

The Homefinding & Fostering Agency

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 Home Finding and Fostering Agency seeks to provide both short and long term foster care placements for children and young people of all ages, throughout Kent, London and Sussex. A wide range of carers are recruited in order that placements can be made, pertaining to the specific needs of the individual, including mother and baby placements, sibling groups and those with a history of enduring different forms of abuse. A particular strength of the agency is its provision regarding 'unaccompanied asylum seeking minors' and to this end, carers of ethnic origin were specifically sought, as were those with regards receiving children from Eastern Europe. More recently, such referrals have gradually increased once more and the agency has been working extremely hard to recruit carers within a closer physical proximity to London boroughs. In addition, much work has continued to further develop the agency's work with teenagers, with particular emphasis upon preparing them for independent living. The outcomes for such youngsters have been nothing short of commendable and this element of the agency's work is a particular strength.

Summary

This was an announced inspection completed by one inspector over a week period. Sound matching processes ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their needs. Vigorous recruitment criterion ensures the safety and welfare of children and young people, in terms of the staff and carers employed by the agency. A broad training programme benefits the staff and carers of the agency, in terms of increasing their knowledge base and improving upon their practice. Excellent consultation processes ensure all stakeholders have their say. The wide range of skills and expertise among the staff team is very well utilised. Excellent monitoring systems and quality assurance methods enable the service to continue to improve. The agency provides support services to children and young people above and beyond its responsibilities. The support provided for teenagers preparing to leave the care system is exemplary. A dedicated 'contact' service ensures children and young people maintain contact with those who are important to them.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

These follow the recommendations made in the last report. The separate written health book has been given to nearly all the carers. They have to attend a two day healthy care training programme to understand the guidance for setting up and maintaining these books, and some carers still need to attend this. The revision of the policies and procedure for action taken, following receipt of an allegation made against a foster family has been actioned. Alongside information given on training days and in support groups, and the introduction of a new booklet regarding this. The foster carers' supervision records have been reviewed, as have the daily records held by foster carers. Training was held specifically on this subject. A skills audit on the foster carers has now been completed and the agency is producing a resource directory.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people positively benefit by having their health needs identified and met. They are all registered with local health care services and any outstanding annual health reviews are actively being chased. Referrals to specialist health services are made in accordance with presenting needs; this includes psychiatry, CAMHS and other forms of therapeutic services. The agency supports foster carers to access the services they need and can assist with costs, as well as provide transport for any appointments that are out of the local area. There is good liaisons between the fostering service and the Looked After Children's (LAC) nurses from the nearby local authorities. The newly introduced healthy care book clearly records all appointments and is specifically for the young people to take with them when they leave care. This record is still being distributed to all children and young people and is presented as part of the foster carers two day healthy care training. The agency recently trained two staff members who will provide health training for young people, in preventative measures, such as healthy eating and advice on smoking, alcohol and illegal substances. Foster carers demonstrate a clear desire to promote the good health of those in their care. Households provide healthy and nutritious diets and ensure appropriate physical activity is undertaken. Written records of medicine administration are being maintained and appropriate training for additional health matters is provided for those foster carers who look after young people with specific health care needs. Record of consent was seen on file and with the carers.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The manager is suitably experienced and qualified. All of the staff possess the skills, experience and qualifications commensurate with their roles. Those with a social work position are registered with the General Social Care Council. Checks on staff are up to date and clear lines of responsibility and accountability are understood. Form F Assessments of prospective foster carers are being mainly conducted by staff within the agency. These are being completed to an excellent overall standard by staff who have the appropriate skills and knowledge. Appropriate checks are being thoroughly completed. Any areas of concern, in terms of the quality of assessments, are being directed to the Registered Manager in order for these to be raised through the supervision process, such instances are rare. Fostering households are clean, warm and comfortable. Annual health and safety checks are being conducted and each individual foster carer's 'safe care' policy is subject to ongoing annual review. Annual checks are maintained regarding foster carers' own household and car insurances. Foster carers are acutely aware of the fostering task and what it means specifically for the individual young person in their care. This is aided by a very clear placement plan, devised by the agency, the content of which is derived from the local authority documentation and information. The agency recently ran a skills audit on all of the foster carers and now has produced a resource directory. Matching processes are clear. The prescribed process is being stringently followed. The pro forma documentation in place is being fully utilised, with considerations including the locality, ethnicity, behavioural, educational and contact needs of the referred young person. However, on the documentation, key areas are not examined in terms of how the proposed foster carers may be able to meet these needs, neither does it identify any specific support or training issues for the proposed foster carers. The agency provides excellent support to ensure all recognised needs are met but does not fully evidence this. The ongoing success of the agency, in securing long term and permanent placements, which is currently 86% of the overall placements which have been in situ for two years and above, is indicative of a rigorous matching process being implemented. Core subjects including child protection, bullying, promoting self-esteem and receiving allegations from looked after children are comprehensively covered throughout initial

