

Futures For Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

The 'Futures for Children' fostering agency is based in Maidstone and over the last year, has registered other branches in neighbouring counties. It is the intention of the agency to develop small groups of carers, from a wide range of geographical locations, with qualified staff support close by, in line their 'Maidstone' model. According to its Statement of Purpose, the agency seeks to provide, "a flexible, caring and imaginative foster care service...to give children and young people the opportunity to become valued members of society". The agency seeks to provide a variety of placements, based upon the presenting needs of the children and young people referred. These include; short and long term, emergencies, bridging, enhanced, for example, disability, illness, sibling groups and parent and child placements. All Social Workers employed by the agency are qualified and experienced and other employees include a qualified Director of Therapy and sessional workers. For those young people not in mainstream school, the agency funds a minimum of 10 hours sessional work per week. The agency provides continued training for carers and is currently focusing upon the NVQ qualification. Out of hours support is provided by the agency staff team via an on call system and foster carers receive three weeks' holiday pay annually.

Summary

This announced annual key inspection was conducted over a four day period. The purpose was to inspect the agency against the key National Minimum Standards for fostering services and to check for progress made in terms of the requirements and recommendations of last year's inspection visit. Key personnel were interviewed, including the Registered Manager, a Director, social workers and members of the administrative team. Three foster carers were randomly selected and interviewed in their own homes. The children in these placements were 'case tracked'. Policies and procedures were scrutinised, as were the minutes of the previous three panel meetings. The agency has made good overall progress since its last inspection; every requirement and recommendation has been fully or partly met.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Individual placement plans have now been introduced for all of the young people in placement. These are used in the absence of receiving the local authority paperwork in good time. Care files have been reviewed and updated. They now contain all of the required information. Separate sections have now been added in terms of 'health' and 'education'. Placing authorities are being 'chased' for any missing or late information. Safe care policies are being written and implemented by all of the foster carers in respect of the young people placed with them. Clear and explicit guidance is now in place with regards the responsibilities of foster carers to support and promote educational attainment. This is being closely monitored by the Registered Manager.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The primary health care needs of children and young people are being met and more complex needs, for example mental health concerns, are being appropriately referred to specialist external services. The agency continues to have its own therapy team and individual sessions are provided,

as requested by the relevant placing authority. All of the children and young people in placement are registered with local health care services. Foster carers receive ongoing training and guidance in terms of health promotion. More recently, the 'Looked After Children' (LAC) Nurse gave a presentation on her role, as well as a presentation on sexual health for teenagers. The current training plan includes courses on conditions such as Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD. All care files include a separate section pertaining to health. Some hold clearer details than others. The agency is planning to restructure this section to improve upon this and is also considering the value of introducing a health booklet for all children / young people in placement to keep and maintain themselves. Foster carers demonstrate a clear understanding of their own roles and responsibilities in terms of health promotion and this is made clear within the foster carer agreement. Positive examples, found through visiting foster carers, include working with health care professionals to reduce medication and providing clear guidance on healthy eating and lifestyle. Although written policies are in place for foster carers, there is a lack of clear guidance with regards the safe use of medication. One foster carer has worked very successfully to reduce the use of medication, however, the written records in place do not fully safeguard the carer or the young person. The manager is currently liaising with a local college in an attempt to seek training on this subject.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

A sound and robust recruitment process is being implemented. Every level of staff is subject to an Enhanced CRB check, which is renewed every two years and all written references are followed up by telephone verification. Although in practice, gaps within employment dates are being questioned, this is not always being explicitly recorded in writing. Every member of the social work team is suitably qualified and all are registered with the General Social Care Council. Administrative staff follow clear child protection protocols, for example, when taking telephone calls and sensitive information is requested. Their practice is safe, however, this topic is not explicitly covered during their induction period. Assessment processes for the recruitment of foster carers are detailed and thorough. Assessments are only conducted by those with the required expertise. Fostering households are checked annually and those visited during this inspection were clean, comfortable and able to accommodate those living there. Preparation training for foster carers covers health and safety issues and all foster carers are now being required by the agency to write and implement their own 'safe care' policy, specific to the needs of the child(ren) they have in placement. Matching records show the needs of newly referred children and young people are being carefully researched against the skills and experience of foster carers with vacancies. A clear pro forma is being used, although this does not always include details of any skills deficits or specific training / support needs of the identified carer. If appropriate placements cannot be 'matched', the agency does not proceed with the referral, despite having vacancies. The good number of placements within the agency that have moved on to become long term and permanent further supports that good matching is happening in practice. Systems are in place for the monitoring and collation of information regarding actual or suspected harm and abuse. Foster carers receive child protection training as part of their initial assessment and they record concerns and incidents in their daily monitoring records. One example was found of an accident, which was not clearly transferred into the young person's care file. Although it was eventually found to have been dealt with appropriately, the records did not support the action that was taken. Significant events are being reported appropriately to the relevant authorities, within the timescales prescribed. The minutes of the previous three panel meetings support that robust processes are being implemented. Members come from a

