

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

Futures for children is an independent fostering agency located in Southend, Essex. It is registered separately from additional offices which are based elsewhere in the country. The agency provides short and long term fostering placements for children aged birth to 18 years old, as well as parent and child placements.

Summary

This inspection was a key announced inspection. This is a light touch inspection but all the key national minimum standards as well as some other standards have been covered. The rating for being healthy, staying safe and making a positive contribution are judged as good. Enjoying and achieving, and organisation are judged as outstanding. Economic wellbeing was not judged during this inspection.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The registered person was asked to ensure that foster carers receive specialist training. This requirement is now met ensuring that foster carers have the necessary skills to care for children with specific needs. The registered person was asked to ensure that all staff are trained in fire and health and safety procedures. This requirement is now met ensuring procedures are implemented. The registered person was asked to ensure that assessments include the risk to children bedroom windows above ground level. This requirement is now met ensuring that the health and safety assessments cover any specific risks to children.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering agency promotes the health and welfare of children. For example, children are registered with a local General Practitioner and records are maintained of preventative healthcare appointments. All children placed with the agency have received an annual health assessment. Children say that they receive support and advice about being healthy. The agency has a system in place to monitor children's illnesses or accidents to ensure that appropriate action is taken. Children receive support with emotional or behavioural needs. For example, specialist health services are available and some children are using them; this includes counselling or therapy sessions. Foster carers have received advice from the looked after children nurse on matters relating to the health needs of children in their care. There is evidence that consent for hospital treatment is sought from placing authorities. However, the arrangements for giving medical consent is not routinely obtained for children to ensure accountability. Foster carers receive training in first aid, separation and loss and managing challenging behaviour ensuring that they are supported in managing children's specific needs. Supervising social workers provide support to foster carers in managing any specific needs of children.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The fostering agency has robust recruitment procedures in place for staff members employed by the agency. For example, proof of identity, references, employment history, evidence of relevant qualifications and the outcome of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are kept on files. New staff undertake a probationary period to ensure they are suitable to carry out their work within the agency. The staff within the agency are suitable to work with children. The fostering agency provides foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. For example, during the initial assessment of new carers an evaluation regarding the suitability of the household is undertaken. It is agency's expectation that children have their own bedroom unless they are siblings and then can share. Children say that they are happy with their home and are given privacy. Health and safety checks which include any specific risks to children are completed on the household. These checks are reviewed annually to ensure that the accommodation continues to be appropriate. The fostering agency matches children and carers appropriately. During the assessment period, consideration is given to the specific needs of the children that foster carers will be able to manage. The agency has a matching consideration document and in making such decisions placing authorities are consulted. Local authority linking reports for children are retained on files. The agency has a system for monitoring where careful matching is needed in an attempt to minimise the risk of a placement breakdown. The fostering agency has child protection procedures to be followed in the event of a suspicion or allegation of abuse. Some foster carers have attended training in child protection and are clear about which significant events need to be reported to the fostering agency. The agency has a system to monitor specific events relating to safeguarding children. Child protection incidents are dealt with appropriately and all relevant authorities are notified without delay. A safe caring strategy which includes the actions to ensure the safety and welfare of children is completed by the agency. Child protection and other significant incidents are recorded in separate bound books and these provide a clear trail of the action taken and the outcome. Children say that they feel safe and are looked after well by their foster carers. The foster carers working for the agency are suitable to care for children. Robust checks are completed prior to the approval of foster carers. For example, references, CRB checks, health, Ofsted and local authority checks are completed to form an overall view on their suitability to become foster carers. Checks are also completed on significant people associated with foster carers who may have contact with the children. Fostering panels are organised efficiently and are effective in ensuring good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. For example, the fostering panel is currently made up of members who have vast experience relevant to their role within the panel. Panel members are provided with current guidance produced by the British association of adoption and fostering ensuring that they are up to date with current information. Systems are in place to ensure that panel members are provided with the relevant paperwork to ensure that they are prepared for the panel meetings. Staff within the agency say that panel perform a quality assurance function in relation to the assessments they undertake. The minutes recording decisions of panel confirm this is the case. The fostering panel is made up of the relevant people as required in the fostering regulations.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering agency ensures that children are provided with foster care services which value diversity and promote equality. For example, foster carers cover issues relating to diversity and equality during the assessment period. Additional training relating to equality is provided for foster carers and staff on an ongoing basis. The matching process takes into account any racial or cultural needs children may have and an appropriate match is made where possible.

