

Diverse Care (UK) Ltd

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

Diverse Care (UK) Limited is a small independent fostering agency, first registered with the Commission for Social Care Inspection in December 2004. The office is based within the London Borough of Waltham Forest.

The primary role of the agency is to recruit, train and support foster carers from within and around the London area to provide suitable placements for children and young people who cannot live with their own families.

The agency provides a diverse group of carers to provide choice for children needing foster placements. There is a small staff group consisting of an acting manager, two full time supervising social workers and a senior practitioner. They are supported by two full-time administrative staff and occasional and sessional workers as and when needed.

The agency regularly organises outings and social activities for children in placement, foster carers and their families.

Summary

This announced full inspection was to look at all the key standards plus five non-key standards. It also assessed the service's response to the actions and recommendations made at the last inspection.

Diverse Care UK Limited provides a satisfactory service. There have been frequent staff changes until recently when a new team was appointed along with an acting manager. Carers appreciate the stability the new team brings and now receive a more consistent service, with regular supervision and opportunities to build professional relationships with their supervising social workers. Carers appreciate the out of hours support arrangements.

There are now systems in place to prompt staff when annual reviews of carers are due, to ensure these are completed within appropriate timescales in the future. Systems are also being put in place to improve how information is organised and protected, with records showing improved chronology. Some records show gaps which means that carers and staff do not have full information on young people's needs. The agency tries to obtain information from placing authorities and passes on any information it receives.

There are improved systems to ensure that people making enquiries about fostering receive a timely response. The quality and regularity of training is improving, although it is not always provided at times to suit all carers.

The promotion of education is a strength of the agency. Carers are proactive in helping to find appropriate schools for young people and encourage their regular attendance to maximise educational opportunities. Young people are encouraged to live healthy, active lifestyles. Promotion of equality and diversity is generally sound.

Clear information is now provided on allowances and expenses, with improved arrangements for young people's savings.

Checks to ensure staff are suitable are mostly completed with an improved system in place for future recruitment. The panel is organised efficiently. The agency ensures staff and carers know how to keep young people safe.

One carer describes how the service helps them look after young people in their care: '24-hour contact, supervising social worker, supervision monthly, weekly calls, attends all meetings and reviews.' Young people are supported to maintain contact with people who are important to them.

As a result of this inspection, two actions and nine recommendations are made around staff recruitment, record keeping, frequency of reviews, service information, health records and information, diversity, unannounced visits and clarity of roles.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Improvements to administrative systems ensure staff now carry out foster carer reviews in a timely manner. A backlog of overdue reviews has been cleared. Staff are now able to respond promptly to initial enquiries from people interested in fostering. Extra staff are employed to ensure the assessment of prospective carers is not delayed.

The outcome of complaints are now clearly recorded to show clear procedures. Systems for handling sensitive information confidentially and securely are now in place.

The service was asked to submit an application for a manager to be registered with Ofsted. An application is being processed and the agency has also sought appropriate checks and references to ensure the manager's suitability.

Although Diverse Care has tried to make clear the lines of accountability within the agency and carers now understand who they should contact in an emergency, there remains some confusion about the roles and responsibilities of the directors.

The work of the fostering panel has improved so that all members now contribute to panel discussion to

ensure a clear decision making process.

Further information has been obtained for staff recruitment records. A few checks remain outstanding but there is evidence of a more robust recruitment system being in place. The agency is now able to demonstrate that equal opportunities are applied when recruiting staff.

Some, but not all, information has been updated in the foster carers handbook to provide carers with more up-to-date information about health. Procedures are now in place for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service to ensure management are aware of how the agency is performing.

Carers now receive regular supervision from agency staff in the form of telephone calls and visits.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Carers are supported to promote good health in the young people they care for. Foster carers are provided with some training around the basic health needs of looked after young people. More specialised training, such as in sexual health awareness and self-harming, helps carers understanding of young people's specific health needs. Recent training in first aid ensures carers know how to provide treatment in an emergency, which they find useful. A carer commented on how the service supports them to encourage young people to be healthy and have a healthy lifestyle: 'Some of the courses offered directly affect the well-being of the child.'

Attention is given to encouraging young people to live a healthy lifestyle, for example by exercising, living active lifestyles, eating a varied diet and maintaining their personal hygiene. A young person commented 'My carers always give me healthy food to eat.' Appropriate health information is provided to help young people with special needs understand how to keep themselves healthy.

The service keeps careful checks to ensure that all young people are registered to receive basic health services, such as with a General Practitioner, dentist and optician. Although carers record health information in logs, there is not a clear health record which young people may keep with them when they move on. However, the agency plans to introduce such records shortly. Young people's health is routinely discussed, during supervision with carers, to ensure this important area is given a high profile.

Foster carers demonstrate awareness of their role and responsibility with regard to meeting the health needs of young people by taking them to routine and specialist appointments, following the advice of health care professionals and recording health information. However, despite the agency's requests to placing authorities, there is insufficient health information for some young people. A few have not yet received the specialist health services they need despite referrals being made by the agency.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Appropriate checks have been made to ensure the acting manager is suitable to manage a business concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young people. Systems are now in place to improve the recruitment process, including pursuing more detailed references from people with direct knowledge of someone's practice.

