

Time For Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Jill Marriott
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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 for Children is an independent fostering agency that was established in 1999. The service specialises in providing short and long term placements for sibling groups.

Time for Children prides itself on being small, friendly and like an extended family. On 31/03/2008 there were 57 children placed with agency carers. The Statement of Purpose says 'Time for Children has a passionate belief in the welfare of the whole child including each child's personal, physical, social and educational needs'.

The head office is based in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, five minutes walk from Mile End tube station. The premises provides appropriate space for the staff team to work and accommodates an accredited contact centre. The agency has foster carers all over London and some in areas of Essex and Kent. The majority of staff are based part time in the office and part time working from home. All staff maintain regular contact with the office by phone and computer throughout each working day.

Summary

Time for Children Independent fostering agency offers excellent support and care for children placed with its carers. The agency meets all of the standards assessed during this inspection. There is a skilled and knowledgeable management team. The social worker team is experienced and all social workers hold the relevant qualifications. All qualified staff are registered with the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

The agency has a 'family feel' about it and takes a keen interest in the care provided by its foster carers. Foster carers receive excellent ongoing training and access to 24 hour support.

The agency has an effective foster panel who have the relevant skills, knowledge and experience to make safe recommendations to the agency decision maker. The panel has a quality assurance role with regard to assessments and reports that are presented. Recommendations for the approval and review of approval of carers is part of the panel business, at present carers do not have the choice to attend panel for their approval and review meetings.

Children's files do not at present include a front sheet with see at a glance essential information. However, files are kept up to date and in good order.

The children's guide to service does not at present include details of how to contact Ofsted.

The skills, knowledge and experience of the managers, staff and carers of this agency ensure safe care and good outcomes for children.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

There was one action and six recommendations made at the last inspection and each of these has been addressed. All staff files seen included an up to date Criminal Records Bureau disclosure. Panel membership has been reviewed and education and health professionals are

now included on the panel. The agency monitors the quality and adequacy of records and records have been improved. Agency records include relevant documentation located in clearly marked separate sections of each file. Staff files include supervision records. Letters of staff appointments and records of interview are included on the files of staff recently recruited. Team meetings have been introduced and these take place at three monthly intervals.

Carers supervision records include information regarding the every child matters outcomes. These are discussed with carers and children during home visits.

As a result of the last inspection the agency foster carers organise an outing each year to celebrate Christmas.

The steps taken to meet the actions and recommendations of the last inspection enable the agency to support carers to provide safe placements which ensure good outcomes for children.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Time for Children ensures that foster carers are given a clear easily understandable health care plan for children before they are placed or within 24 hours of an emergency placement. Each child's plan explains how specific and general health issues will be addressed and clarifies the roles and responsibilities of carers and key professionals.

All children placed by the agency are registered with a GP, Dentist and an Optician. Of the children placed by the agency 95% have received a health check in the past year. Carers and children confirmed that health issues related to ethnicity, race, disability, sexuality, gender and religion are identified at the planning stage of the placement, as are particular health needs that may impact on children's futures. Each child's health is reviewed during supervisory visits to the placement and at child care reviews. Where there is a need for specialist health services such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), psychologist's, physiotherapists and/or occupational therapists, the agency works in partnership with the child, the carer and the placing authority to ensure appropriate support is available. Older children said in returned questionnaires and during discussion that they understand their health care plans and are involved in resolving issues as they arise.

Creative ways of engaging children and young people are successful. The agency ensures that all children are encouraged to exercise and to eat healthily. The agency provides children and young people with free swimming lessons and a new bicycle of their choice to encourage them to keep fit and healthy and to enjoy the outdoors. Those young people interested in other sporting activities are encouraged to continue.

The service evaluates how it achieves good health outcomes for children and numerous examples of good practice were seen during the inspection. Carers receive comprehensive induction to fostering and ongoing training to identify and address the overall needs of children placed with them. Carers receive additional training to support them to work with children with special health care needs. Carers are confident about their roles and responsibilities with regard to the health of children placed with them. They clearly understand about the roles and responsibilities of other key professionals.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The agency operates a thorough recruitment procedure and ensures relevant checks and references are seen prior to any appointments of staff and carers being agreed. Managers and staff have appropriate qualifications, the line manager to the social work team has an National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 in management. Recruitment files show that all social work staff are registered with the GSCC.