training and then on subsequent training. This is further underpinned by clear policy and procedural guidance. Foster carers confirm they have been well prepared for the potential receipt of an allegation and all now have a booklet regarding this from the Fostering Network. However, the child protection policies and procedures are out of date and have not been reviewed for some time. The agency holds clear and accurate records that support open and transparent working practices in respect of complaints and allegations. The panel consists of a wide range of child care professionals, many of whom are independent members, including the Chair. There are no male representatives on the panel. All members have been recruited subject to providing appropriate references and checks, conducted by the agency. Access to medical expertise is in place but needs to be reviewed. The manager routinely attends panel meetings, although acts as an advisor and does not have a casting vote. Panel members receive the necessary documentation in good time and the Chair requires every member to actively contribute at the meeting. Members are encouraged to ask questions of the presenting social worker and the applicant. Clear focus is placed upon examining an applicant's ability to promote a safe and healthy family based lifestyle. Annual reviews are up to date. The documentation for this process includes seeking the views and opinions of the foster carers, the young people in placement, placing authorities and birth children. Panel members speak knowledgeably of their role and function, there are clear processes for when full agreement cannot be reached; they have been provided with panel training and more is planned.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Over half of the foster carers and young people are White/British, however, those children from other ethnic backgrounds are placed with foster carers with matching identities. Initial and ongoing training covers equality and diversity and the equal opportunities policy and procedure is subject to ongoing review. The agency is focusing upon foster carer recruitment within the London area. Its advertising campaign is targeting those from ethnic and religious backgrounds suitable for unaccompanied minors. The staff team reflects a diverse group in terms of gender, race and ethnicity. Children and young people with disabilities are having their needs met. Their foster carers receive the training, support and practical assistance necessary to enable them to provide appropriate care. Every school-aged young person has an up to date Personal Education Plan (PEP) in place and all care files hold a separate 'education' section. The monthly reports, completed by supervising social workers, include details of educational attendance, attainment and needs. This information is used by the agency for ongoing monitoring purposes and is regularly forwarded to the placing social worker. This year has seen an increase in attendance to go on to further education, 100% of children in school and overall grades are higher. Foster carers are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities in terms of promoting educational achievement. This is clearly detailed within the Foster Carer Agreement. Those households visited offer appropriate resources, such as quiet space, computer access and books. Foster carers attend school meetings and open events and give those in their care clear guidance in terms of ensuring that homework is completed. Financial assistance may be given if needed, for example, to purchase school uniform and in the event of temporary exclusions or a school place not being immediately secured, the agency provides additional relevant support. The agency will also fund classroom assistants and individual tutoring in the home if required to enable young people to have the same opportunities and to help them catch up on any missed schooling.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes good contact arrangements for the young people, and has clear policy and procedures for foster carers regarding promoting and supervising contact. The agency provides training that sets out the principles and expectations that foster carers are expected to adhere to and the arrangements to support them in facilitating contact. The agency has their own contact coordinator who directly arranges all transport and facility arrangements for birth parents, foster carers and young people and can also liaise with the local authorities. The agency provides and trains contact supervisors, who have a meeting every six weeks with group supervision alongside the manager and contact supervisor. The contact reports, monitors and reviews contact arrangements and the views of the young person are sought in determining future arrangements. Team meetings discuss placement updates and all contact arrangements for young people and carers. Records indicate that children's opinions have been sought prior to their own reviews and that of their foster carers' review. Children and young people spoken to described means by which they had been consulted for example reviews, the opportunity to attend a specific participation group set up by the service just for them. As part of the agency's participation group they meet regularly and arrange planned events for young people with support from the foster carers. They recently held a talent show at a local theatre to raise funds for disadvantaged young people in Ethiopia; which is a charity set up by the agency. This years theme for the participation group is doing an art show with an exhibition. The agency's supervising social worker ensures that the children in placement are regularly seen and spoken to on their own. This ensures all the young people build a relationship with the social worker and they know who they can raise any concerns or complaints with. Some examples of the comments received from the young people's surveys about the agency: 'I'm very happy living here', 'it's probably the safest I've ever lived', 'lots of family time together', 'do you feel well cared for - 'Yes they love me', 'I'm happy', 'I just feel happy where I am'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The service's vision and values are explicitly stated in the Statement of Purpose and they are evidenced throughout service delivery and in the practice of staff and managers. The Statement of Purpose and Children's Welcome Pack continues to be informative, clear and regularly updated. The management team is organised so as to provide an efficient and effective service with everyone having set roles that are clear and well structured with clear lines of accountability. The social workers have vast amounts of knowledge and experience to be able to support the carers and children. The manager and registered individual between them have vast management experience and oversees policies, procedures and all financial transactions and monitoring. In house supervision is provided for the manager and social work staff on a regular basis, and all staff receive an annual appraisal. The training and development is specifically individually tailored for all staff's future development. The staff team possesses the skills, expertise and qualifications according to their roles and functions. Those staff interviewed demonstrated a sound understanding of their own roles and responsibilities, which are clearly described within contracts and job descriptions. All administration staff have specifically designated roles. Overall, the staff retention is excellent and staff have been in post for a long time. The checks on the

