



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Children First Fostering Agency Ltd

**9 Lords Court
Cricketers Way
Basildon
Essex
SS13 1SS**

Lead Inspector
Jackie Graves

Announced Inspection
15th January 2007 10:00

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Fostering Services*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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SERVICE INFORMATION

Name of service	Children First Fostering Agency Ltd
Address	9 Lords Court Cricketers Way Basildon Essex SS13 1SS
Telephone number	01268 567330
Fax number	01268 289716
Email address	children-first@cffa.co.uk
Provider Web address	www.cffa.co.uk
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Children First Fostering Agency Ltd
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Miss Lynsey Jane Clachar
Type of registration	Fostering Agencies

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 6th March 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

Children First Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency with limited company status.

The agency was established in April 1999 and aims to provide fostering placements for children and young people within the birth to eighteen years age range.

The agency is fully committed to providing a multi-cultural service and has recruited foster carers from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In particular, the agency has specific expertise with regards to caring for children of an African or Afro-Caribbean background.

The agency assesses each child's needs against the carers' ability to meet these needs and only offer placements where an appropriate match can be made.

The agency arranges long term, short term and respite, bridging, emergency, and parent and child placements.

Children First is centrally managed from its head office in Basildon, Essex. New accommodation has been provided in Bedford to replace the Luton office.

At the time of the inspection, fifty-five children were placed by the service.

SUMMARY

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

A lighter touch inspection was carried out on this occasion. Three foster families and the children they care for were case tracked and visits made to two homes. It was not thought necessary to observe a fostering panel this year.

Thirteen carers, eleven children and one placing officer gave their views in questionnaires. Records were examined when visiting the Basildon premises. The agency provided information to contribute to the inspection.

During the inspection, the registration of Miss Lynsey Clachar, as manager, took place. Mr. Woody Clachar continues to be involved in the agency as director and responsible individual.

The inspector would like to thank the children, carers, staff and directors for their help with this inspection.

What the service does well:

The agency continues to provide an excellent service to children and carers and to meet or exceed all National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services.

The majority of children who returned questionnaires said they 'Always' feel well cared for where they are living and one said they 'Usually' do. Young people were generally of the opinion that carers support their education, help them develop their interests and keep healthy.

Carers were asked what the service does to help them care for children:

'Support in therapy and finding safe recreational facilities for the young people we have at present.'

'The support with any problems that may occur. Attend meetings with me to give me extra support. Support me with education of the children and visiting the schools with me. Also, by having a yearly holiday where everyone meets up together and has a great time.'

A placing authority indicated that the service works very well in partnership with them and wrote about the most positive aspects of a foster home:

'The commitment and support to the children has been enormous...the foster carers are keen and committed to addressing all the needs of the children.'

The agency is proactive on children's behalf, advocating when children receive a poor service from local authorities.

What has improved since the last inspection?

The premises in Hockley were unsuitable for people using wheelchairs or those with serious mobility problems; the agency has rectified this situation by finding new premises in Basildon with accessible ground floor meeting rooms, sufficient space and a bathroom for disabled people. The new offices provide a suitable venue for training, meetings, storage of records and work.

The agency has updated their behaviour management and quality assurance policy documents.

Carers and staff reported that the training programme has been improved in the last year and a considerable investment made in ensuring carers have the skills and knowledge they need to best meet the needs of children and young people.

No requirements or recommendations were made as a result of last year's inspection but the agency monitors what it does to continually improve the service it provides to children and their foster families.

What they could do better:

No requirements or recommendations were made as a result of this inspection as Children First continues to meet or exceed all the minimum standards. The agency has its own effective systems of quality assurance and continues to monitor its own service to ensure consistently high standards.

The placing authority questionnaire reported no negative aspects to the foster home and nothing the service should change in its provision for, or care of, children.

The majority of carers who responded said there was nothing the fostering agency could do to provide a better service. Children First organises an annual holiday for carers and their families; one carer valued the holidays but requested an alternative venue to Butlins. The agency stated alternative venues have been considered and explored with foster families, but the overwhelming response from children has been in favour of Butlins.

Another suggestion from a carer was that the agency reward children for their achievements; it was confirmed that the education officer is given a budget to do this and rewards children's efforts and achievements with certificates or gifts.

The last suggestion was to recognise the input from birth children in foster families. The agency acknowledges birthdays of birth children, as well as fostered children and includes birth children in events such as the annual holiday. A scheme also operates where carers have the option of taking a birth child with a fostered child to a major premiership football club.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

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Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements Identified During the Inspection

Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

- The fostering service promotes the health and development of children.(NMS 12)

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

The service encourages the health and well being of children placed with its carers.

Quality in this outcome area is good.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Young people were asked if they get support and advice about being healthy; eight said 'Always,' one said 'Usually' and one said 'Sometimes.' A few gave reasons why:

'This family wants me to be healthy.'

