

Community Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC387213
Inspection date	4 December 2009
Inspector	Stephen Smith
Type of Inspection	Key

Address	Unit 13 Moss Bay Managed Workspace Moss Bay House 40 Peart Road Derwent Howe Workington Cumbria CA14 3YT
Telephone number	07726 357957
Email	louised@communityfostercare.co.uk
Registered person	Community Foster Care
Registered manager	Marie Louise Devlin
Responsible individual	Rebekah Pearson
Date of last inspection	

© Crown copyright 2009

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

You can obtain copies of The Children Act 2004, Every Child Matters and The National Minimum Standards for Children's Services from: The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Cripins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

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

Community Foster Care is a registered independent fostering agency. It is one of two independently registered fostering agencies provided by the organisation which is a charity and 'not for profit' limited company. The other agency is based in Gloucestershire. The agency currently has three approved foster carers, all with children in placement. It employs a manager and a full time administrator. It intends to appoint a part time supervising social worker within weeks of this inspection.

Summary

This was an announced inspection of Community Foster Care. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the agency's compliance with the fostering national minimum standards and regulations. All the key standards were inspected under the five outcome areas of being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic wellbeing. The effectiveness of the service's organisation was also inspected as was its work to promote equality and diversity. All outcome areas are rated as good.

The agency undertakes detailed assessments of foster carers which ensure they are suitable people, although health and safety assessments of their homes are not wide-ranging enough. It provides children with good support for their health and education. It is good at helping them have contact with their families and gives good support to help young people prepare for adulthood. The service is small but well managed and monitored. It knows the children placed well and manages the service in such a way as to focus on identifying and meeting their needs. Children are well matched with their foster carers and the agency is creative in identifying matches based on children's needs. However, the service does not always do as much as it could to ensure that it receives full information about children from their placing authorities. New foster placement agreements are not drawn up for children who have transferred, with their carers to the agency from other fostering services. This means that the roles and responsibilities foster carers' and others relating to these children may not be clearly identified.

Placements are well monitored and managed and foster carers are well supported and supervised. Children are kept safe in their placements, although the child protection procedure for carers does not give clear enough guidance in some areas. The agency ensures that placing authorities are informed of all events relating to fostered children.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of Community Foster Care.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency and its carers meet children's health needs. All foster carers have first aid training and there are plans to provide further training in health matters. Where children have specific individual needs, carers are able to access the necessary training to meet these. The foster carers' handbook provides carers with supporting information and advice about children's

health. Foster carers know the arrangements regarding the delegation of responsibility to consent to routine and emergency medical treatment. However, this is not fully supported by formal documentation signed by placing authorities. Children are registered with the primary health care services they need with support given to carers to ensure that any difficulties in accessing services are addressed. They receive good support for any specialist health needs they have. Information sharing at the time placements are made is good and this ensures that foster carers know children's health needs. Written documentation from placing authorities, to support the verbal information shared, is often limited and the agency is not as robust as it should be in seeking this information from the authorities concerned.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are placed with foster carers in homes that are safe and suitable. Home safety is checked during the assessment of prospective foster carers. However, the checklist used to carry out this assessment is not wide-ranging enough. As a consequence children's safety from some physical hazards is not adequately ensured.

The agency places children with foster carers who are carefully and creatively matched with them in order to meet their needs. Placements are made within foster carers' terms of approval, which are carefully considered. If this careful matching requires an exemption from the usual fostering limit, there is a very clear and effective process in place to seek consent for this from the area authority and monitor the arrangements on an ongoing basis.

The agency uses its own comprehensive foster placement agreement form to ensure that appropriate information about children is available to carers when they are placed. It then contacts placing authorities to ask for all necessary looked after children documentation to help support the placement. However, its arrangements in this area are not robust enough to ensure that this information is received in a timely manner. Additionally, the service does not develop placement agreements for the children and carers who have transferred together to the agency from another fostering service. This means that responsibilities and roles may not be fully explored and agreed. Placement agreement meetings take place before placements are made, or at the time of placement in an emergency situation. This ensures that all necessary signatures to the placement agreement can be obtained.

