

# Quality Fostering Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Sharon Treadwell
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	27 June 2007

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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**

Quality Fostering Ltd is an independent fostering agency based in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. The agency recruits, assesses, approves and supervises foster carers to provide a range of placement options for young people aged from birth to 18 years. Placements are commissioned by a number of local authorities. The agency has established its own fostering panel to consider all foster carer applications. At the time of this inspection the agency has eight active foster carer households providing placements to ten young people.

### **Summary**

During this inspection the inspector visited, and spoke to, a number of foster carers and young people in placement and others were consulted through questionnaires. The overall quality rating, as a result of this inspection, is satisfactory but it is notable that this agency has commendable commitment to providing well-matched and lasting placements and is able to demonstrate some extremely positive outcomes, in terms of the achievement of permanence and stability, particularly for young people with very disruptive placement histories.

There are a number of requirements and recommendations within this report but these do not detract from the fact that young people say that they feel happy, safe and well cared for by their foster carers and that the carers say that they feel valued and confident in the agency's capacity to support them in providing this care: 'value based organisation'; 'positive working relationships'; 'my opinions are listened to'; 'the management of this service is excellent'. Placing social workers are equally confident in the capacity of the placements provided to promote positive outcomes for young people: 'I cannot overstate how pleased I have been with the agency's very high standards of care'; 'There is a good ethos and service delivery is extremely supportive, caring and, most of all, focussed on the young person as an individual'.

The agency must review its staffing complement to provide the capacity for an improved management focus on ensuring that all elements of the National Minimum Standards are fully met and that the agency's systems and practices fully support its very positive placement record. The implementation of a post-approval training programme, which meets the requirements of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards, must be a priority.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

The previous inspection of the service was the first following initial registration. At the time of that inspection the agency had only two approved foster carer households and only one young person in placement. The agency has grown at the providers' predicted rate over the last two years.

As a result of the previous inspection five actions were identified. The agency has improved its capacity for obtaining initial health information by introducing its own pro-forma, which placing social workers are strongly encouraged to complete. All carers have now been provided with lockable storage to ensure that confidential records are safely stored.

Two actions related to the inadequacy of the employment information, retained by the agency, in relation to sessional workers. The information held still does not meet regulatory requirements and a further action has been made. A recommendation was also made reflecting the need for the agency to increase staffing levels, proportionate to the functions of the agency, as it expanded. Arrangements are now in place for a suitably qualified worker to deputise in the manager's absence. This arrangement is on a sessional basis but the individual is a member of the panel so has good knowledge of agency practice. The Registered Manager remains the only permanent employee but the use of sessional social workers has been refined with only one worker, in addition to the manager, providing carer support. This worker is currently employed for three days each week and this has allowed positive relationships to develop and provided carers with consistency.

Eight additional recommendations were made during the previous inspection. The majority of these have been appropriately addressed. The agency has introduced a pro-forma record, which carers are appropriately completing, for the recording of any restraints of young people. Only one restraint has occurred and the record clearly demonstrates that this was prompted by the need to safeguard the young person. The agency is not always ensuring carers' appropriate access to restraint training, particularly where young people's care histories indicate the potential for them to need to be physically restrained. A recommendation has been made, within this report, for the agency to urgently address training shortfalls. Whilst recognising that a significant financial commitment has recently been made, in enrolling all carers onto the Open University National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 course, a post-approval training programme is still needed, both to meet National Minimum Standards requirements and to address particular carer training needs in relation to young people in placement.

The agency has recently redesigned its guides for young people and has involved several fostered young people in this process. The new guides are excellent. The agency complaints procedure is now wholly appropriate and provides good clarity for carers, young people and others in how to make a complaint. Complaints are addressed in a timely and professional manner.

The agency has relocated to new office premises since the last inspection. The new office is in a multi-occupancy building and is appropriately equipped as an office base. The agency hires a room at a local hotel for meetings of the fostering panel and for initial carer training events. Within the office complex the agency is able to negotiate usage of additional rooms should this be necessary.

Two recommendations have not been implemented. The agency is not providing carers with written information detailing their responsibility to implement structured independence planning and preparation programmes for young people nearing the time when they will cease to be looked after. Carers are not provided with post-approval training to equip them to fulfil these responsibilities. The agency does not differentiate appropriately between complaints and allegations, particularly in the written information provided to carers. The agency must make more detailed guidance available to foster carers on the procedure for their neutral suspension from fostering, in the event of serious allegations being made against them, pending the outcome of any investigation, and the support arrangements for them during this time.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is satisfactory.

