

Reach-Out Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Michael McCleave
Type of Inspection	Key

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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

Reach-Out Care independent fostering agency has been in operation since 1999. It is based in office accommodation close to the centre of Newton Aycliffe. The fostering team comprises of a Registered Manager, social worker, support workers and administrative staff. The general manager has ultimate responsibility for the operation of the service, who reports to the directors of the company.

Summary

The agency although small in size, nevertheless operates to high professional standards. Foster carers enjoy good support from the support workers and there is a positive culture of continuing improvement through the training programme. Young people live in safe foster homes and their overall care needs are appropriately met. Of particular note is the very strong educational support provided for the young people by the agency. Young people who have previously failed in the educational system, have shown remarkable improvement in their academic work, and have achieved success in state exams. This is commendable. Since being taken over by a new company, the agency has improved and there is a positive commitment to continue to develop and eventually expand. Foster carers and the young people are supported by a service that promotes good practice.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The manager was required to ensure that the policy on recruitment of staff is reviewed, and that the information given to foster carers, is up to date. Both these requirements have been reviewed and improvements made. The manager was recommended to improve the way key documents were checked, and for the administration of records to be improved so as to ensure that these records were accurate and properly maintained. The administration systems have been reviewed and the appropriate improvements made. In addition the manager was recommended to ensure that young people received a guide detailing to what they can expect whilst in foster care. A new welcome pack has been developed that includes a colourful children's guide and an MP3 player which has recorded information from the guide. This is particularly helpful for young people who may have some difficulty with their reading.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

All children and young people are given a comprehensive health assessment by the Looked After Children Nurse and this health assessment is given to the foster carers. This report details how the child's specific and general health issues are to be addressed, and indicates clearly how services are to be provided. The fostering agency is fully aware of what health resources are available, including specialist services, such as psychology and Child Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Young people are able to access advice and guidance from the nurse on personal health concerns. Foster carers are aware of their role in ensuring that the health care needs of young people in their care is met. All children who are fostered by the agency are registered with a general practitioner and have access to dental care. The health needs of

the children and young people is actively promoted and services are provided to meet these needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager is a qualified social worker who also is currently completing a management qualification. There are robust recruitment procedures in place. All staff appointed to work at the agency are not permitted to commence work, until all checks have been completed satisfactorily, this includes professional and administrative staff. During the assessment stage all potential foster carers have a safety check made of the home. Risks are identified and these are recorded in the foster carer's records. All children and young people are placed with foster carers who have been thoroughly assessed and carefully matched with carers. Foster carers are kept fully informed about the children and young people placed with them and the fostering agency ensures that full information is passed to carers about health, behaviour and any other important information about family background. Placements are carefully planned and the matching process is thorough. Some case records, however, did not have written placement agreements, containing specific reference to the elements of matching, which were taken into consideration when agreeing the placement. Foster carers receive training in child protection awareness during their induction. They are confident in their role to protect the children and young people placed with them. The agency training schedule identifies child protection as mandatory for staff and carers. The fostering panel is well established and has good administrative support. Members of the panel demonstrate a professional commitment to ensuring high standards in their decision making. The panel receives information in good time from the agency prior to meetings, and sound decisions are made. The panel additionally maintains an independent scrutiny oversight of the quality of information presented to panel meetings, and where appropriate will challenge the agency. The panel serves children well, and can demonstrate good outcomes for children. Carers are always invited to attend the panel and to make a contribution to the proceedings. This is good practice. The staff and foster carers are clear about respective roles and responsibilities in safeguarding children, and together with the foster panel, work professionally as a team to ensure that children and young people are safe.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering agency has a policy on valuing diversity, and this has been shared with foster carers as part of their initial training. The agency promotes equality and diversity, and this is a mandatory part of the annual training for all foster carers. The agency has been imaginative in ensuring that children and young people fully understand the information they are given, when they are initially placed with foster carers. They are provided with an MP3 player which has a recording of information from the welcome pack. Some young people have difficulty in reading and this method ensures that they are not discriminated against. This is excellent practice. This service recruits carers who can meet the diversity needs of the children and young people it cares for. Young people and foster carers confirm that the service is very positive about promoting issues of religion, ethnicity, language and culture. The service ensures that the educational needs of all children and young people in foster care are well met. Young people receive excellent additional support, which is characterized by innovative and creative approaches to education that addresses individual needs. The agency employs a qualified teacher known

