

Freedom Fostering

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

Freedom Fostering is a limited company operating as an independent fostering agency. It was established in 2002 by a group of social workers, foster carers and teachers. The agency was first registered in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 on 18 December 2003. At the time of the inspection Freedom Fostering supports 13 foster families who care for 12 children and young people.

Summary

During this full inspection which was announced all key standards were inspected. The inspection focussed on arrangements to safeguard children and young people's welfare, meet their individual needs and enable them to have a say in their day to day care. All areas of the Every Child Matters framework were assessed. Freedom Fostering is judged as good overall and performs strongly in all outcome areas.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Freedom Fostering has been inspected on two occasions since May 2007. The first inspection was a key inspection. The second inspection focussed solely on the fostering panel. These improvements address requirements and recommendations from both inspections. The agency was required to record evidence of remedial works to foster carers' homes following health and safety checks, to carry out risk assessments for all children and young people placed and to seek verification of why an applicant's previous employment ended where their duties had included working with children or vulnerable adults. These matters have all been addressed. They provide improved safeguards for children and young people from harm, neglect or abuse. The agency was required to put in place foster placement and foster care agreements which include all the matters required. This has been achieved, ensuring foster carers are fully aware of their responsibilities in relation to their role as foster carers for the agency and as foster carers for specific children and young people. The agency is not ensuring that the foster placement agreement is in place before the beginning of every placement. This could undermine the foster carer's understanding of their role and responsibilities in relation to particular placements in the interim until the agreement is put in place. The agency was further required to develop systems to monitor educational outcomes and attendance. These are in place and are supporting improved practice in relation to education. There were some shortfalls in relation to record keeping and the return of records at the conclusion of a child or young person's placement. These are now fully compliant and contribute to effective record management. The agency has addressed requirements to improve the clarity of proposals in assessments of applicants to foster and reasons for recommendations from the panel. These assist improved decision making by the fostering panel and the agency decision maker. Despite efforts to acquire a Criminal Records Bureau check (CRB) for the chair of panel, the agency is still depending on a CRB generated by their main employer. This has the potential to undermine measures to ensure those working with children and young people are safe to do so. Recommendations to improve the quality of assessments and the membership of the fostering panel have been met. This results in improved quality of decision making by the fostering panel. Recommendations to improve the matching tool, the safer caring policies, unannounced visits

and risk assessments for contact have been met and increase safeguards for the wellbeing of children and young people. The remaining recommendations relating to records of foster carers' supervision, the delineation of roles in the agency, updated guidance on fostering allowances, the strategy for supporting foster carers and the whistle blowing policy have been addressed increasing the organisational strength of the agency.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Freedom Fostering ensures it provides services which help each child and young person to receive health care which meets their needs for physical, emotional and social development. The agency's good practice results in improved health outcomes for children and young people. The agency gathers sufficient information prior to placement to identify the health needs of the child or young person. This ensures that the agency places children or young people with foster carers who are able to meet these needs. Foster carers register children and young people with primary care health professionals without delay. These practices ensure that children and young people are able to receive the medical care and attention they require as soon as they are placed. The agency trains foster carers in a wide range of areas relating to physical and emotional health. This is supported by guidance in the foster carers' handbook. Foster carers attend individualised training relating to the specific health needs of children or young people placed with them. Foster carers are aware of their responsibility to support the work of health professionals with the children and young people. This includes working with paediatricians and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. This ensures children and young people are benefiting from the interventions of skilled health professionals. Foster carers encourage children and young people to develop healthy life styles and eating habits. Staff from the agency support foster carers to understand the psychological function of food for some children and young people. This is effective in reducing dependence on food for emotional comfort. Foster carers maintain an ongoing health record for each child or young person placed with them. They share this with the children and young people to involve them in their health management. This helps to prepare them for managing their health in adulthood. The health record provides a comprehensive record of health interventions to assist health planning. The agency works directly with children and young people to support their emotional wellbeing. This includes direct work on anger management. This work is contributing to placement stability for children and young people by providing them with the tools to cope with their anger. Foster carers and the agency contribute to strategic health planning. They provide information to the child or young person's social worker and statutory reviews on progress and issues relating to health. As a consequence, health planning is consistent and goals are met.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Freedom Fostering employ good practices and procedures to keep children and young people safe. The agency ensures children and young people are placed in safe homes. Annual health and safety checks and unannounced visits monitor the safety and practices within and around the home. Foster carers receive training to increase their knowledge of how to manage environmental risk. As a rule, foster carers keep medication in a locked cabinet. However, this is not always adhered to and could place children and young people at risk from unsupervised access to medication. Homes visited during the inspection were warm and welcoming. Children and young people see the homes as their own and are able to personalise their rooms. They