The agency has introduced a health record pro-forma and encourages placing social workers to provide full health history information, on this form, when requesting a foster placement. Foster carers have good awareness of young people's individual health needs and are prompting young people to eat healthily and get plenty of exercise. Young people confirm this: 'The things that keep me healthy are mummy, fruit, milk, walking to school'; 'trampolining gives you energy and gym gives me big bones and strong muscles'. The agency has developed its own pro-forma for obtaining signed consent to medical treatment but is not always using it, relying instead on Looked After Children (LAC) paperwork and this is not always appropriately completed to provide the necessary consents. The absence of signed consent to medical treatment can render the carer unable to make routine health care arrangements, provide first aid or administer medication.

Carers are working well, with various specialist health professionals, to develop their skills to meet young people's specific needs and young people have good access to mental health and other specialist services. An educational psychologist and a health visitor are members of the fostering panel and provide good physical and mental health expertise in considering carer approvals.

The agency provides carers with good information about their responsibilities in respect of promoting young people's good health and about recording requirements. Carers complete monthly summaries, which have a dedicated section on health, and are retaining appropriate records when they administer medication. None of the agency's current foster carers have received first aid training and carers do not currently have appropriate access to specific training relating to the individual needs of the young people they have placed, for example visual impairment. Although carers are retaining records relating to the health of young people placed, they have not been supplied with a dedicated record, which is updated during placement and able to move with the young person. Some young people's annual health checks are overdue but carers are rightly raising this through young people's LAC reviews and are requesting that appointments are made in a more timely way.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is good.

The foster homes visited provide comfortable accommodation for the young people placed and the carers demonstrate good awareness of their responsibilities to promote young people's development and keep them safe. The foster carer recruitment and approval process is extremely thorough. The agency uses the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) form F assessment and carer assessment reports are completed to a very high standard. As part of this inspection process the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has confirmed that it has no concerns about the practices of this agency. Placing social workers say that the agency's carers have excellent awareness of the need to prioritise young people's safety and that they closely follow care plans. Placing social workers have made some very positive comments about carers' commitment to young people: 'A high degree of professionalism and integrity'; 'He loves this home and is able to enjoy the many aspects of just being a child, which were previously denied to him'.

Foster carers are provided with appropriate written guidelines in respect of managing and recording instances of bullying and young people going missing from the foster home and with good examples of what sanctions are permissible in managing young people's presenting

behaviours. The written guidelines fully clarify that corporal punishment is unacceptable. The agency provides all carers with comprehensive, written safe caring guidelines but these are general rather than individualised guidelines and do not reflect the particular home circumstances or the individual circumstances of the young people accommodated. Although carers' pre-approval training includes coverage of safe care and child protection there is no post-approval training programme to ensure that their knowledge in these areas is regularly updated. Where young people's behaviours have caused them to be physically restrained, for their own safety, the agency has not always sought appropriate training for the carer. Appropriate health and safety checks are undertaken to ensure that carer households constitute a safe environment for young people.

The agency undertakes a very thorough and robust matching process, which carefully considers young people's individual needs in relation to identity, culture, religious beliefs and disability as well as taking account of arrangements for contact with their birth family. Risk assessment is an integral element of this process and any transracial placements demonstrate good consideration of the carer's capacity to meet the young person's needs. Young people say that they are happy in their placements and feel safe and well cared for. The agency makes it clear to carers that they must encourage their extended family to be inclusive of the young people they foster. The agency is able to demonstrate very good placement stability and placements have been confirmed as permanent for a number of young people who have previously experienced a large number of placement disruptions.

The inspector did not attend a fostering panel but did meet with the panel chair and read the minutes of the last three fostering panels. The agency has a confident and competent panel. Clear panel guidelines ensure that members are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities. The independent panel chair brings a wealth of relevant experience to her role and has a sound knowledge of agency practices and of the role of the panel in monitoring these. Panel members have a good range of expertise and experience and panel minutes reflect very thorough consideration of all fostering applications and close scrutiny of assessment reports. The use of an independent panel advisor promotes the transparency of the panel process. There are currently only eight panel members and the agency is seeking to recruit two more. Panel minutes do not currently clarify that the panel advisor and the panel administrator are not voting members and one member is incorrectly listed as independent since he is employed, on a sessional basis, by the agency. The panel members received initial training and the panel chair details that a debriefing session is held at the end of each session to consider any learning experiences. The agency has recently instituted annual appraisals for panel members and is aware of the need to provide further panel training opportunities.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is good.

The agency is endeavouring to recruit foster carers from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and initial carer training incorporates full consideration of equality and diversity issues. Currently no post-approval training is provided to address any additional training needs carers may have in relation to meeting the individual needs of young people placed. Placing social workers have made some positive comments about work undertaken with young people, by their carers, in helping them to understand differences between people and in reducing their propensity to make potentially racist comments.