All children are placed with agency carers who have been appropriately recruited and thoroughly assessed as being suitable to work with children. Carers are trained to offer safe care, they have strategies in place to promote the confidence of children and improve their self esteem. To further ensure each child's safety full information about health, behaviour and family background is shared with carers. The effects of any previous significant harm suffered by children is addressed through care planning, assessment and the review of care process.

The matching process is thorough. Children are placed with carers who are identified as being able to meet their needs. Ethnicity, religion, language, sexuality and issues regarding culture and disability are considered when planning the placement. On the rare occasions that gaps are identified in the matching process, packages of support are developed.

The agency has good policies and procedures in place related to child protection. The policies include a range of issues such as dealing with allegations, bullying, behaviour management, sanctions and rewards, corporal punishment and children missing from care. Carers said that training is compulsory; they are supported with childminding and crèches to enable them to attend. The agency holds training in different venues in and around London to reduce travelling for carers. Child protection training is included in the initial fostering training and is updated regularly to ensure new legislation is shared and practice issues are addressed. Staff and carers are knowledgeable about protection issues and are able to describe how they would deal with allegations and issues that arise.

Services and activities available for children are risk assessed. There is a balance between acceptable risk and the wishes, views and developmental needs of children. The agency works with carers to ensure that typical lifestyles are provided and ensure as far as possible that services do not make children feel different because they are fostered.

The foster panel was observed during the inspection and minutes of previous panel meetings were seen. The panel is well managed. It has effective and relevant membership that is representative of the local community. Excellent outcomes for children can be demonstrated. There is a quality assurance function and panel ensures assessment reports and review of approval reports are of a continually high standard. The panel recommends approval of carers and review of approval to the agency decision maker. Complaints and concerns are also considered by panel to ensure continued good practice. The manager of the agency makes the final decision with regard to all recommendations. The panel is considering ways of involving carers in the approval and review process. At present carers do not attend panel.

The agency works in partnership with carers, placing authorities and key professionals to ensure that all possible steps are taken to improve the lives of children and keep them safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency actively seeks to recruit carers that can meet the diverse needs of the children placed with them. Its policies and procedures promote equality and diversity and are central to the provision of achieving high standards for children. Children and carers confirmed that the agency respond in a positive manner to issues related to gender, religion, ethnicity, culture, language sexuality and disability.

Each child has a personal education plan in place (PEP) which details how specific and general health issues will be addressed. The plan also identifies the role of the carer and of key professionals working with the child. The agency actively supports carers to help children achieve. Carers confirmed that they attend open days and parents evenings and that they are very much involved in the education of children placed with them. Children are encouraged to achieve throughout their placements and beyond. The agency acknowledges and rewards children's educational achievements whether they are big or small. The impact that changes in school can have on the educational development, achievement and friendships for children and young people is recognised by the agency. Where possible children stay at the school they know. Where this is not possible the agency works in partnership with the child, the carer and the relevant placing authority to look at the best education options available. Where appropriate parents are also involved in planning for education.

Children receive excellent additional support which is creative and tailored to meet individual need. Young people said they receive support with homework and encouragement to acquire further education. Staff and carers receive training and regular supervision where a range of issues are raised and discussed. All carers are supported to maintain good links with education professionals and the child's school.

Children are supported by carers and link workers to be involved in the local communities. All children are encouraged to participate in leisure and sporting activities. Those who are interested in specific activities are supported to continue with these. The agency records show many successes for children undertaking specific activities. Children said they have the opportunity to attend out of school activities such as local youth clubs, dance and drama groups, cubs, brownies, guides and scouts.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency has developed innovative and positive support and training for carers to enable them to understand family relationships and promote positive contact for children with their families. The agency has child friendly rooms available for contact where this is required as part of the placement plan. Children and young people are familiar with the agency which provides rooms for a range of activities, crèches, contact and childcare reviews.

Children are asked for their views about their placement at supervising social work visits, as part of the child care review process and for the annual review of carers approval. The agency understands how consultation with children makes a difference and ensures that they are placed with carers who can meet their expressed views and needs.

