

Community Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Michael Williams
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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

Community Foster Care is an independent foster care agency, established to provide professional foster care for Looked After Children (LAC). It was set up as a limited company in 1999 and is also a registered charity and not-for-profits community business. The agency has a board of trustees that meets regularly to ensure it fulfils the responsibilities of a registered charity. The agency's carers are mainly located in Gloucestershire, but some are now in Swindon as the agency expands into this area. Data for this inspection showed that the agency has 24 approved fostering households providing 32 approved places for children, 25 of these 32 approved places are filled, three vacant and one non-available.

Summary

This key inspection was announced so that an inspection programme could be arranged. All the key national minimum standards for fostering services, and all the Every Child Matters outcomes for children (apart from Achieving economic wellbeing), were inspected. All the outcome areas inspected are judged good. Following the last inspection of the service in January 2007, a responsible individual started working as Chief Executive Officer for the service in March 2007. They have worked hard to use their expertise in fostering and their child-centred approach to provide the agency with a structure and guidelines that clearly show how they meet the standards and regulations for fostering services. Social work staff and foster carers commented that they now feel safer in practice with this responsible individual at the helm. After consolidating the work of the service, the responsible individual plans to develop the service with the appointment of a new foster care manager.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

No statutory requirements were reported following the last inspection of the service in January 2007, when the overall quality rating of the service was also good. Out of the nine pre-inspection surveys received from foster carers, five said that things had changed for the better in the last 12 months, three said things had not changed, and one could not say because they had only just started with the service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

A good service is provided to help each child or young person in foster care to receive health care that meets their needs. The agency's foster placement agreement includes the required information regarding foster children's health needs, and arrangements for giving consent to their medical or dental treatment. Carers ensure that foster children are promptly registered with a local doctor, dentist and optician. Foster children also receive external therapeutic services when necessary. Foster children's 'Health Issues' are a standard item for discussion during foster carers' supervision. First aid training is provided to foster carers on an annual basis. One of the agency's foster carers has significant health input for their foster child with disabilities. This carer has specialist knowledge of children with disabilities and has been supporting another foster carer of a child with disabilities to develop essential lifestyle plans for them. The service is in the process of gathering information (that will be available in children's

case records) on the number of foster children who have had an annual health check. Case tracking showed that one foster child recently placed had received such a check.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was being managed by the responsible individual for the service. They have the appropriate qualifications, skills and experience to manage the agency efficiently, and they are suitable to work with children. They exercise effective leadership of the agency's staff and operation, so that the agency is organised, managed and staffed in a manner that delivers the best possible child care. In July 2007, five months into starting their role, they contacted Ofsted about practice in the agency that was of concern to them. Ofsted therefore requested that they carry out a review of the agency's quality of care (covering all of the matters to be monitored by the registered person). They submitted their report of this review (including details of all the action they had taken in response to their concerns) to Ofsted in August 2007. The agency makes available foster carers who provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. This is achieved through their clearly set out assessment process for prospective carers, which includes all the information required and a health and safety report. Foster carers have preparatory training and annual reviews. The agency ensures that they offer carers to local authorities who represent a good match for the child or young person the local authority is seeking a carer for. Data from the agency showed that most of the children placed with them had care plans. The 'Purpose of Placement' is the first consideration in the agency's written foster placement agreement, which also includes 'Matching considerations'. The agency's responsible individual agreed to ensure that one of the arrangements in this agreement (for approval for foster children to stay overnight away from the foster home) reflects government guidance (2004) on this matter. Carers' terms of approval (as stated in their foster care agreement) match the children placed with them. In the fostering households visited, foster children were well matched with their carers. The agency protects each child or young person placed with them from all forms of abuse. The agency has a Safe Care and Behaviour Management policy that carers follow and receive training on, along with child protection training. The responsible individual for the agency agreed to ensure that their Safe Care Policy also reflects government guidance for approval for foster children to stay away overnight, and government guidance (2007) on disclosure checks for those in a 'foster carer support' role (such as baby-sitters). The agency has notified Ofsted as required about the instigation and outcome of any child protection enquiry involving a child placed with them. Child protection concerns or referrals are managed well by the agency. They protect children and support foster carers when dealing with an allegation. Placing authorities are notified of any absconding by a child placed with foster parents. Managers, staff and carers are demonstrably safe and suitable to work with children. In March 2007, the agency recruited an independent social worker to cover part-time the absence of the registered manager, who planned to leave the agency when the responsible individual started. Inspection of this independent social worker's recruitment record showed that they started with criminal records bureau clearance that was portable, but without a second written reference. However, the responsible individual knew that they did not pose any level of risk to people using the service because they had worked together in their previous employment. The agency was in the process of gathering all the information required on the person they had selected to become their new fostering manager and registered manager applicant. Case tracking showed that there are thorough checks on foster carers as part of their assessment process. When one of the agency's foster carers was previously a local authority foster carer, their approval was subject to some