'So you would live longer.'

'(Carer) tells me to eat healthily and tells me why.'

Carers reported that the service was 'Excellent' or 'Good' at supporting them in ensuring children are healthy and have healthy lifestyles. Comments included: '*They encourage medicals, dentist, eye test, teeth, etc. Talk to us about health problems. Encourage exercise, healthy eating, proper sleep, etc.*'

'When we encountered the beginning of an eating problem the advice/support was there straight away.'

'*The children's welfare is paramount with Children First and they always put the children first.*'

The service reports that 79% of children placed have received a health check in the past year. The service has advocated on behalf of children when local authorities have not fulfilled their responsibilities to children regarding their health.

Staying Safe

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- Any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable. (NMS 3)
- The fostering service provides suitable foster carers.(NMS 6)
- The service matches children to carers appropriately.(NMS 8)
- The fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect.(NMS 9)
- The people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people.(NMS 15)
- Fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively.(NMS 30)

The Commission considers Standards 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

3, 6, 8, 9, 15, and 30

The agency has systems to ensure people are suitable to work with children, can protect them and keep them safe.

Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency reports that no allegations have been made against any of its carers during this inspection year and no referrals have been made to POCA. Refresher training on Child Protection was planned for just after the inspection.

Those carers' homes visited were clean and well furnished/decorated, providing a homely, comfortable environment for children living in them. Carers confirmed that their homes are checked annually by the agency to make sure the homes are as safe as possible and free from avoidable risks. Records corroborated this and showed that checks were also made of transport used for fostered children. The agency has given advise to carers regarding the new guidance on car seats for children.

It was not thought necessary to observe panel as part of this inspection. The service reports that the panel continues to be suitably established and quorate, with advisers for education and health included.

As no new members of staff have been recruited since the last inspection, staff recruitment files were not examined on this occasion. On previous inspections, a robust recruitment process was evident. The agency was asked by CSCI in May, 2006, to provide details of their staff/carer recruitment as an example of good practice.

The agency has followed up references for prospective staff with telephone calls to the person giving the reference, recording this in detail. Records showed a system to highlight when police checks (CRB) are due every three years.

Those families visited felt the children they cared for had been well matched to their families. Consideration had been made to specific needs, for example to be the youngest child in a family, to be placed with two foster parents, as well as ethnic / cultural backgrounds.

Enjoying and Achieving

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service values diversity.(NMS 7)
- The fostering service promotes educational achievement.(NMS 13)
- When foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child.(NMS 31)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

7, 13, and 31

The service values diversity and promotes the importance of education. Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Young people felt their carers thought their education was important and gave examples of how they helped them aspire to achieve:

'I go to a good school and get home work.'

'Cause I'm always nagged even though it drives me mad I still end up trying hard.'

'I read every night.'

All children who responded in questionnaires said they 'Always' get the right help so they can be successful in their education.

Carers said the agency gave excellent support to them regarding education and invaluable help when trying to get the best help for children's education. In questionnaires, carers wrote:

'There is a dedicated education advisor who liaises with schools. She also attends PEP meetings and provides support/information as necessary. She is a valuable asset to the agency and a valuable support to the children and carers.'

'The education advisor has helped me with the tricky process of obtaining an educational statement for a child in my care and choosing appropriate schooling.'

Children First has staff and carers from different ethnic origins and backgrounds. The agency described seeking support from further agencies, such as churches, drop-in centres, interpreting services and resource centres to ensure that children's individual needs are met. Carers spoken to, said that children had been well matched to their families and they had been supported to address any differences.

In surveys, carers wrote about how the agency supports equality and diversity:

'We have had children from different cultures and with disabilities and have been given help both in day to day care and understanding of these.'

'They try to match children with carers of their ethnic background and if it is not possible, the carers are flexible and would go the extra mile to meet the child's needs.'

'Diversity issues are embedded in the whole culture of the organisation.'

Standard 31 is not relevant to an independent fostering agency.

Making a Positive Contribution

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person. (NMS 10)
- The fostering service promotes consultation.(NMS 11)

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

10, and 11

The fostering agency promotes consultation, supports contact arrangements and advocates for young people.

Quality in this outcome area is good.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

The agency reported that no complaints had been made against any of its foster carers, staff or foster children during the last twelve months. Children commented on how they felt they could approach the manager, or responsible individual, directly to talk about anything that might concern them.

Young people reported that carers listen to their views about everyday matters.

There was evidence that some children are not receiving statutory social work visits, with the agency undertaking tasks that should be carried out by local authorities. There was also evidence that local authorities carry out looked after statutory reviews but do not always carry out review decisions. In one case seen, this resulted in an independent reviewing officer threatening to make a formal complaint after a local authority had repeatedly failed to implement review decisions.