Young people are placed with carers who are assessed on their ability to provide a safe, comfortable and nurturing environment for them. Carers are provided with training and guidance on how to promote safe and healthy environments and so minimise risk to young people. Most households are inspected annually, although a minority of checks are overdue. The majority of homes provide a satisfactory standard of accommodation where young people feel 'at home'.

A carer commented on the success of the agency in ensuring they could meet the needs of young people placed with them: 'Very good because the matching process was very good.' The agency has recruited a range of carers so young people may be matched with families who can meet their assessed needs. A new matching form has been introduced with the aim of improving the matching process, but is not yet in use. Where a young person's needs cannot be fully met

within the placement, the agency supports carers with any additional training, support or information they may need. A questionnaire from a foster carer states, 'They help make as good a match as possible between child's need and our own resources.'

The service manages child protection referrals well, ensuring information is shared with appropriate people. Training and guidance ensures carers and staff are aware of how to keep young people safe. Policies on safe caring are now in place for individual households, although some were not completed when young people were initially placed. Additional specialist training is also provided to help carers recognise signs of abuse, manage behaviour and help boost young people's self-esteem. Guidance makes it clear that carers may use only appropriate means of managing behaviour and that corporal punishment is not allowed. The agency has systems in place to work with households where there may be shortfalls in their ability to safeguard young people.

Considerable effort has been made to rectify shortfalls in the recruitment procedure identified at the previous inspection. Checks have been made retrospectively to present a more thorough assessment of staff suitability. A few checks are still outstanding but systems are in place to improve the process when new staff are recruited in the future.

The fostering panel consists of individuals who have a wide range of skills and experience, including specialist knowledge of health and education and a person who has experienced foster care, to ensure the best outcomes for young people. There are clear procedures in place for the panel so that it can fulfil its quality assurance function. Panel members are provided with suitable training to help them develop an understanding of their role and current issues relating to fostering. People's experience of panel is largely positive although some query whether the comments of panel members are always constructive.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is satisfactory.

Education is given a high priority. The support and encouragement carers give young people to attend school regularly and to achieve well is a strength of the agency. Carers are pro-active in arranging suitable education placements for the young people they care for. They develop effective relationships with schools to ensure they work in partnership with staff in the best interests of young people. Carers support young people to value education and take full advantage of after school activities, such as sport and music, to develop their skills and self-confidence.

Carers take a full part in contributing to decision making concerning young people's education, such as in securing appropriate provision for young people who have special educational needs. Information on young people's education is generally available on their records, so there is sufficient information and a chronology for them and their carers. However, for a minority of young people there are no educational records available.

The agency has a new matching process when considering possible carers for young people but this is not yet fully used. Training provides opportunities for foster carers to develop their knowledge of young people's diverse needs. Carers are generally clear about how to preserve each young person's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background. Carers mostly ensure young people can develop their sense of identity, for example by attending places of worship

and wearing appropriate clothing. However, a minority of young people do not have their diverse needs fully met, which impacts on their sense of self-worth and identity.

The service ensures that young people with disabilities receive the specific services and support they need. Carers ensure young people gain equal access to opportunities to develop their interests and hobbies so they can live as full a life as possible.

The standard relating to short-term breaks has not been assessed as it is not relevant to this service.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Diverse Care promotes consultation with young people, for example, at the time of their reviews, so that their opinions may be considered in decision making about their futures. Supervising social workers sometimes include discussion with young people when making their visits to foster families, to ascertain their views about their everyday lives in the foster home.

Carers mostly rate the service as 'satisfactory' at involving young people in decisions about how the service is run. There are plans to formally consult young people on how to improve the agency and its service delivery in the near future.

The service provides details of how young people may raise complaints in the children's guide to Diverse Care. In addition, a copy of the complaints procedure is provided when young people are newly placed with carers, so they may be guided on how to raise any concerns. However, a few young people reported not knowing how to complain and the agency is taking steps to remind them of their rights in this area. The outcome of any complaint made to the agency are now clearly recorded.

The agency supports carers to promote, facilitate and encourage contact so that young people can maintain links with people who are important to them. Where contact is provided in carer's homes, they make efforts to provide a natural, relaxed environment so that young people may enjoy meeting family in a homely setting. Carers are sensitive when dealing with any impact contact may have on young people and ensure this is considered when contact arrangements are reviewed.

Carers receive guidance on what to expect from contact and the importance of it to young people. Contact arrangements are generally clearly recorded on children's files but insufficient information from placing authorities compromises some young people's understanding of their contact arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Information provided on allowances and expenses has improved. Carers are now clear about what is available and allowances and fees are paid in a timely manner. The system for saving for young people has been streamlined, as the agency now saves money directly on their behalf and makes payments when young people move on. This ensures young people will have some funds to support themselves in the future.

