

# Blue Sky Fostering Ltd

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	David Coulter
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	01/10/2007

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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**

Blue Sky Fostering is an independent fostering agency based in Romsey, Hampshire. It was established in 2005. It now offers placements across a large geographical area in the south of England from Gloucestershire in the west to Sussex in the east. Short and long-term placements are provided for young people, including mothers and babies. The agency provides foster placements to a number of local authorities.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This announced inspection assessed the service against the key national minimum standards for fostering services. Evidence was gathered from a number of sources, including questionnaires, records and documents and discussions with carers, agency staff and young people.

The agency's child-centred approach lays great emphasis on the importance of matching children and young people with carers who have the requisite knowledge and skills to meet their often complex social and emotional needs. The high incidence of placement stability indicates that the matching process is effective. Carers feel they are extremely well supported by their allocated agency workers. There are well-developed monitoring systems that ensure all placements are subject to regular review.

The agency operates with experienced and highly motivated carers who provide children and young people with opportunities to pursue healthy lifestyles. The health and well-being of each young person are carefully monitored. Carers are proactive in seeking out specialist services to address areas of concern such as mental health. Children and young people are supported in accessing appropriate educational and training opportunities. The service is inclusive and involves young people and carers in its development.

There is one recommendation arising from this inspection, which is aimed to further improve the quality of the current provision, which is outstanding.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

One recommendation regarding educational attainment was made during the last inspection. The agency now closely monitors the educational progress made by young people, and carers seek out additional tutorial support when required.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that children and young people are matched with carers who have the requisite knowledge and skills to meet their often complex physical, social and emotional needs. The health needs of each young person are identified prior to placement and consents are obtained for medical interventions. Health plans provide guidance for carers on how each individual's needs can be met. The health and well-being of each young person are monitored on an ongoing basis and health plans updated in response to changing needs. Carers ensure that children and young people are provided with access to appropriate medical care and seek out referrals to address specific needs such as mental health. A record is kept of all medical appointments and interventions. The agency provides carers with information and regular training on health-related issues.

The agency promotes the concept of healthy living, and carers encourage children and young people to eat wisely and undertake regular exercise. Prior to placement, carers are provided with information and guidance on dietary requirements associated with cultural or religious needs. All carers undertake first aid training and there is clear guidance available on the storage and administration of medication. Carers who specialise in supporting mothers and babies liaise extremely effectively with health professionals such as midwives and health visitors. Evidence indicates children and young people receive excellent individualised care and support that meet their identified health needs.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency recruits carers through advertising in the local press, the internet and by word of mouth. The agency has a team of dedicated staff who operate a rigorous selection system. Although the agency aims to recruit carers from all sections of the community, all prospective carers must meet a set of stringent criteria. All prospective carers are subject to a comprehensive assessment process that includes checks on both themselves and family members. Health and safety assessments are also carried out in respect of their properties and pets.

Prospective carers are allocated a member of staff who monitors their progress through their initial training. An effective quality assurance system ensures that all necessary information is obtained and checks completed before they are presented to panel. During their initial training prospective carers are introduced to the concept of safeguarding and are made aware of their personal responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any child protection concerns. Carers reported that the selection and training programme is extremely thorough and made them fully aware of the social and emotional demands that fostering could place on them and their families. Evidence indicates the agency operates with a pool of child-focused carers who offer a wide range of skills and experience.

The agency aims to ensure that young people are matched with carers who can effectively meet their needs. The small number of placement breakdowns indicate the matching process works well. The agency has a small team of staff who seek information from placing authorities on the physical, social, emotional, cultural, educational and religious needs of the young people to be placed. Agency staff are quite clear about the strengths and experience of their carers and evidence indicates that great care is taken to match young people with appropriate households. All new placements have to be approved by the manager. The matching process takes into consideration the skills and experience of carers, the composition of their households and the suitability of the location. Each placement is considered on an individual basis. Carers reported that they were never put under pressure to accept placements. Comprehensive plans are developed in respect of each placement and provide carers with clear guidance on how the care needs of the young people in their care can be met. All placements are subject to regular review.

The agency benefits from having a very experienced manager who has been in post for a number of years and has contributed significantly to its growth and development. She is held in high regard by both agency staff and carers who clearly value her knowledge and expertise. The manager has a 'hands-on' approach and keeps abreast of the progress of all young people in their placements. The manager is well supported by the agency directors, one of whom fulfils the role of decision maker.

The agency employs both administrative and social work staff. Staff are recruited to the agency by a well-established process that requires them to complete a detailed application form, undertake a Criminal Records Bureau check and provide the names of referees who can comment on their knowledge and skills. All new staff have to undertake a full induction before assuming their full responsibilities. The agency operates with a team of experienced and dedicated staff who access regular training opportunities to keep their knowledge current.

The agency operates two fostering panels and has a dedicated member of staff to manage their operation. While one panel has been operational for some time, the other has been recently formed to meet the growing demands in a new geographical area. The panels consist of members with appropriate skills and experience. There are clear written policies and procedures for their operation. The panels maintain independent scrutiny of the agency. Carers reported that while appearing at panel had been stressful, its members had put them at ease and sought information in a polite yet thorough manner. Panel minutes are detailed and clearly reflect how decisions are arrived at.

