements within the agency, including respite placements.	17 August 2007
13	establish a procedure for monitoring the educational attainment, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster carers.	17 August 2007
25	maintain clarity in monitoring records, ensuring that matters are entered in the correct record even if they also appear in another record relating to carer management. The agency should develop processes for undertaking longitudinal evaluation of monitored matters.	17 August 2007
24	ensure that all recordings which foster carers have made in relation to children placed with them are returned to the agency at the conclusion of the placement.	17 August 2007
22	ensure that all foster carers sign the agency's new, compliant foster care agreement.	17 August 2007
15	ascertain directly that where a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, so far as reasonably practicable verification of the reason why the employment or position ended.	17 August 2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- implement its new matching tool and record for all future referrals for placement.

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- retain documentary evidence that household safe care policies have been reviewed and amended, if necessary, at the point of each new placement and in consultation with the entire household, including the foster child.
 - ensure that contact does not take place until the child's social worker has carried out a risk assessment. The agency should retain evidence of this risk assessment on the children's records.
 - review and update its guidance on allowances for foster carers.
 - begin the process of clearly delineating the roles of the responsible individual and the registered manager.
 - amend its whistle blowing policy to better reflect the demands of legislation.
 - ensure that comprehensive records are kept of the work undertaken in foster carers' supervision meetings.
 - record clearly on the foster carers' file when an unannounced visit has taken place.
 - draw up a strategy for working with foster carers which brings together in one strategy all the matters outlined in NMS 21.2.

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.