Information for children is presented in a manner which may help them understand it and promotes positive images of children from different backgrounds. The fostering agency treats children's educational needs as a high priority and has introduced a system to monitor the education of children. For example, a record is maintained which evaluates the kind of educational establishment children attend, whether they have moved school due to a placement change as well as children's attendance. Reports concerning children's educational history and attainments are recorded on their files. Children say that they are given support with their education and this includes help with homework. Foster carers are actively involved in children's education and offer encouragement and praise regarding their educational achievement. Foster carers are clear about the importance of a positive education for children and are active in promoting children's educational interests. The fostering agency does not currently provide short term breaks.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering agency ensures that children are encouraged to maintain contact with significant others. The contact arrangements for children are clearly recorded on files. Supervising social workers offer support in ensuring that contact arrangements are maintained and liaise with local authorities where necessary. Foster carers are clear about the contact arrangements for the children in their care. The agency has a facility to allow children and their family to meet in a safe and secure environment. Records of supervised contact is maintained. Foster carers also facilitate telephone contact. The fostering agency ensures that children's opinions are sought over issues which are likely to affect their daily life. Children say that they can talk to their foster carers about any concerns or problems that they may have and a resolution is reached. Children are aware of the agency's complaints procedures, but some say that there would be no need to use this as they can just talk to their foster carer. The agency's supervising social workers see the children regularly and are clear about the need to listen to their views. The agency has attempted to engage children in the operation of the service, but this has had limited success because of the reluctance of children. A yearly outing is arranged for children and their carers which provides them with the opportunity to meet up and share their views. Children have the opportunity to express their views at their statutory reviews.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There is a clear Statement of Purpose (SOP) which covers the aims and objectives of the fostering agency. The SOP was updated in November 2007 and includes information on how to make a complaint as well as information on complaints received by the agency. In addition, the agency has a young person's guide (YPG) which is presented in a child friendly manner. The YPG includes information about what children can expect when living with foster carers as well as whom to contact if they are not happy. There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the fostering agency. For example, the registered manager undertakes monitoring of the matters set out in schedule 7 of the fostering regulations. A report is produced to highlight the standards within the service and adaptations are made if necessary. Further audits are carried out on the files of children and foster carers to assess the

practice of the staff within the agency. Staff within the agency are committed to ensure that their practice is effective in promoting the interests of children. Staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an efficient and effective service. For example, there is a clear staffing structure in place. This includes the level of responsibility for individual staff and the manager. Staff say that they feel supported and receive regular supervision. They also benefit from regular team meetings to discuss any issues that arise. The fostering agency has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff. The team within the agency comprises of some permanent and contracted social workers, an administrative team and sessional workers. Social workers have a relevant social work qualification and relevant experience of working with children. There is also a registered manager in post. Staff say that staffing levels are continually evaluated to ensure there are an appropriate amount of staff. Staff within the agency are clear about their roles and responsibility. The administrative team are proactive in organising the daily running of the agency and provide sound support for social workers. The fostering agency recruits foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the children. Social workers within the agency have relevant experience to ensure that they are able to carry out quality assessments of prospective foster carers. The assessments of foster carers is thorough and cover the matters set out in the fostering regulations. The fostering agency has a training programme for both foster carers and staff. Foster carers say that they are happy with the training opportunities. Social work staff are registered with the general social care council and are expected to complete training as part of their ongoing professional development. Training for staff includes health and safety, child protection, life story work and self harm. On occasions, staff and fosters carers attend training together and say that they are satisfied with the training available to them. The fostering agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. For example, visits are carried out to complete supervision with foster carers. Records are maintained of these visits and any issues followed up. Social workers have regular telephone contact with carers and there is evidence on files that any issues highlighted are promptly taken up with the appropriate person. Regular informal meetings are arranged where foster carers can meet together. Foster carers are provided with a range of written information which they can refer to when needed. Foster carers are aware of the out of hour's service that the agency operates and say that they can contact the agency at any time for advice and support. Foster carers are very complimentary about the support they receive from both their supervising social workers and the agency as a whole. Fostering carers annual household reviews are not consistently completed within the relevant timescale. On occasions the timescales between the start and end of the review is delayed. This does not ensure a consistent approach to the evaluation for the continued suitability of foster carers. Staff are clear that delays should not be caused by waiting for information requested from others and the agency are committed to ensuring that reviews are completed within a timely manner. Foster carers are provided with a foster carer agreement which covers the matters set out in schedule 5 of the fostering regulations. Case records for children are comprehensive. For example, each child has their own record which is well organised and up to date ensuring that information can be easily retrieved. The agency organises files into the every child matters outcomes ensuring that they can evidence there contribution to children. Systems are place to ensure that relevant information relating to a child is kept on the child's file. The fostering agency's administrative records contain all significant information relevant to the running of the service. For example, separate records are maintained for children, foster carers and staff. Complaints, significant issues and allegations are recorded separately. Confidential records are stored securely in lockable facilities.

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
21	ensure that foster carers reviews take place not more than one year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering agency considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year [Regulation 29(2)]	18 April 2008

Recommendations

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

- consider ensuring that foster carers are provided with clear procedures for giving consent for children to receive medical treatment. [NMS 12]

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.