as the education support worker, who ensures that an educational plan is prepared for each young person. This is given to foster carers to keep them fully informed about their role in helping to meet their educational needs. This plan details how the young person's specific and general educational requirements are to be addressed. Any issues concerning attendance, exclusions, extra help with homework will be managed by the education support worker. Some young people who were previously not achieving at school have succeeded in gaining impressive exam results. Foster carers value highly this educational support as do the young people. One young person clearly summed up by stating, 'I couldn't have done it without her support'. The service respects cultural diversity. An excellent approach is demonstrated to ensure that children and young people achieve their full educational potential.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency actively supports and promotes family contact where it is in the best interests of the young people. This is emphasised through training and support for foster carers. The views of the young people are taken into consideration in any contact arrangements. The fostering agency has established systems for children to participate in discussions about their placements and future plans. All children and young people are encouraged to attend their formal reviews. They are encouraged by the agency social worker to record their feelings about their placement. The agency values feedback and all foster carers and young people are sent a questionnaire annually to give their views about the service provided. A children's guide given to all young people at the time of their placement, provides good information about how to make a complaint, and includes the provision of useful contact details. This information is also included in the MP3 player given to all young people. The contribution young people make to the agency is demonstrated when young people are invited to be on the interview panel for new staff. They take a full part in the interview process and also in the decision on appointment. This is very good practice. Children and young people are encouraged to have a say in matters that have an impact on their lives and to actively participate in ensuring that their views are listened to.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers play a crucial role in preparing young people for their independence. They take part, where appropriate, in planning meetings and liaise with other professionals involved in the preparation for independence process. The agency has links with the leaving care team, to ensure that young people have access to good information and support. Foster carers are very aware of their important role with young people in planning for independence. They teach the young people about budgeting for food, electricity, heating, rent, social and leisure activities. Training opportunities are available for foster carers to develop their role in preparing young people for adulthood. Foster carers see their role extending beyond the confines of the foster home once a young person leaves them. Where this is requested by the young person, foster carers are encouraged by the service to continue support with regular contact with the young person as long as this support is required. This is good practice. Young people are supported as they prepare to move into independence and the foster carers have an important role to play.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency is committed to increasing the understanding of equality and diversity among foster carers. Training in this area is now mandatory. The understanding among foster carers about diversity issues varies depending on training received. The agency's commitment to equality and diversity is demonstrated with the support and encouragement for foster carers to attend a regional conference on equality and diversity. The service values are clearly stated in the Statement of Purpose. The agency provides good support to foster carers, so as to ensure that they provide safe and caring homes for children and young people. The agency works to high professional standards and the management of the service ensures that staff are very well supported. The team manager, who has day to day responsibility of the service, is qualified and experienced. It is evident from the day to day operations of the service, that the team manager monitors working practices, processes and systems to ensure support and good practice among the team. Staff are supported by managers who are always contactable for advice and guidance. In addition, a well established formal supervision and appraisal system is in place to ensure that staff development and performance is maintained. There is a positive management commitment to the continuous development of staff and carers. This is evident from the training schedule and confirmed by staff and foster carers. A business plan has been prepared by the manager that addresses where improvements can be made to service delivery. This document will inform the directors of the company of how the service will plan ahead for development. There is a training programme in place that includes induction training for all new foster carers. The foster panel plays an important role in monitoring the training undertaken by foster carers during carers' annual reviews. In order to increase foster carer awareness of equality and diversity, training in this area is now mandatory. This is good practice. The agency maintains appropriate records for each foster home that includes details of the child or young person placed. These records contain all the relevant information to enable the staff to monitor and support the foster carers. Some young people, however, are not aware that they can contribute and write their own comments in their case records. Additionally, some records did not have the signature of the author. The administrative support is provided is good. The fostering agency is well managed. It is led by a manager who promotes good practice and is supported by a small team of highly motivated professional and administrative staff.

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):

- ensure that written foster placement agreements, contain specific reference to elements of the matching which were taken into consideration in agreeing the placement and

identifying areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate for any gaps in the match between child and carer (NMS 8.4)

- ensure that children and foster carers are encouraged to access their records, make additions and comments and record personal statements, including dissent. (NMS 25.12)