The agency works hard to ensure that children are kept safe in their foster placements. Foster placements are monitored and supervised regularly; fostering social workers meet with children and birth children and maintain detailed records of this consultation. Foster carers' supervision monitors the frequency of visits by children's social workers. Safe caring policies are in place for all foster carers homes with child specific addendums to these agreements being completed as required. These are agreed with children's social workers.

The suitability of foster carers is rigorously checked during their assessments. Child protection and safe caring matters are covered in their pre-approval training and further training is planned along with training in managing challenging behaviour. Child protection information is contained in the foster carers' handbook along with the procedure to be followed. However, this procedure is not sufficiently explicit about matters relating to the reporting of child protection concerns. Children feel safe and well cared for in their placements. For example, one young person said, 'I love being with my carers'. They know who to speak to if they are worried.

The fostering service has an effective procedure for responding to any complaints, allegations or significant events. It has well developed systems for monitoring any significant events, the action taken, its outcome and for notifying the relevant people.

The service has effective staff recruitment procedures in place for to ensure their suitability to work with children. It follows these in practice and this helps safeguard children.

The agency's fostering panel is thorough and robust in its work. It gives careful and close consideration to cases presented to it and makes clearly considered recommendations to the decision maker along with the reasons for these. It also provides an effective quality assurance check for the agency, offering feedback on the quality of information presented to it. The records of panel meetings are detailed and comprehensive.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency provides services to children and their families that are based on their individual needs that reflect and value their differences. It also recognises and values difference in the way it works with foster carers. Applicants' attitude and ability to reflect diversity and promote equality is assessed before they are considered suitable people to care for children. The agency provides carers with information in the foster carers' handbook and has plans to provide further training in equality and diversity.

The agency advertises for foster carers from a range of backgrounds, cultures and ethnic origins and welcomes applicants from all groups. The agency, its carers and children reflect the predominantly White British population of the area but the agency keeps equality and diversity issues in mind. It works effectively to match children with carers appropriate to their needs and gives close consideration to children's specific needs. Children with disabilities and complex needs receive good support from the fostering service.

Children are provided with effective educational support. The service provides carers with information about education within the foster carers' handbook. The agency and its carers contribute to the development of, and work in line with, children's personal education plans. There are good links between carers, the fostering team and children's social workers that help support children's education. Foster carers have close links with schools and work with them to ensure that children receive the support they need. The agency works with placing authorities to help children access the appropriate schools when they are placed and to ensure that school placements continue to be appropriate. Arrangements are clearly identified in foster placement agreements to ensure that attendance at school is promoted. Carers transport children to and from school where necessary and attend meetings and events to support their fostered children. Support and help with homework is provided by carers and the service recognises educational achievements and ensures that it is acknowledged.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency and its foster carers support and promote contact between children and their families wherever this is appropriate. Contact arrangements are identified in foster placement agreements and carers clearly understand the level and type of contact that has been deemed in children's best interests. Foster carers know their own roles in facilitating contact including

providing transport, supervision and emotional support for children. Children know their contact arrangements and have their views taken into account when they are reviewed. Good information and guidance is contained within the foster carers' handbook and contact matters are discussed in carers' supervision sessions. This helps carers to understand the implications of contact for the child and how best to support them. Foster carers maintain records of the outcomes of contact so that this can be considered when plans for children are developed and monitored.

Foster carers listen to children and young people and take notice of their opinions regarding their day-to-day care. They advocate on children's behalf and support them to express their views about their own plan of care. This is supported by the robust manner in which the agency consults with fostered children during visits to foster carers and the good records maintained of this consultation. Children are assisted by the agency to express their views for the reviews of their care. Social workers visit children in their foster placements regularly and this visiting is closely monitored by the agency to ensure that it is happening with sufficient frequency.