contact restrictions. The agency agreed to clarify whether or not these restrictions were applicable to their approval with them. All three of the agency's supervisory social workers are qualified and experienced social workers. The agency's placement support worker, who has a teaching but not a social work qualification, is supervised by a qualified social worker. The fostering panel serves children well and can demonstrate good outcomes for children. It is well managed with effective membership who understand the needs of children. The panel is able to maintain independent scrutiny of the fostering service and challenge the service where appropriate. Panel members are subject to relevant checks, and receive induction and ongoing training. The panel was not inspected during the agency's last inspection. It has undergone significant changes since March 2007 under the responsible individual's direction. For example, changes to its membership (including its chair and advisor) and its decision maker. Panel meets frequently and is always quorate. This inspection coincided with the summary of panel business 2007. A fostering household visited commented that there were a lot more panel members than they expected when they attended panel at the end of their approval process.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Community foster care actively use their community networks to seek to recruit carers that can meet the diversity needs of children placed. Its policies and procedures value diversity and equality and the contribution that such an approach makes to the care of children. Diversity is valued in children, carers and staff members. Diversity is one of the matching considerations in foster placement agreements, and any gaps in placement matching are addressed. The agency has carers of foster children with disabilities, and they have linked these carers up to provide additional support. The agency gives a high priority to meeting the educational needs of each child or young person placed, and ensure that they are encouraged to attain their full educational potential. All the school age children in placement attend education, bar two recently placed unaccompanied asylum seekers. Most of them have a personal education plan. Carers support their educational placements and homework. 'Education - Attendance/Engagement/Homework' is a standard item for discussion during foster carers' supervision. In the fostering households visited, all the young people placed were achieving well educationally, with one aiming to go to university. The agency's placement support worker has a teaching qualification and supports children who have issues with educational attendance and achievement.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency gives a high priority to promoting and encouraging foster children's contact with family and friends. Foster children's views and wishes are sought regarding contact arrangements, and contact details are included as required in the agency's foster placement agreement. The fostering households visited were actively supporting the family contact of the young people in placement. The agency ensures that the views of the majority of children and young people placed are the focus of their activity and are promoted and incorporated in what they do. The agency's placement support worker and supervisory social workers see children in placement on a regular basis, and record their comments when they do. However, the agency does not currently offer policies and documents in a user-friendly format for children with disabilities, including verbal communication difficulties. The agency is currently working in partnership with Young Gloucestershire to consult with a group of looked after young people to identify their particular needs relating to youth provision. The agency is setting up a forum for foster

children to let them have their views. Foster children know how to raise any concerns or complaints. The agency had no on-going complaints from children or others. Foster carers visited commented that having an opinion that was listened to was a new experience for their young person in placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

As Ofsted does not consider any of the standards in this outcome area to be key standards, it was not inspected on this occasion.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a clear statement of its aims and objectives which it ensures they meet. The agency's statement of purpose and function was revised in November 2007 as part of an overall revision of its policies, procedures and guidance, and it includes all the information required. Case tracking showed that the agency's associated children's guide is provided to foster children and their carers as soon as they are fostered. However, this guide is not produced in different formats that meet the needs of different groups of children. The agency's organisation and management of staff is good. Staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an efficient and effective foster care service. The agency has had a number of management changes in the last three years, during which time it has not operated with both a full-time, substantive responsible individual and registered manager. At the time of this inspection, the responsible individual was working with a part-time independent social worker (in the absence of a registered manager) to manage and supervise the work of the agency's three supervisory social workers and one placement support worker. Given the agency's current number of carers, there is adequate administrative and clerical back up to enable these staff to carry out their duties in an efficient and effective manner. Staff and carers undertake on-going training (often together), and staff received their revised handbook during this inspection, with the revised handbook for foster carers following. When the agency's full-time, substantive foster care manager starts, the responsible individual will be able to step back from a staff management role to their chief executive officer role. The agency has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff and recruits a range of carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. The agency is small and is being closely managed to ensure that adequate staff cover is maintained at all times. Where a shortfall in staffing occurs, there are contingency plans to resolve the situation (such as a manager covering their work). There is a clearly set out and searching assessment process for carers. Since the responsible individual's arrival, all assessments of potential foster carers are undertaken using the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Form F. This covers all the information required of prospective foster parents and their competence for fostering, and it is audited prior to its submission to panel. The agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers which is put into practice. Management and support of carers is provided by the combination of regular visits from supervisory social and placement support workers, quarterly support groups, an annual training programme (of generic and specialist courses), out-of-hours support, respite care, and annual reviews. The fostering households visited were being supervised at the frequency agreed (fortnightly to monthly) and supervisory visits are recorded. All foster carers' annual reviews are up-to-date and foster care agreements are re-issued as part of this review. Small, self-managing support groups were not running (having started up at the time

of the last inspection), and were going to be reviewed by the incoming foster care manager. The vacant carers' representative position was in the process of being filled. The agency ensures that an up-to-date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care. As part of the responsible individual's review of the agency's quality of care, a new filing system for children's case records has been introduced. There is now a clear and comprehensive list of contents for children's case records, and these records are maintained accordingly. The agency is now sending all relevant records back to the foster child's placing authority when they leave the agency. Foster carers complete running records on foster children, that form part of their case records and inform supervisory social workers' written information for children's LAC reviews. In one case tracked, the agency were waiting for the official minutes of a foster child's LAC review to update the placing authority's plan for their care. The agency's administrative records contain all significant information required. The contents of foster carers' files has also been reviewed, and the agency is in the process of auditing them against the new list of contents. The agency has a full-time administrator and all administrative records are securely stored. At the time of this inspection, the responsible individual was looking into purchasing a computer system to monitor the quality and adequacy of the agency's records, and to identify if remedial action is necessary.

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
15	ensure all the information required is obtained before staff start work at the service (Regulation 20)	31 March 2008

Recommendations

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

- Prepare prospective carers for their attendance at fostering panel (Key NMS 30)
- Develop consultation with children with disabilities (Key NMS 11)
- Produce the children's guide in different formats to meet the needs of different groups of children (Key NMS 1)
- Provide a summary in case records for children of any changes to the placing authority's plan for their care, in advance of receipt of their LAC Review minutes (Key NMS 24)

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.