

Attachments Fostering Limited

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Sophie Wood
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Date of last inspection	24/09/2007

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Attachments Fostering Ltd is an independent fostering agency, based in Snodland, Kent. Qualified, permanent staff are employed and the agency also uses a regular bank of qualified independent social workers for additional assessment and review work. The agency has its own established fostering panel, chaired by an independent person.

The agency currently has 13 approved fostering households, situated across the Kent region. Services offered include emergency, short term and bridging placements, long term, parent - child and sibling placements and respite provision. Within this, the agency also offers assistance with contact, therapeutic interventions, and support with education and life story work.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This announced key inspection covered all of the key standards for fostering services and also explored the actions and recommendations made from the previous inspection visit.

The agency has moved offices since its last inspection and now enjoys the benefits of improved premises. New staffing appointments have been made and foster carers say they feel well supported.

Young people present as being very settled with their foster carers; a good percentage of placements are long term and these individuals are thriving. Shortfalls are identified with regards to some areas of documentation and processes. Three actions and six recommendations have been made as a result, none of which impact directly upon the safety or welfare of the young people in placement.

Improvements since the last inspection

Three actions and three recommendations were made from the previous inspection visit of 24 September 2007. The agency was asked to ensure all fostering households provide a safe physical environment and this has resulted in a review of such policies, procedures and monitoring systems. Young people can be assured their physical safety is being safeguarded.

The agency was also asked to improve upon the content of supervision records for foster carers and to ensure that all foster carers are in receipt of up to date foster care agreements. Both of these actions have been implemented; foster carers receive an improved service as a result.

Recommendations included the need to review matching documentation, consultation mechanisms for foster carers and staffing levels of the agency. Matching documentation is comprehensive and this increases the likelihood of

making appropriate placements. However, some gaps remain in terms of the level of details explored at this important stage.

Foster carers confirm there are clearer consultation mechanisms in place, but some express dissatisfaction with the outcomes of such forums.

The agency currently has a sufficient number of staff employed, which meets the needs of the service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people thrive in environments which effectively promote their health and well being. At the onset of a placement, young people are immediately registered with local core services, including the GP, dentist and optician. The agency seeks to obtain health histories and immunisation records in order to ensure young people receive the input and treatment they need. Medical consent for treatment is in place for every young person in placement with the agency.

Foster carers understand their own responsibilities and they maintain detailed records of all health care appointments, illnesses and injuries. These records are regularly scrutinised by the manager and are effectively used within review reports. Hence, the physical and emotional well being of young people is being effectively monitored.

Foster carers receive clear training and guidance from the agency on promoting the health of those in their care. Such information is comprehensive and relevant to each fostering household and young person placed. Those with babies and younger children focus clearly upon developmental milestones and immunisations and those with older children equip them to effectively cope with impending adolescence, for example, their sexual health and emotional well being.

Foster carers are very focused upon providing young people with healthy diets and lifestyles; again, this is reinforced through good training, guidance and role modelling by the agency. Surveys received from young people are positive.

'My foster mum always gives me healthy dinners', 'I always have my five a day' and 'I get good advice about being healthy'.

Direct quotes from young people made during this inspection include, 'I love my mum's cooking', 'we do a lot of physical activities' and 'I'm never ill because I have a healthy life'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

All those involved with the agency can be assured that the management team possesses the skills, experience and qualifications necessary. The individuals concerned continue to attend additional training to ensure they keep abreast of changing policies and legislation; hence, service users and employees benefit by

being involved with a competent agency, which recognises its own shortfalls and seeks to address these appropriately.

Young people benefit by living with foster carers who have been carefully vetted. Households are comfortable and free of hazards and the agency reinforces clear health and safety expectations. Young people speak very positively about their bedrooms, 'it's my own private space' and 'I've got all my toys in my room'.

Records demonstrate that unplanned endings are rare. A good number of young people are enjoying the stability of long term placements, which effectively meet their needs, leading to positive outcomes. Matching processes are thorough, but there are examples whereby the information received about a young person at the referral stage has not been rigorously considered against the specific circumstances of the proposed foster carers. This deficit has led to some practical difficulties, which could have been avoided.

Young people are well protected from possible sources of harm because foster carers and staff implement robust child protection policies and procedures. Accidents, illnesses, concerns, complaints and disclosures are swiftly reported, with appropriate action taken. Written records are clear and subject to ongoing robust monitoring by the manager.