Both agency files and carers' own records contain all relevant education information such as statements of special educational needs, personal education plans (PEP) and school reports. Carers are very committed to promoting young people's educational achievement and both carers and agency social workers attend any educational meetings scheduled by young people's schools. Carers' records demonstrate that they provide young people with good access to a wide range of leisure and sporting activities and encourage them to become involved within their local community by joining local groups such as the sea cadets. The dedication of some carers, to encouraging young people's educational success, has resulted in notable improvements in young people's attitudes to education and some significant achievements: 'I go to every lesson now so I can get a good job'.

The agency supports its carers well in meeting young people's educational needs and there are examples of sound support systems being negotiated, for carers and young people, where young people have been without a full time school placement. Placing social workers confirm that young people's education is well prioritised by the agency and its carers: 'When a child was unable to access formal education the agency sourced extra funding to support educational activities'; 'The carers have introduced the child to many new activities and increased his confidence'.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

The arrangements for young people to have contact with their birth families are carefully considered in matching them to a foster placement. Carers are supporting young people well to maintain agreed contacts. Some young people are unhappy with their current contact arrangements and their views are being appropriately represented, in their LAC reviews, for consideration by their placing authorities. Carers are not always fully aware of the role of the local authority children's rights officer, who may be helpful to young people in such situations. Some young people have designated advocates and this supports them in making their views heard. Some carers have developed very positive relationships with young people's birth families and this encourages positive experiences of contact for the young people concerned and, in some cases has helped the young people to understand why they are unable to live within their birth family. Some carers have been involved with social workers in helping young people complete some very good life story work.

The agency has a clear and appropriate complaints process. One complaint has been received since the previous inspection and records demonstrate a timely and thorough investigation. The complaints process is clearly summarised for young people in the young people's guides. Young people feel listened to and are able to list a range of people they can speak to if they are unhappy.

The agency has recently redesigned its guides for young people. There are two guides catering for different age ranges. Four young people aged 5 to 16 years have been involved in designing the guides, which include a range of excellent information in an attractive, child-friendly format. The guide for children under eight is particularly impressive, being in the format of a story about a little girl who is fostered, and both guides incorporate some wonderful drawings done by the young people.

Currently, when undertaking annual reviews of its carers, the agency is not directly securing the views of young people in placement. Their views are only being represented through the



carer's supervising social worker. The views of the carer's children are not being obtained at all when annual reviews are undertaken. Supervising social workers regularly speak with young people in placement when they visit carers. Carers and placing social workers consider this to be a very child-centred fostering agency.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The agency confirms that all its carers are paid in accordance with the government minimum allowance guidelines. Carers are provided with very clear written information about pocket money and clothing allowance provision for young people in placement.

Carers are working well to develop young people's social and life skills and there are demonstrated improvements in young people's confidence and competence. This is recognised and valued by placing social workers: 'He is treated as an individual and his age and level of understanding guides the carers' responses'; 'The carers work well with other professionals to fully promote the young person's future success'. Placing social workers also reflect on the good work done by some carers in helping young people to understand finances through encouraging them to open bank accounts and by promoting saving thus increasing their confidence about future possibilities.

Although carers are clearly promoting young people's personal development extremely well, and helping them to make positive transitions into adulthood, the agency has not provided any written information for its carers to clarify what is expected of them in terms of preparing young people for independence. There is no post-approval training to enable carers to provide young people with effective support and guidance in preparing to move into independent or semi-independent living. Such training is of particular importance for those caring for young people with specific disabilities if they are to encourage those young people to achieve their full potential. Where young people are eligible to have pathway plans, the young people and their carers have been actively involved in compiling these plans. Older young people spoken to are clear about their future plans and are happy with them. Foster carers are generally supporting young people's further and continued education or, where they wish to move into the world of work, promoting the completion of vocational qualifications.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

The Registered Manager of Quality Fostering is one of its director's and is the only current permanent employee. His suitability to manage the agency has been confirmed through the Ofsted registration process. Three qualified workers, employed on a regular sessional basis, provide assessment and support for foster carers, cover for the manager in his absence and provide some out of hours duty cover and input into initial carer training. The employment records, retained in relation to these sessional workers, are inadequate. The agency is now growing steadily and the manager is very aware of the need to recruit permanent social work staff. Some of the shortfalls identified, particularly in this section of the report, demonstrate the need for a more robust management focus on organisational issues to ensure that the agency's capacity to demonstrate that the National Minimum Standards are met equals its capacity to demonstrate positive outcomes for young people in placement.

The agency's Statement of Purpose provides some good detail about the services provided but does not incorporate information about the number of complaints received and their outcomes nor does it include information about the agency's management structure and staff. The young people's guides have recently been redesigned with the help of a group of fostered young people. The guides are excellent and provide a good range of information in an easily accessed format.