appear at ease in their foster homes. Children and young people feel safe in their homes which increases the likelihood of placement stability. Freedom Fostering gathers full information on children and young people who are referred to them. This enables them to make careful matches of children and young people to foster carers who are able to meet their needs. This process is supported by improved matching and risk assessment documents which focus the task on identifying good matches and ways to meet any gaps in matching. The agency consults children and young people who are already in a foster home before making another placement. Careful matching and risk assessment ensures children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their assessed needs and provide nurturing, stable homes for them. Where possible, children and young people have introductions to their new foster home over a period of time. The foster carers and the agency make efforts to ease the initial transition for those who have had to move in an emergency. Children and young people receive introductory letters from foster carers. This eases the transition and results in the children and young people becoming quickly settled even when placed in an emergency. Comprehensive foster placement agreements are now routinely in place before the start of each placement. This results in consistent practice and clear responsibilities in relation to each placement. However, the agency is not ensuring that the foster placement agreement is in place at the outset of every placement. As a result foster carers could fail to fully understand their role and responsibilities with regard to the specific placement until the agreement is in place. The agency protects children and young people from neglect and abuse through its child protection procedures. Staff are competent to apply the procedures and ensure foster carers are aware of their roles and responsibilities to protect children and young people. Training, supervision and guidance is provided to staff and foster carers to support their practice. This ensures that there is no delay in referring child protection matters appropriately to prevent children and young people suffering continued abuse or neglect. Foster carers protect children and young people in their homes by using safer caring policies. They share these with children, young people and their social workers and review them when a new child or young person is placed in the home. Children and young people understand the need to adhere to the guidance to protect themselves. Likewise, foster carers understand that safer caring practices afford them and the children and young people protection from abuse and allegations. This contributes to the child or young person's sense of security in the foster home. The agency has effective staff recruitment and vetting procedures to ensure staff are suitable to work with children and young people and have the necessary qualifications and experience to do so. Staff undertake a programme of induction and probation to ensure they are familiar with procedures to safeguard children and young people. Annual appraisals are undertaken to assess whether staff remain suitable to fulfil their roles. The panel members are vetted in the same way as all staff in the agency. Although the agency requested a CRB for the panel chair some time ago, its return has been delayed. The chair has continued in their role in the meantime. The chair does have a clear CRB recently generated by their main employer and has been subject to all other checks. However, the lack of a CRB specifically commissioned by Freedom Fostering has the potential to undermine the safeguards afforded by comprehensive staff vetting. The independent fostering panel is effective in evaluating the suitability of applicants to be foster carers and monitoring the quality of assessments completed by social workers. The panel membership is diverse and reflects a wide range of backgrounds and experience. The agency has appointed to the roles of independent members with child health and education backgrounds and is awaiting the outcome of vetting checks on the individuals. The panel chair is very experienced in the provision of social care for children and young people. The chair leads and manages discussion effectively to ensure decisions are based on full information and discussion. The fostering panel has developed its quality assurance