The service ensures that carers understand that they need to provide young people with age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for learning independence skills. Young people are offered opportunities to cook, shop and perform household chores to help prepare them for independent or semi-independent living. Young people are encouraged to consider their futures and be involved in any decision making process about this.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Carers describe the staff as helpful and approachable, including the administrative staff who deal with their queries promptly. Describing the support they receive from the agency, a carer commented: 'They offer continual support together with a varied range of courses throughout the year. Regular support group meetings and social gatherings.'

The recently appointed manager has effected change to ensure the organisation is now operating to deliver a satisfactory level of child care. She has an appropriate level of experience to provide clear leadership for the service. There are improved lines of communication and accountability between staff, managers and carers, although there remains some confusion about the role and responsibilities of the directors.

Support was disrupted for a period of time when there was a high turn over of staff. Improved systems to prioritise and monitor workloads and a recently established full staff team mean the service can provide more consistent support to carers and young people. There is now capacity to follow up initial enquiries, from people interested in fostering, in a timely manner. Although the backlog of reviews has been cleared, these have not been carried out within required timescales. Carers are supported by regular visits and telephone calls, although unannounced visits have not been made recently to all carers. They have access to 24-hour support and feel they may contact the agency whenever they have a query or concern.

Staff indicate they are well supported and have regular supervision and training, including joint training with carers, to develop their skills and knowledge. They have access to the agency's policies and procedures and are provided with contracts, job descriptions and conditions of service so they may deliver an efficient service. Following induction, there is a probation period which allows the service to confirm their suitability for the work.

There is sufficient administrative support to meet the current needs of the agency. Contingency plans are in place to meet the changing demands of the service, with arrangements to use freelance and sessional workers who are familiar with the agency and its carers. Carers appreciate the quality of the out of hours support which is provided. Important information and messages are passed to the appropriate people in a timely manner and useful advice, based on experience, is given. However, there is not such a clear system of communication when the post holder is away and other staff cover this position.

The organisation of administrative files show improvement. However, there are still significant gaps in recording support, key events and decision making on children's files, so carers and staff do not have full information about how to best care for them. Frequently, this is due to significant delays in placing authorities making vital documents available, although the agency is proactive in trying to obtain this information. Carers are confident that the agency passes on any information it does receive to them so they have as much information about the young people they care for as possible. However, a few opportunities for agency staff to make their

own recordings are missed, for example, about decisions reached following their attendance at strategy meetings while awaiting the minutes from local authorities.

Records of complaints are now clearly recorded to show the outcome. The agency's policy on access to records has been amended to define who may access sensitive information and to ensure records are stored securely at all times.

Carers attend pre-approval training as part of their assessment and induction to the agency, although their induction to the agency is not always evidenced. There is an ongoing training programme in place for carers which helps ensure they are adequately equipped to meet the needs of the young people in their care. Carers feel the range and frequency of training has improved recently, with additional training sessions now included within foster carer support group meetings.

A clear statement of the aims and objectives of the service is available, which includes most of the necessary information. Appropriate versions of this are available for young people in the form of a children's guide, to help them understand the service provided by Diverse Care. Both documents are under review to ensure they present current information to interested parties. Foster carers are provided with foster care agreements so they know what is expected of them and the agency. However, these are not always signed to show agreement.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

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
15	ensure that the personnel records for all staff working for the fostering service contain complete information and documentation as outlined in Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations (Regulation 20)	14 June 2010
21	make sure that reviews take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 29 (1))	14 June 2010

Recommendations

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

- make sure the foster home is inspected annually to make sure it meets the needs of foster children. Ensure homes are adequately furnished and decorated and maintained to a good standard of cleanliness and hygiene and provide a nurturing environment (NMS 6)

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- ensure that telephone enquiries are made as well as obtaining written references. Records are kept of checks and references that have been obtained and their outcomes (NMS 15)
 - update health information in the foster carers' handbook. Ensure each carer is provided with a written health record for each child placed in their care and that this is updated and moves with the child (NMS 12)
 - ensure that foster carers provide care which respects and preserves each child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background (NMS 7.4)
 - revise the Statement of Purpose to include details in respect of the numbers of children placed and the numbers of complaints and their outcomes (NMS 1.4)
 - ensure there is a clear management structure with clear lines of accountability (relating to the role of the directors). Make sure there is clear communication of information when the officer for the out of hours service is not on duty (NMS 16.2)
 - ensure, in the foster care agreements, foster carers have a full understanding of what is expected of carers and the agency; this relates to carers signing this document (NMS 22.2)
 - make occasional unannounced visits to foster carers, at least one each year (NMS 22.6)
 - ensure that all training is organised to encourage and facilitate attendance by foster carers, for example by including convenient times (relates to those who work). Evidence that all new carers receive induction training (NMS 23.3)
 - evidence that all new carers receive induction training (NMS 23.2)
 - make sure that an up to date, comprehensive case record is maintained for each child or young person in foster care which details the nature and quality of care provided and contributes to an understanding of her/his life events. (NMS 24.1)