new staff files did not have evidence of a second follow up phone call or suitable photo identification, all older staff files checked contained all the necessary information. The agency carefully select their foster parents to ensure that they have quality foster carers, and the assessment process using the form Fs stays at a high standard by using the agency's social workers who are experienced and skilled to perform this task. The agency tries to ensure that all foster parents attend training and supervision so as to maintain the high quality of provision for the agency. They are able to provide training at the weekends as well as during the day time and on certain evenings to ensure every one is included. The training portfolios for foster carers do not evidence all the training, support groups, conferences that both carers may have attended outside of the agency. The agency's supervision and support is recognised by the foster parents to be of a high standard. Extracts taken from the surveys sent to foster carers: 'offer lots of support, supervision visits are regular'; 'High levels of support'; 'good training programme and the opportunity to do my NVQ 3'; 'offer an excellent service'; and 'social workers really care about the young people'. The agency has a case recording policy, which details the purpose of recording information, and outlines the information to be held on file. Some of the foster carers and children's files were scrutinised and showed a high level of consistency in terms of content and organisation. The content evidenced regular auditing however they sometimes lacked evidence that on completion of all outstanding tasks they were signed and dated. Evidence was seen to support the unannounced visits have taken place and use of different coloured paper to make unannounced visits more visible in the file. There was no unannounced visit system to record this. The administrative records are kept as required, and all significant information relevant to the running of the service was available to be checked. There are key staff responsible for monitoring the quality of the service and recording yearly the outcomes with evidence of improvements made by the young people. The records are stored securely at all times and procedures for managing confidential information are in place.

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
9	ensure the child protection policy and procedure is updated to include all relevant legislation (regulation 12(1)(a)(b))	31 July 2008
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff/foster carers to ensure children are protected (regulation 20(3))	31 May 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure all young people have a healthy care book (NMS 12)
- ensure the matching form clearly identifies any deficiencies and how the agency will meet these (NMS 8)

- ensure panel has access to a medical advisor and male representation is appointed (NMS 30)
- ensure all training is recognised and added to the training portfolios (NMS 23)
- ensure a system is in place to record unannounced visits (NMS 22)

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.