Contact arrangements had been supported by those families case tracked. As already discussed, sometimes review decisions regarding contact arrangements had not been actioned by local authorities. The agency plans to develop its befriending scheme to further help young people to gain confidence and express themselves.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- The fostering service prepares young people for adulthood.(NMS 14)
- The fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified.(NMS 29)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

29

The agency supports children and carers with sufficient, promptly paid allowances.

Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

Carers reported that allowances are clear and paid promptly to them. Carers wrote in questionnaires:

'The agency gives me an allowance for me to meet the children's needs in all these areas.' (access to transport, activities, education, employment, training and so on)

Carers are encouraged to save money for children to give them some financial security for their future. Supervising social workers check that allowances dedicated for savings, clothing, pocket money etc. are used appropriately.

Management

The intended outcomes for these Standards are:

- There is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives.(NMS 1)
- The fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience. (NMS 2)
- The fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified. (NMS 4)
- The fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently.(NMS 5)
- Staff are organised and managed effectively.(NMS 16)
- The fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff.(NMS 17)
- The fostering service is a fair and competent employer.(NMS 18)
- There is a good quality training programme. (NMS 19)
- All staff are properly accountable and supported.(NMS 20)
- The fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers.(NMS 21)
- Foster carers are provided with supervision and support.(NMS 22)
- Foster carers are appropriately trained.(NMS 23)
- Case records for children are comprehensive.(NMS 24)
- The administrative records are maintained as required.(NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose.(NMS 26)
- The fostering service is financially viable. (NMS 27)
- The fostering service has robust financial processes. (NMS 28)
- Local Authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers.(NMS 32)

The Commission considers Standards 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

1, 2, 16, 17, 19, 21, 24, 25, 26, and 32

The standard of management is high with a commitment to constantly improving the service. Training helps carers deal with situations and behaviours, which they may not have experienced before.

Quality in this outcome area is excellent.

This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.

EVIDENCE:

In questionnaires, most carers described the training as 'excellent.' Some comments included:

'Training is excellent and helps to face challenges and situations from different perspectives.'

Information provided by the agency showed that a broad range of training was provided and that updates in child protection training had been put on. The agency had written to some carers to remind them of their obligation to attend training each year and this had been followed up in supervision with carers.

The service reports that six carers have achieved NVQ level three (or the equivalent) with a further five working towards achieving this. In addition, eleven carers have achieved other relevant qualifications, such as NNEB, or in teaching, nursing, youth or social work.

Some carers said they had not received sufficient information about the children they cared for but were clear this was not the fault of Children First. One wrote:

'Due to inefficient Local Authorities not Children First.'

Letters were on file showing repeated requests for information on children had been made by the agency to some local authorities. The inspector was particularly concerned with the lack of response to requests for information and poor practice regarding one child and referred the local authority's poor practice to CSCI in that area. The agency's efforts to try to secure a quality service for the young person and to keep their interests at the heart of decisions were commendable.

As mentioned in the summary, Miss. Lynsey Clachar was registered as manager during the inspection. She has considerable experience, having worked for the agency for over six years, and suitable qualifications related to the care of children. She is embarking on a course leading to a management qualification. Mr. Woody Clachar, previous manager, continues to be involved in the agency as responsible individual and director.

The service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. Carers reported that they have good, professional relationships with supervising social workers that visit them frequently, also speaking to the children placed. Twenty-four hour help is available and carers praised the support the agency provides:

'The professionalism and support provided for carers is exceptional. Its training programme is excellent but above all its whole philosophy of care; putting the best interest of the child first is unrivalled.'

'Provides full support, help and regular contact during difficult times.'

The new premises provide sufficient space for staff to work and for meetings and training. The building is accessible to people who use wheelchairs or with limited mobility. A second floor is being constructed to provide further work/meeting areas and additional storage.

The agency has an open access policy so that carers and children may read their files if they wish to, with a restriction on third party information which may not be divulged without the author's permission. Confidential records are stored securely.

Carers were of the opinion that there were sufficient, experienced staff in the agency. There were clear arrangements for when a member of staff was not available and carers said that the manager and responsible individual were always available. The agency reports and is observed to have a very 'hands-on' approach to management.

There is sufficient administrative support to staff. Staff are supervised and supported by the agency to train and develop professionally.

Standard 32 is not relevant to an independent fostering agency.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) **3** Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) **1** Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 "N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
12	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	X
6	3
8	4
9	4
15	4
30	4

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	4
13	4
31	N/A

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	4

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	X
29	4

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	3
2	3
4	X
5	X
16	X
17	3
18	X
19	X
20	X
21	4
22	X
23	X
24	3
25	3
26	X
27	X
28	X
32	N/A

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection?

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.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations

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