Recruitment processes are strong and serve to protect everyone involved with the agency. Recent new appointments have been made subject to thorough vetting and interviewing procedures. The independent social workers used to conduct foster carer assessments and reviews have the same criteria applied.

Panel members possess a wealth of relevant experience and qualifications. Clear guidance is in place with regards to the role and function of the panel, but there are shortfalls with regards to its quality assurance functions. Foster carer assessments and reviews are undertaken by a number of independent social workers and the quality of these reports is variable. Although factual in content, a number do not give a clear analysis of the impact of this information, in terms of its possible implications upon the fostering task. This factor has negative implications with regards to the matching process and it is unclear that the panel is robustly monitoring this aspect. Written minutes of panel meetings do not always hold sufficient details. This aspect has already been identified within the agency, with appropriate training booked.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Young people benefit by living with foster carers who effectively meet their needs. Policies, procedures and training sessions clearly cover pertinent topics, including the gender, religious, ethnic, language and cultural needs of young people. Foster carers demonstrate a heightened awareness as to the previous experiences of young people, including their own personal family backgrounds. They take great care to show respect for these factors, which is very much appreciated by those in their

care.

Wherever necessary, relevant external services are accessed on behalf of young people. Foster carers advocate strongly on behalf of young people to ensure they receive the immediate and ongoing services and support they need.

Foster carers are particularly good at promoting young people's confidence and feelings of self worth. Direct quotes include, 'my mum says I can do anything I want to do, as long as I work hard' and 'they just accept me for who I am and really want to help me'.

Educational attainment is highly valued and positively driven by the agency. Young people are actively encouraged and rewarded to attend school and this is robustly monitored.

There are minor shortfalls within the written guidance for foster carers, in that their role is not always made clear, but this does not impede their practice. To the contrary, foster carers and agency staff are commended for their efforts in finding appropriate school placements very quickly, so as not to disrupt the educational needs of young people.

Young people go to school fully equipped for the day ahead. Foster carers ensure they have the correct uniforms and equipment. They liaise effectively with school personnel and provide environments at home which enable the completion of homework.

They are also very good at recognising the future aspirations of young people and support them to seek the means of education which are right for them, such as vocational or academic means. Outcomes result in young people feeling good about their future.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers fully recognise and appreciate the importance of positive family contact for young people. This is further supported through clear and explicit written guidance and training, provided by the agency. Where necessary, foster carers provide practical support to facilitate contact arrangements, such as transport. Daily records, completed by foster carers also describe the impact of such visits, in order for this information to be passed onto placing authorities, in accordance with placement agreements.

There is less clarity and obvious support for foster carers in dealing with difficult contact situations, for example, negative repercussions following such a visit. This shortfall presents a risk of foster carers not feeling confident and competent in dealing with such situations.

Young people speak very positively about consultation processes with their foster carers. Daily decisions are heavily influenced by young people and they benefit by being enabled to express their views and opinions and to take control over important decisions. This is achieved using an educative approach, commensurate with the young person's age and understanding.

Young people are appropriately supported to plan for their statutory review meetings

and they are also asked by the agency to contribute towards the annual review process of foster carers.

There are less mechanisms in place however, with regards to direct and ongoing consultation mechanisms between the agency directly and the young people about general service provision. Young people are furnished with written material and say they know how to make representations and complaints, but this is not clearly recorded in all cases. In addition, there is limited evidence available to demonstrate the degrees to which the birth children of foster carers are being consulted, other than at their parents' annual reviews.

The agency risks missing out on important information, which may either be very positive, or at worst, detrimental with regards to the well-being of all of the young people involved with the agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people receive good and appropriate advice and support in terms of preparing for impending adulthood. This is underpinned by the training and guidance that foster carers receive from the agency. Young people are actively encouraged to think about their future and are given opportunities to further develop their independence skills. On occasion, this is impeded by a lack of clear information from placing authorities, in terms of the content of the placement agreement. Such documents are sometimes unclear in terms of the exact work being requested to be undertaken by the agency and its foster carers and this makes it difficult to record clear progress or concerns within daily care records.

