

Time Out Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Valerie Packham
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Date of last inspection	11 September 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

Time Out is an independent fostering agency in West Sussex.

Since the last inspection in 2006, the agency has worked hard to develop a range of foster placements for children and young people.

Summary

This announced key inspection was undertaken to assess whether the areas of improvement identified at the last inspection had been met. The inspection also examined the agency's ability to meet the key National Minimum Standards. Achieving Economic Wellbeing was not inspected.

Time Out has made great strides since the last inspection and this is a good service in most respects. The numerous recommendations and requirements made at the previous inspection have been attended to. More carers have been recruited and there are a number of children in placement. Members of the senior management team are approachable, knowledgeable and responsive to feedback.

The complex needs of children and young people are being met. The views of children and young people are respected. Children and young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster placements.

Carers are happy with the service and feel well supported. One action has been made to ensure the panel is quorate. Recommendations have been made regarding the development of personalised safe caring guidelines, the removal of some information from agency documentation and for carers to be supervised by qualified social workers.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Action has been taken to meet the requirements and recommendations that were made at the last inspection. Full recruitment information and checks are undertaken, with references verified. Independent social work staff employed by the agency to undertake the assessment of foster carers have the relevant experience and are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC). Carers records are kept for at least three years from refusal or withdrawal. All assessments on prospective carers are detailed, with any queries raised in references followed up as part of the assessments. An up to date version of the British Adoption and Fostering Agency (BAAF) Form F is being used when assessing carers and carers sign and date their assessments.

The Chair and the Vice Chair of the panel have specific job descriptions. The agency decision maker does not attend panel meetings. Notices of approval are issued and foster care agreements are used. Carers, children and placing authority's views are obtained when undertaking reviews. Any transport provided by foster carers is checked during the assessment stage and at reviews.

Arrangements for respite have been included in the policies and procedures. The supervision process of carers is described in the policies and procedures. The majority of policies and procedures are in line with practice.

The children's guide has been produced in a more child-friendly format and includes details on how to complain.

The responsible individual and the registered manager have researched their responsibilities under the Protection of Children Act (POCA) 1999.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Health issues are discussed with prospective carers during their assessments and at preparation training. Healthy eating, exercise and any health issues are covered in supervision, as required. The agency requests health information from placing authorities at referral to facilitate the matching process. Foster carers are informed of the young people's health details, which enables them to provide a good standard of care and support. The agency is proactive in working with a looked after children's nurse to ensure health assessments and health care plans are completed.

Comprehensive policies and procedures are in place on a wide selection of health matters and on health and safety. Guidance is provided to foster carers on health care through training sessions and the foster carer's handbook.

The agency ensures carers attend basic first aid training. Children and young people are registered with their local GP, dentist and optician, and annual health assessments are completed. The agency has records of signed consent from the relevant person for medical treatment to be provided to the children and young people in placement.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Safeguarding is a priority for the agency and its foster carers. Foster carers and the agency staff place importance upon obtaining detailed information about the children and young people in order to meet their needs and to protect them from harm. Action is taken in order to seek any missing information. There is a safe caring policy in place and carers have basic safe caring guidelines. These would benefit from being individualised further in order to safeguard everyone in each household.

Health and safety is checked as part of the assessment process and is regularly reviewed. Health and safety training is provided to foster carers.

The senior management of the agency are experienced and highly qualified, with foster carers speaking highly of the support provided by the team. All staff and carers are safe and suitable to work with children. Fostering assessments are undertaken by independent social workers. An appropriate recruitment process is in place for these workers. Recruitment practices are comprehensive and thorough.

Staff show an awareness of the importance of appropriately matching children with carers in order to achieve the best possible outcome. Children and young people are highly complimentary and their comments include, 'I'm looked after properly...', and 'the foster carers care about

me'. By taking a vigilant approach to the matching process, each child is placed with a carer capable of meeting assessed needs.

Carers are provided with written information on caring for children who have been abused and how to protect them from any type of abuse. This is also discussed during preparation training and is further explored in post-approval child protection training courses. Carers are aware that corporal punishment is unacceptable. The agency provides carers with information on behaviour management.

Professionals and carers are sensitive to and aware of the effects of bullying on children and understand that fostered children may be at risk of bullying. An appropriate written procedure is in place for use if a foster child is missing from home. Foster carers know how to respond to concerns or allegations. The foster carer handbook details behaviour management strategies as well as providing guidance on acceptable and unacceptable sanctions.