Although children and young people receive support from placing authority social workers, agency staff regularly check on their well-being and will spend time with them during their regular supervision visits. Young people indicate they are happy with the degree of support they receive and are aware of how and to whom they can direct concerns. Young people's views of their placements are obtained as part of the

annual reviewing process. There is an effective out-of-hours system and well-established procedures in the event of a young person going missing.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Agency staff and carers are clearly aware of the contribution education can make to the future prospects of young people in care. Carers are proactive in securing suitable educational placements for the young people in their care. If a child or young person enters care with a stable educational placement every effort will be made to maintain it. Carers are actively involved in liaising with school staff and advocate on behalf of children and young people to ensure they are being provided with access to appropriate educational resources. For example, carers have sought additional tutoring for young people for whom English is not their first language. Carers attend educational reviews and contribute to the development of education plans. The agency recognises the achievements of all the children and young people in its care.

The agency has expanded in recent times and now recruits carers from within an area of the south that extends from the Severn in the west, to Sussex in the east. The agency values diversity and has recruited carers from a range of social and cultural backgrounds. Careful matching ensures that young people from minority communities are placed with carers who are sensitive to religious and cultural needs. The selection and training of carers addresses diversity issues around gender, religion, ethnic origin, culture, disability and sexuality. Evidence indicates that staff and carers confront discrimination and inappropriate practice.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

Carers assist young people in maintaining contact with their families by providing phone and computer access and transport for visits. All contact arrangements are made explicit in placement plans and the role of carers established. A number of carers reported that contact visits can be stressful for all concerned and felt that its impact on children and young people was not always given the priority it deserves. Although contact visit arrangements are regularly monitored and specific difficulties discussed, there is currently no systematic recording system of children and young people's behaviour both before and after contact.

Children and young people indicated that they were aware of how and to whom they could register any worries or concerns. Most indicated they would talk directly to their carers or social workers. Carers reported they monitor the well-being of children and young people in their care on an ongoing basis. The agency is successful in involving young people in decision making about their futures and participation in reviews is high. Agency staff are extremely successful in mediating between young people and their carers. The high level of placement stability indicates that most

difficulties within placements are satisfactorily resolved. Young people are involved in the development of the service and their views are sought through support groups, one-to-one meetings and questionnaires.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

The stability provided by carers has resulted in many placements being made permanent. As a consequence many young people are now placed until they complete their education or training at 18. The agency has recognised the importance of preparing young people for life after care and has introduced group training sessions to equip them with a range of independent living skills. Carers also provide a range of opportunities in the home for young people to master key domestic skills such as cooking.

All carers receive an allowance based on a nationally agreed rate. Individual placement agreements between the agency and carers make clear any additional expenses. Carers confirmed that their allowances are always paid on time and that the agency is extremely responsive to changing needs and circumstances. For example, financial resources were immediately made available for carers to accompany a young person for medical treatments in London.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has developed a comprehensive Statement of Purpose that clearly states its child-centred approach to fostering and details the service it offers. The statement is written in clear unambiguous language and is updated in response to changing circumstances. A number of age-appropriate guides have been produced for children and young people. These guides explain, in child-friendly terms, what being fostered with Blue Sky carers will mean for them. Young people's guides are made available to them prior to any placement

The agency operates with a group of well qualified and motivated staff who are intent on delivering a high quality service for vulnerable children and young people. All staff are provided with job descriptions and undertake a full induction on appointment. Monthly supervision sessions provide opportunities for reflective practice. The agency benefits from having directors with firsthand childcare experience. Staff reported that the directors are approachable and are always willing to offer support and advice. Staff and carers work in partnership with a number of different agencies to ensure that the children and young people in their care have their educational, health and social needs effectively met.

Staff are provided with opportunities to extend their professional knowledge and skills by engaging in different aspects of fostering, from carer training to direct work with young people. The social work team is supported by a support team of able

administrative staff. Communication among staff is good and regular team meetings provide opportunities to share information. Although staff acknowledge they are always busy, they feel that manageable caseloads enable them to provide effective support to carers.

There is an expectation that carers, like staff, will continue to develop their knowledge and skills. The agency has developed a training programme that enables carers to progress to a National Vocational Qualification at level 3 in childcare. There is a high level of satisfaction about the quality of training. Carers are also appreciative of the advice and guidance provided by the agency's therapist. A number of carers specialising in the care of mothers and babies said they would appreciate the opportunity to meet and discuss issues of common interest.

Carers feel well supported by their designated workers and receive supervision every two weeks. In between supervision sessions, carers maintain communication by phone and email. Carers feel they are listened to and that advice and support are always available. All carers are subject to an annual review that, among other things, examines the success of placements and checks domestic arrangements. Carers can access both formal and informal support groups in their areas. There is an effective out-of-hours service, and carers can access advice at any time.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding and staff and carers advocate effectively on behalf of young people in care to ensure they are not discriminated against. Carers are recruited from all sections of the community regardless of their race, creed or sexual orientation. Although the agency provides carers with information on the distinguishing features of different social and cultural groups, it warns them against the danger of responding to cultural stereotypes. There are excellent systems in place to ensure that any specific cultural needs are identified prior to placement and strategies developed to meet them. Carers met during the course of the inspection were all treating the young people in their care as unique individuals with their own specific needs.

Records are written in clear unambiguous language and contain recent and relevant information. Individual files are accessible with clear indexing. Confidential information is appropriately stored in locked facilities and electronic data can only be accessed by authorised personnel. There are established protocols for home working and although staff reported that at times difficulties can arise maintaining internet access, lines of communication appear effective. A new communication system is already planned and is due to be introduced in the near future.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- introduce a recording system to monitor the behaviour of young people both before and after contact visits. (NMS 10)