role. There are tools and lines of communication in place to support this function. The quality of work presented to the panel is steadily improving. This contributes to improved decision making about the suitability of candidates to foster. The chair produces an annual report on the work of panel and identifies areas for improvement in the agency. This is a useful tool in guiding the agency to continually improve the quality of its work and foster carers. The agency has introduced a new policy to cover decision making when all members of the panel are not in agreement. However it is confused and is not sufficient to guide panel effectively in these circumstances. This has the potential to undermine the quality of decision making. Freedom Fostering seeks to assess foster carers thoroughly, to test their suitability through rigorous discussion in panel and their continued suitability through reviews, health and safety checks and unannounced visits. The agency seeks to ensure staff and panel members are safe to work with children and young people through sound recruitment and vetting practices. The agency takes measures to ensure children and young people are placed with the right foster carers and that risk in placements is managed. The policies and procedures of the agency support these tasks effectively.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Freedom Fostering has good practices to engage children and young people in activities to increase their self-esteem and participation, to value their diversity and to promote their education. The agency places most children and young people with foster carers with similar backgrounds and cultures who can support their identity and understanding of their birth culture. Where children and young people are placed with foster carers who do not wholly match their ethnicity or religion, plans are put in place to support foster carers to meet their needs. Additional support, training and advice is provided and children and young people are offered opportunities to spend time with staff, foster carers or family who reflect their own heritage. In this way the agency supports the development of the children and young people's identity and self-esteem. The agency is developing its expertise on providing care for children and young people with disability. A member of staff has been recruited with a significant background in disability. They are able to advise foster carers and staff. Training is provided for foster carers who have specific needs to meet in relation to disability. The agency has good insight into the impact of discrimination on outcomes for children and young people and is successful in building the confidence of all children and young people to meet the challenges presented by discrimination. Foster carers value education and are aware of their responsibility to support the education of each child or young person placed with them. They support children and young people's education through attendance at education meetings, liaison with schools and assisting children and young people with homework and study needs. The agency provides additional tutoring to all children sitting Standard Attainment Tests. It also provides educational support and tutoring in response to specific need. This includes reintegrating children and young people into educational settings and supporting children and young people with additional learning needs. The agency has developed a monitoring system for education matters which allows it to develop practice in this area. Children and young people placed with Freedom Fostering achieve improved outcomes in education. The input of foster carers and the agency enables children and young people to have stable educational placements. This is a significant contributory factor in improved long term outcomes for those children and young people.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Freedom Fostering provides good opportunities for children and young people to influence their day to day care. The agency establishes clear, recorded arrangements for contact at the outset of placements. Children and young people live with foster carers who are able to support their particular arrangements. Foster carers support particularly onerous and complex contact arrangements. Supervising social workers provide assistance in managing the physical arrangements for contact and its emotional impact. The agency ensures foster carers understand the importance of maintaining links with children and young people's birth families where possible. Foster carers make outstanding efforts to build emotional attachment between children and their parents. Foster carers speak respectfully of birth families and the difficulties they may also face. Foster carers keep records of the outcome of contact which are shared with the child or young person's social worker. This assists in making positive, safe arrangements for contact. These practices allow children and young people to retain relationships with those who are important to them and support the development of their emotional resilience. Freedom Fostering ensures that children and young people's opinions are sought over all issues which are likely to affect their daily life and future. The agency provides forums and newsletters for children and young people to engage them through play and discussion in giving their views and opinions on how they are cared for. Supervising social workers meet regularly with children and young people. Children and young people are comfortable and confident with the supervising social workers and in the offices of the agency. The views of children and young people and birth children are sought for foster carers' annual reviews and statutory reviews. This allows them to participate in decision making about their day to day care. Children and young people feel their opinions are listened to and changes made to reflect them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Freedom Fostering has improved its services to young people moving towards adulthood. Foster carers attend training on meeting the needs of young people leaving care. They work with their supervising social workers to identify areas for development of young people's independence skills. The agency provides workshops for young people on areas such as money management. All children and young people have bank accounts and are supported to manage their money by foster carers. Foster carers support the development of domestic, social and employment skills. Young people who have moved successfully into independent or semi-independent placements are welcomed back to visit their foster carers and receive emotional support from them. The work to build the skills and confidence of young people and to continue emotional support after independence increases the likelihood of successful transitions to independence.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Freedom Fostering has a clear Statement of Purpose and children's guide. These assist good placement decisions by placing officers. Children and young people understand what the agency does and how to make their views heard. The agency regularly monitors and assesses its performance against the Statement of Purpose to identify areas for development and ways to build on improvements in the quality of care. This results in positive changes to the service the agency provides. There is a clear management structure within the organisation. This has been subject to some rearrangements over the past few months due to the departure of the registered manager. However, the agency has managed this period well and ensured that suitable people have been responsible for the management of the service. The standard of service delivery has

not been adversely affected. Foster carers feel the quality of service offered by the agency has improved significantly over the last year. This has resulted in increased levels of satisfaction for children, young people and foster carers. The agency has excellent practice in recruiting foster carers from a diverse range of backgrounds to meet the needs of potential placements. Assessments of applicants to foster are improving, assisting the fostering panel and the agency decision maker in making better decisions about the suitability of applicants. Annual reviews of foster carers' continued suitability are comprehensive and identify areas for development. They assist foster carers to continually improve their practice. Supervising social workers also undertake annual appraisals to identify learning needs. The agency provides a very extensive training programme for foster carers and social workers. The agency is successfully introducing the Children's Workforce Development Council training standards to the foster carers. Foster carers also study for the National Vocational Qualification Level 3 in caring for children and young people. Good quality training assists staff and foster carers to work effectively and consistently with children and young people. There are adequate numbers of suitably qualified staff to ensure foster carers are supported around the clock. Foster carers are clear about how to access support when they need it. Generally they use it appropriately to support their placements. Staff are provided with good quality supervision through a number of forums which support their day to day practice with the foster carers. It also increases their knowledge and understanding of current developments in practice, legislation and research. Consequently, supervising social workers continually develop their understanding of the fostering task. The agency ensures that foster carers receive regular supervision to support them in their work with the children and young people. Foster carers maintain comprehensive records. They attend training on record keeping and caring for children and young people's memorabilia. Their records contribute to a comprehensive record of the child or young person's time in care. The standard of administrative support in the agency is excellent. This ensures the records maintained by the agency are in good order and support the fostering task. The good organisational and management practices of the agency underpin good outcomes in all areas of the Every Child Matters framework.

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
8	ensure before making a placement, the responsible authority enters into a written agreement (in these regulations referred to as the "foster placement agreement") with the foster parent relating to the child (Regulation 34(3))	31 October 2008
30	ensure full and satisfactory information is available in relation to persons working for the purposes of the fostering service. In particular, the chair of panel should not sit again until the Criminal Records Bureau check commissioned by the agency has been received. (Regulation 20(3)(d)(i), Schedule 1)	31 October 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering home and immediate environment are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm in relation to the storage of medicine (National Minimum Standard 6.6)
- ensure the written procedures for the fostering panel cover decision-making when all members of the panel are not in agreement. (National Minimum Standard 30.2)

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.