Returned questionnaires show that children will talk to a range of appropriate people such as social workers, teachers and carers if they are unhappy or need to discuss particular issues. Children are provided with a guide to the service. The guide has relevant information about how to access an independent advocate, how to make a complaint and includes a list of useful contacts.

The agency demonstrates that systems have been developed to involve the views of children in all aspects of planning for their futures. Children are consulted about their care including those with communication difficulties whose wishes are sought through developing appropriate methods for them to express their views.

The agency firmly believes that listening to children and taking their views into account about their care, their needs and the services provided enables them to grow into confident, responsible and valuable adults.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children said that they are supported by the agency to achieve their individual ambitions. They said they receive good preparation for living independently as adults. Agency records confirm that good on-going support is available for young people who are living independently.

The agency seeks to raise the educational and employment aspirations of every child and young person placed with them. Foster carers have the skills to support children and young people through to independent living. Each child has an individual care plan and older children have pathway plans specifically designed to help them to become independent adults. From the beginning of each placement children are positively encouraged to achieve and gain age appropriate independence skills. Younger children enjoy the challenge of cooking and keeping their personal space tidy. Older children are encouraged to undertake household tasks to cook and clean their rooms. They are supported to save money and to budget. All older young people are encouraged to access further education and work experience.

Foster carers confirmed that they receive payments on time. The agency has a clear breakdown of fostering allowances and carers are clear about these. They agree that allowances are tailored to meet the needs of children placed with them. Full information about allowances is available in the foster carers handbook.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

There is a system in place to ensure the Statement of Purpose and the agencies policies and procedures are reviewed and updated as necessary. The Statement of Purpose includes the aims and objectives of the service and incorporates details of the services provided. The children's guide to service is in the process of being reviewed to include updated information regarding Ofsted details.

There is a stable management team in place. Managers and staff are relevantly qualified, skilled and experienced to carry out their roles. All social workers are registered with the GSCC. Managers ensure that processes and systems are comprehensive and support good practice. They are available daily to children, staff and carers and can be contacted at the office, by email

and by telephone. There is also a 24 hour support service available to carers and children. The management team, staff and service culture is open and inclusive. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the agency addresses feedback, complaints, equality and diversity issues and the individual needs of children and carers.

The service is monitored and the managers and staff are aware of what the service does well and where development is required. Development issues are addressed, appropriately clear, and achievable action plans are put in place.

There is a back-up system in place to cover managers absences. Staff are confident that they know who to contact in specific situations. The agency has a relevant number of staff to support the carers and children placed. All staff receive adequate supervision usually once each month. Appraisals and training plans were seen on staff files. Staff and carers confirmed that they are well supported to carry out their respective roles.

The recruitment procedure is rigorous. It is in line with best practice guidance and includes a structured induction and training plan for all new recruits. The process includes a positive strategy for ensuring the recruitment of a range and diversity of staff and carers to meet the diverse needs of children.

Policies, supervision notes and records of meetings show that there is a strong management commitment to the development of staff and carers. Training, refresher training and information sessions are available to ensure access to new legislation and practice changes. During the inspection specific training took place with regard to the new training, support and development standards for foster care. The training was delivered in a way that was pitched at a level easily understood by all those attending.

Examples of good practice and the ability of staff and carers to respond to children in a helpful warm manner were seen throughout the inspection. Children confirmed in the questionnaires received and during conversations with them that they are happy in their placements and feel safe and well cared for.

Administrative records were seen and were up to date and in good order. Children's records do not have a front sheet, which gives quick access to essential information. However, there are individual records in place for each child and these are kept up to date. Records contain all significant information required by regulation. Every attempt is made to compile these in partnership with children and relevant others so that they contain a true reflection of the child's experience. All agency records are kept confidentially in a locked filing cabinet. Young people and relevant others are able to access their files on request.

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
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Recommendations

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

- consider as a matter of good practice, offering foster carers the choice to attend the foster panel for their approval and review of approval meetings. (NMS 30.5)
- develop a front sheet for childrens files which includes basic details and essential information. (NMS 25(1)(3))
- include details of the address and telephone number for Ofsted in the childrens guide to service. (NMS 1(5))