Children are provided with clear and accessible information about how to complain if they are not satisfied with the care they receive or if they have worries or concerns. Simplified information is provided for younger children. The agency has developed links with a local organisation to develop an activity programme for children which will also include arrangements for mentoring and individual support for children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The agency provides good support to young people to help them prepare for adulthood. It provides foster carers with good information and advice in the foster carers' handbook about helping prepare children to be as independent as possible. The agency has good links with the local authority's leaving care team and training for foster carers in pathway planning and helping children move on has been arranged. Supervising social workers provide foster carers with ongoing advice and support with supervision covering preparation for independence where appropriate.

Foster carers work with children to help them learn the skills they will need to live independently. Children are involved in planning for their future and are well consulted as these plans develop.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The area in which the agency works is predominantly White British and this is reflected in the agency's carers and foster children. Despite this the agency is inclusive in nature and seeks applicants to foster carers from different backgrounds, ethnic origins and cultures. The ability of applicants to foster and work with children in a way that recognises and promotes equality and diversity is closely considered prior to their approval as carers. Equality and diversity issues are addressed during foster carers' preparation training and further training is planned. The agency takes children's specific needs into account when making placements.

The agency's statement of purpose covers the matters set out in the national minimum standards but not all information is provided in sufficient detail to adequately describe the service it provides. Information about the agency's processes for reviewing and training foster carers is

not detailed enough. The statement itself relates to the organisation's fostering service as a whole and not just the branch in Cumbria. As such the information contained is not specific enough about the operation of this branch. The agency has children's guides in place for younger and older children. These are presented in a manner that is attractive and accessible to ensure that children get the information they need and are structured to be personalised to the needs of individual children.

The agency is effectively managed, controlled and monitored. Regular file audits take place to ensure that recording is of good quality and the manager operates a rigorous system to monitor and act on any significant incidents. The agency has a budget that enables it to undertake its current level of work. Management and staffing arrangements are appropriate for the agency's size and rate of growth. The agency employs the manager, who also acts as a supervising social worker until the agency grows, and a full time administrator. A sessional worker has been employed to undertake some assessments of foster carers and a part time social worker has been recruited. Foster carers are very satisfied with the management arrangements and hold the manager and responsible individual in high regard. One said that the agency is 'creative and empowering' in the way it operates to meet children's needs.

The fostering agency is robust in the way it assesses foster carers. It checks the suitability of applicants carefully and assesses their competence to foster as well as considering their background and experiences of child care. Assessments are detailed and evaluative. This ensures that those carers approved are suitable to care for the children placed with them.

Once approved, foster carers are provided with very good support and thorough formal supervision. Carers are visited very frequently and there is regular contact between them and the agency on an ongoing basis. This ensures that support is always available to carers. A good foster carers' handbook provides information to underpin carers' practice.

The agency has provided its carers with good preparation training as part of their assessment to foster. All foster carers are working to complete their training in line with the Children's Workforce Development Council national occupational standards. Carers have completed training in first aid and the agency has plans to provide a range of training in the next few months.

The agency and its carers maintain good records about children and their care. Foster carers' recording is monitored and copies of records are retained at the agency. The service provides information about children for their reviews and maintains records of outcomes of reviews to guide the care provided to children. Internal recording is suitable to assist planning and act as a reference for children in future should they wish to look back at their history.

Children's records are well structured and the agency monitors records to identify any information about children that is required but has not been provided by the placing authority. Where information is not provided the agency contacts and writes to the authority concerned to request this information. However, the agency has not been robust enough in ensuring that it receives this information. In most cases it does not have enough written information about fostered children and this limits its ability to ensure their needs are being met.

Foster carers' records are well maintained. Files are well structured and ordered with all information easy to find. File audits take place to ensure that recording is of a good standard and key case decisions are clearly recorded on files.

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 that foster placement agreements are in place for all children placed with foster carers approved by the agency; specifically for those who transferred to the agency with their carers from another agency. (Regulation 34.3 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002)	12 February 2009

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the safety of foster carers' homes is fully assessed against all eventualities (NMS 6)
- develop the child protection procedure for carers to include all necessary information (NMS 9.1)
- ensure that the statement of purpose sets out all the matters in the national minimum standard in sufficient detail and relates specifically to this branch of the agency (NMS 1)
- ensure that the fostering service and its foster carers have access to full information and documentation regarding foster children. (NMS 24.6)