The manager is very actively involved in service provision and details that he regularly joins an independent group of social work practitioners to monitor the quality of the service against Best Practice. The fostering panel provides a good independent quality assurance monitoring role. The manager confirms that there are proper financial procedures in place which are overseen by the Company Accountants.

Foster carers feel well supported and speak extremely positively about the professionalism and sound value base of this agency. Carers feel valued, say that their opinions count and that they can influence agency practice, as has recently happened in relation to respite entitlement. Carers receive regular supervision, from qualified social workers, and find it easy to contact agency staff, should they need additional advice or support, at any time. Some good informal mutual support networks have been developed between carers though some carers say they would like carer support groups to be formalised and for there to be opportunities for social gatherings to include fostered and birth children, as well as carers. These views have been shared with the manager. Placing social workers feel that both the agency and its carers work well with them in partnership: 'excellent communication'; 'carers always return calls'; 'reviews are well attended'. Placing social workers receive copies of the foster carers' monthly written reports detailing the young people's progress in all Every Child Matters outcome areas.

All carers have signed a foster carer agreement and have a copy but there is not always a copy of the agreement on the carer file. Some carers' records do not contain a placement history. The agency is in the process of introducing electronic recording systems and all this information is available on the electronic database. The agency is not always operating wholly in accordance with the written information, provided to carers, in its Statement of Purpose and in the foster carer agreement, for example in the frequency of carer supervision, in the provision of respite and in the provision of training.

The foster carer recruitment, assessment and approval processes are extremely thorough and ensure the provision of some very positive placements. Foster carer reviews, however, are not being undertaken in a timely manner with some carers having been approved almost two years before having their first annual review. The agency has recently invested in enrolling all its carers onto the Open University National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 course, which will greatly enhance their skill levels. At the present time however, the agency does not provide any post-approval training course and has not implemented the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) training standards, which came into force in April 2008. From that date all new foster carers were required to complete the CWDC training within twelve months of their approval whilst existing carers were given until April 2011 to gain the CWDC certificate of successful completion. The necessary implementation of the CWDC training standards will have additional implications for staffing.

The agency retains largely appropriate records relating to carers and young people and both agency records and those retained by foster carers are securely stored. Appropriate records are

retained in relation to complaints and allegations. Currently the agency does not differentiate appropriately between complaints and allegations, particularly in the written information provided to carers. The standards require that records relating to allegations are retained separately from complaints and that carers are provided with clear information about the procedures to deal with them and the independent support available to them. Since the agency pays a subscription for all carers to join Fostering Network there are appropriate support networks in place.

The manager is not always appropriately notifying Ofsted in relation to incidents detailed under Schedule 8 of the Fostering Services Regulations. There has been some confusion about what notifications are needed and two incidents have occurred, which should have been notified.

## 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
18	retain records to demonstrate that all staff, including social workers, are appropriately qualified and experienced and are suitable to work with children and young people and to safeguard and promote their welfare (Regulation 20(3)(d))	1 June 2009
18	ensure that reviews of carer approval are undertaken in a timely manner (Regulation 29(2))	1 July 2009
25	notify Ofsted of any relevant significant events in accordance with Schedule 8 (Regulation 43(1))	1 June 2009

### Recommendations

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

- provide foster carers with a written health record for each young person placed in their care, which is updated during placement and moves with the young person (National Minimum Standards 12.4)
- obtain appropriate consents to medical treatment for all young people placed with the agency's carers (National Minimum Standards 12.3)
- develop individualised safe caring guidelines, for each foster home, in consultation with the carer and everyone else living there. Ensure that these are cleared with the young person's social worker and explained clearly and appropriately to the young person (National Minimum Standards 9.3)
- give consideration to the views of young people in foster care, and the potential support needs of the carer's birth children, when reviewing the foster carer's approval status (National Minimum Standards 11.3, 23.7)

- develop written guidance for foster carers to detail what is expected of them in terms of preparing young people for independent or semi-independent living (National Minimum Standards 14.2)
- develop a post-approval training programme to ensure that foster carers are trained in the skills required to provide quality care and meet the needs of each young person placed in their care. The programme must include all required components and must comply with the CWDC requirements. (National Minimum Standards 23.1; 23.5; 23.6; 12.5; 9.2; 14.3)
- ensure that the full time equivalent staffing complement, in terms of numbers, grades, experience and qualifications, is adequate to meet, at all times, the needs of the fostering service (National Minimum Standards 17.2)
- review the Statement of Purpose and ensure that it includes all required details (National Minimum Standards 1.4)
- pursue a clear strategy for working with carers ensuring that the written information truly reflects the support provided (National Minimum Standards 21.2)
- provide carers, staff and young people with written information about the procedures for dealing with investigations into allegations and details of the independent support available to carers during any investigation and ensure that separate records are retained in relation to any such incidents (National Minimum Standards 22.9, 22.10).