More positively, foster carers establish positive relationships with young people and, alongside the agency, take a pro-active and sensible approach in equipping young people with important and valuable life skills. They voice a sense of frustration in terms of their own values as parents, 'It's hard to think they are leaving to try to survive independently when they are so emotionally young, but we can't influence those decisions and have to do the very best we can to support them to move on'. The ethos of the agency, and indeed, its name 'Attachments', is further endorsed and underpinned by the actual practice of its foster carers. 'He is not physically moving out when he reaches that set age. We've agreed with everyone that he will continue living here until he naturally makes the decision to move out and live independently, just like our own children did'.

A variable response is received from foster carers with regards to the receipt of their payments and expenses. Written policy and procedural guidance is clear and foster carers report that such expenses are paid on time. However, some say they are confused about the explicit details of such payments, with particular regards to respite care funding. Other foster carers report no such concerns and confirm their satisfaction. Documentation, including the written meeting minutes of ongoing consultation meetings, demonstrates the agency has routinely discussed these issues with foster carers. Written agreements are in place and these do clearly describe the payment rates. The agency clearly links remuneration to training attendance, in an attempt to reinforce and encourage such practice. There are occasional examples

whereby absences from training have been incurred which have been beyond the foster carer's immediate control and this has been negatively reflected within the carer's annual review, adversely affecting their annual payment increase.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency provides explicitly clear information about its services. The Statement of Purpose is reviewed at regular intervals and it is made available for all interested parties. It contains all of the elements required and the information within it is accurate and up to date.

The young person's guide is available as a welcome pack and it is suitably provided in different formats to suit younger and older audiences. Older children confirm a good understanding of the agency's role and purpose, but not all foster carers confirm that they have received clear guidance to support those in their care to read and have this information carefully explained to them.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency strives to have a workforce comprised of individuals from a variety of backgrounds. Clear policies and procedures are being implemented in practice and young people are being placed with foster carers who are able to meet their individual and diverse needs.

Over recent months the agency has recruited new permanent staff members. Induction and probationary report records show a thorough and robust approach towards inducting newcomers robustly and safely, within a context of appropriate supervision. This aspect is further confirmed through staff interviews. 'I've been really well supported and have never felt out of my depth' and 'I receive excellent levels of formal and informal supervision. I know what is expected of me'.

Current staff members are suitably qualified to undertake their prescribed roles and responsibilities. Where shortfalls and gaps are recognised, the manager implements clear training and support plans. Foster carers say they feel well supported through their own individual meetings, as well as through attending training sessions and group support meetings.

Case records for young people are generally well maintained. Although foster carers demonstrate a sound awareness of their role with regards to providing safety and stability, there are examples whereby the circumstances of placements have altered but this has not been clearly reflected with amended placement plans and agreements. This can make it difficult for foster carers to know exactly which areas of support and intervention they need to be focusing on.

Administrative records are in good order. These are held securely; hence, confidentiality is maintained. Administrative staff members have clear roles and functions, which ensures the smooth running of the agency. Registers are in place, but a number of different formats are in use, which is potentially confusing.

Good monitoring systems ensure the service is routinely reviewed, in light of making improvements and development planning. Areas with regards to direct outcomes for young people are more rigorously scrutinised than operational and administrative ones.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
30	review and update the written guidance in place with regards to the functions of the fostering panel, to specifically include the monitoring of the quality of assessments (NMS 30, Regulation 26(2)(b))	22/12/2010
10	ensure foster carers are provided with the training, support and guidance they need to promote and manage positive family contact for those in their care (NMS 10, Regulation 14)	22/12/2010
14	ensure placement agreements and plans describe the specific details of the care and support being required by foster carers in respect of young people preparing for adulthood (NMS 14, Regulation 34(3), Schedule 6)	22/12/2010

Recommendations

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

- ensure that matching documentation includes greater detail with regards to anticipating issues which may arise, based upon the referral information received, in order to fully explore the support needs of the proposed foster carers (NMS 8)
- improve upon the current mechanisms in place with regards to consultation processes with fostered children, birth children and foster carers (NMS 11)
- ensure that all young people have the contents of the young person's guide fully explained to them upon joining the agency (NMS 1)
- ensure case records for young people are comprehensive and accurately reflect the care being provided (NMS 24)
- review administrative records to avoid unnecessary duplication (NMS 25)
- ensure all of the areas requiring ongoing monitoring receive the same robust approach. (NMS 4)