wide range of professional backgrounds and there is a good level of independent membership. Given the length of terms that some individuals have held, plans are currently underway to secure new members. Annual reviews for this office are up to date.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The majority of foster carers and young people in placement are White British, however, the agency continues to widely advertise in an attempt to recruit from ethnic minority groups. Those children from different ethnic groups are suitably matched with foster carers whose ethnicity matches their own. Children with complex care needs are being placed with foster carers who possess the skills and knowledge necessary to meet their needs and specific support and training is in place. The agency's policy and procedure on equality and diversity is being implemented in practice, in terms of staff recruitment. For a small agency, a good mix of individuals from different ethnic, disability and religious backgrounds is clearly apparent. Diversity training is provided at the assessment stage and continues to be revisited by existing foster carers and staff. Almost all of the young people are attending full time school. Those with special educational needs have clear and up to date 'statements' on file to reflect this. The 12% who are currently excluded are receiving appropriate day time support, provided by the agency. All care files hold a separate education section, which contain school reports and Personal Education Plans. Educational attendance and achievement is being monitored through foster carer supervision and the completion of monthly reports. Foster carers and, where necessary, the agency social workers, attend all relevant school meetings and educational reviews. Outcomes of these are recorded in the education section of the file and the Registered Manager routinely monitors and evaluates such information. The 'Foster Carer Agreement' explicitly covers the role and responsibility of the foster carer to promote and support educational achievement. Foster carers are clear about this. The homes visited provide resources that encourage study; one foster carer advocated strongly to the placing authority in order for the young person to be provided with a computer to use at home.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency actively supports and promotes positive family contact for those in its care. Files contain a separate contact section, which describes the individual arrangements and how these will be achieved. Foster carer training covers this subject and those foster carers who were interviewed demonstrate a clear awareness of their roles and responsibilities. These are described within the 'Foster Carer Agreement'. One foster carer talked of encouraging regular telephone contact, which is further supported by the agency, through the provision of a supervisor who provides transport and supervises the session. In such cases, reports are written, copied to the young person's file and forwarded to the placing authority. The agency's Head Office, located nearby, has ample provision of comfortable, private rooms, should these be needed for contact visits. Foster carers indicate through their returned surveys that they are satisfied with the agency's consultation processes. They feel well informed. Supervision records show that fostered and birth children are regularly seen privately by the supporting social worker and two separate consultation events are planned for later in the year; one for fostered children and the other for birth children. The agency has regularly attended the consultation events held by the Children's Rights Department of Ofsted. The agency's written literature for young people is carefully prepared in different formats, to suit the needs of the wide group it is intended for.

Where necessary, it is translated. Children and young people report that they know how to complain, within and outside of the agency. Foster carer annual review documentation now includes a process for obtaining the views and opinions of those children in placement, as well as the birth children of the foster carers.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose is clear and concise; it contains all of the information, as required by the National Minimum Standards for fostering services. It is subject to ongoing review and was last updated in August 2007. Written information for children and young people is equally clear. Different formats are available to reflect the needs of the range of children being looked after. The agency is adequately staffed to meet the needs of the number of fostering households and young people in placement. The Registered Manager no longer has a caseload and can focus upon supervising the team and monitoring the quality of the work being conducted. Team members are qualified and suitably experienced; they receive ongoing supervision and appraisal. Lines of communication, accountability and delegation are clear. Training and development needs are being recognised and effectively planned for. The team is cohesive. Staff enjoy regular team meetings and frequently liaise with the Directors. Caseloads are manageable, and terms and conditions reflect specific individual needs. The agency values its staff. Foster carers receive regular supervision visits and telephone calls in between. All are provided with membership with the 'Fostering Network'. Six foster carers have achieved their NVQ Level 3 certificates and two are working towards this. Foster carers value the on call provision of the agency. They say they always receive the guidance and, where necessary, the practical support they need when difficult situations arise. Case records for children and young people have been reviewed and updated. Such files are now being audited by the Registered Manager. A system has now been implemented whereby the agency has designed its own placement agreement, which is used in the absence of local authority paperwork, should there be a delay in receiving this. The information contained within details the purpose of the placement, its intended duration and how the foster carers are to meet the needs of the young person placed with them. The administrative team is led by an experienced and competent line manager. Systems are clear and effective and a computer data base is being developed. Processes for ensuring that necessary checks are being updated on time are effective. Data such as foster carer lists, household with vacancies and placement records are all easily retrievable and in a state of continual update. The Registered Manager has a clear system for reviewing and monitoring the work of the agency. Quality audit review reports are being completed and forwarded to Ofsted, in line with the requirements of the National Minimum Standards for fostering services.

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
12	review the health sections of all care files to ensure consistency in terms of the details held. (Regulation 15(2)(c))	30 November 2007
12	ensure appropriate health related training is provided for all foster carers, for example, the administration of medication. (Regulation 15(2)(c)).	30 December 2007
9	ensure all accidents are clearly documented within care files.(Regulation 11(a))	10 November 2007

Recommendations

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

- ensure any gaps in employment are explained and 'written up' within the interview notes. (NMS 3).
- include basic child protection awareness training within the induction period of administrative staff. (NMS 9).
- ensure the written evidence pertaining to matching information includes a description of the ongoing training and support needs of the foster carers. (NMS 9).

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.