A fostering panel meeting was not attended during this inspection. The panel has a varied combination of independent members, who bring a great deal of knowledge and experience. A thorough recruitment procedure is followed when recruiting panel members. Panel recruitment records contain the necessary checks and references. All panel minutes demonstrate the panel is professional in its approach. Panel provides a robust quality assurance function regarding the assessment of applicants and with carers' annual reviews. However, on one occasion in 2007, the panel should not have undertaken any business as no agency social worker was present. Although this was a breach of Regulation 25, it did not impact on the wellbeing of any child or young person. Otherwise, the fostering panel serves children well and demonstrates good outcomes for children.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children are provided with placements that meet their diverse needs. The service actively seeks to recruit carers that can meet the diverse needs of children. The agency values diversity and promotes meeting the specific needs of each young person. Preparation training covers the need to provide care which respects each child's background. A comprehensive assessment process considers diversity with prospective carers. This is to ensure they will be able to meet the complex needs of children and young people. The foster panel is composed of a diverse section of society. Carers are given an equal opportunities policy and the promoting equality and valuing diversity policy. Any particular needs are carefully considered as part of the matching process. Post approval training is provided to carers on equality and diversity.

Children and young people are empowered to develop skills to help them deal with all forms of discrimination.

The education of children and young people is seen as high priority by the agency. Some members of the senior management team are experienced education professionals, with close links to a local education project. Foster carers support the children and young people with their schooling. If necessary, young people are supported in changing schools, so that their needs are met appropriately. Foster carers attend personal education plan meetings, parents/carers evenings and education reviews. Training is provided to carers on the education of looked after children.

Children and young people are encouraged to try out new hobbies and activities. The service has a flexible approach to out-of-school learning which allows a child to follow an interest, succeed and make a positive contribution to their community. Children are supported to continue with any previous leisure activities they may wish to continue. New opportunities for enjoying and achieving are also promoted.

The agency is not providing a short-term break service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency understands the importance of children and young people having contact, providing it is set out in the care plan and foster placement agreement. Contact arrangements are discussed at the time of placement and on an ongoing basis. Staff and foster carers promote contact arrangements where appropriate.

Children and young people know how to raise any concerns or make a complaint. As one young person emphatically emphasised, 'Yes, I do know how to make a complaint'. The children's guide informs children and young people how to raise concerns and complaints. The website is a further resource on their right to complain. A children's rights link and a children's legal centre link are accessible by young people from the Time Out website.

Children and young people are consulted over all matters that affect them. Children and young people are supported to make their views known as part of the foster carers' annual reviews. Their responses are taken into account by the fostering panel and are used by the agency to develop their services. Children and young people are also supported in expressing their views at their statutory reviews.

Carers receive training on communicating effectively with children. Carers understand the importance of being able to interact appropriately with children and young people. Children's views are respected by staff and carers. Referring to a foster carer, one young person said, 'When I talk she listens'.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a registered manager who is a qualified social worker. The registered manager and the responsible individual have both obtained the NVQ Level 5 qualification in management. The manager is to be commended on exceeding the required qualification at Level 4. The directors and the manager all have the necessary business and management skills and financial expertise to manage the work efficiently. Foster carers appreciate staff offering a personal touch. As one carer said, 'It is a friendly, warm, caring agency'.

Carers feel supported knowing that a member of the agency team is always available to talk to them by telephone. The manager and the directors staff the out of hours telephone service, which is appropriate, given the small size of the agency.

The recruitment policy aims to recruit a range of carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Assessments of prospective carers are detailed and thorough. There is a training plan in place for the training and development of all staff and foster carers. All carers attend preparation, post approval and in-service training. Training programmes reflect the policies of the fostering service and have been drawn up for the next two years. Carers are consulted as to the most suitable dates and times for training, to facilitate attendance and are asked to evaluate training to inform future training. All carers are given a handbook which contains policies, procedures, guidance, legal information and insurance details.

The Statement of Purpose sets out the aims and objectives of the agency. The information is also available on the agency website. Time Out does not provide a 'support care service' therefore all documentation, including the Statement of Purpose needs to be reviewed and amended. The children's guide has information about what the agency sets out to do and it includes information on rights and how to complain.

The agency maintains clear records for the young people and the foster carers. Files are in very good order and are stored securely. Foster care agreements outline what is expected of the agency and the carers. The manager is proactive in requesting any outstanding paperwork from placing social workers. Carers are paid promptly and the agency pays for them to be members of the Fostering Network. Information about respite care is clearly documented. Carers' know and understand the policy on respite care.

There is strategy for working with carers that is documented and understood. Supervision is a means of developing carers' skills and to provide them with support. One carer commented, '...offer proactive hands on support...' Supervision is an opportunity for the agency to review the carers' work on a regular basis. Carers understand the role of the supervising social worker and are aware of the need for occasional unannounced visits. The agency ensures all carers receive one unannounced visit per year. Not all approved foster carers are supervised by a qualified social worker and instead receive supervision from other child care professionals. This has not however, had a detrimental effect on carers or young people.

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
30	ensure all foster panels are conducted with the required composition of members (Regulation 25(1))	11 August 2008

Recommendations

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

- review and revise safe caring guidelines to ensure they are personalised for each household (NMS 9.3)

- consider supervising foster carers with an appropriately qualified social worker (NMS 22.3)
- review and amend documentation to remove any information on support care (NMS 1)