

Excel Fostering Limited

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

Unique reference number	SC396525
Inspection date	27/05/2010
Inspector	Sue Winson
Type of inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	30/10/2009

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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

Excel is an independent fostering agency responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers. It provides a range of foster placements for children and young people, from birth to 18 years who are unable to live with their families. These include short term, emergency, long term, permanent, mother and baby, children with disabilities, and placements for asylum seeking children and young people.

The agency was registered in October 2009.

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 the key standards under every outcome area. This is a good service.

The agency provides preparation, training and support to enable foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people in their care. The staff and foster carers are child focused and work to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people.

There is a clear commitment to promoting health and education and supporting contact with significant people. The service is developing and there is a commitment and capacity to improve. Foster placement agreements do not meet national minimum standards and full information is not available on staff files. Full information about children placed is not always available to the agency and safe caring guidelines have yet to be agreed with placing social workers. Formal staff supervision and appraisal is not taking place and not all staff have job descriptions.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of the agency since registration.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service largely promotes the physical and emotional health and development of children. Children and young people are registered with dentists, doctors and opticians and receive specialised health services that they need. Foster

carers training and preparation equips them to meet children's health needs. They work in partnership with health professionals, including health visitors to the benefit of children. The agency and foster carers know about health services and agencies in the area and inform older young people about how to access them directly. The agency monitors how well foster carers are meeting health needs on supervisory visits. Monthly summaries reflect how needs have been addressed and these are forwarded to individual social workers. Foster carers provide information for the planning and review processes. The agency is active in requesting full background information from placing social workers with varying degrees of success.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The manager and responsible individual are suitable to carry out a fostering service. They have the necessary business and management skills and financial expertise to manage the work effectively and efficiently. The manager has considerable experience and holds a social work qualification. She is registered with Ofsted. All the necessary checks and references have been taken up.

Checks with the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) are carried out and references are obtained before people start work to make sure they are suitable. Telephone checks with referees are not yet carried out.

Foster carers provide a healthy and nurturing environment. CRB checks on foster carers are carried out prior to panel and referees are interviewed. Health and safety assessments are carried out during the assessment process and are reviewed on the first supervisory visit. They serve to protect children, are thorough and include pet assessments and references from vets. Accident forms are completed by foster carers and monitored by the agency. Training includes health and safety and fire safety and unannounced visits are taking place.

The agency places the needs of the child at the forefront when making matching decisions, in consultation with placing social workers and foster carers. They pursue placing social workers for written information, however, significant gaps remain which have the potential to affect matching and to compromise young people's care. Foster placement agreements do not contain all the required information, however, the agency tries to obtain such information from placing authorities. The agency considers the religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic needs of children and have been active in sourcing services in the community, sometimes prior to a placement taking place, for example, in making contacts with the local mosque and sourcing interpreters.

The fostering service safeguards young people and foster carers are positive about the value of their training. Appropriate policies and guidance are in place which inform foster carers about protecting children, bullying, absence without authority and behaviour management. Young people and foster carers are provided with information about the complaints procedures. Safe caring guidelines are written

during the assessment process, however, they are not updated in respect of specific children and young people, although risk assessments are conducted in some cases where there is high risk. Safe caring policies are not cleared with social workers. The agency has informed social workers and Ofsted of significant events and can demonstrate that child protection issues have been dealt with appropriately to safeguard children.

The fostering panel is child focused and organised to ensure that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers. The panel chair and members have a wide variety and range of relevant experience which contributes to the decision making process. The panel exercises robust scrutiny of information presented and have a quality assurance function which informs the improvement agenda for the agency.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Promoting equality and valuing diversity runs through the policies and practices of the agency. Foster carers work with young people to promote self-worth and encourage them in any interests or talents. The agency provides training and support to ensure that education is valued and carers support children and young people to maximise their opportunities.

The educational and leisure needs of young people are promoted. Foster carers advocate on young people's behalf and encourage and support them to attend education. They work together with teachers to meet young people's needs and with pre-school children provide a stimulating learning environment. Children and young people are encouraged and enabled to take part in community activities in line with their skills and interests.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency promotes contact to meet the needs of children and young people and foster carers are committed to supporting them to maintain relationships with friends and family members. Examples were given where foster carers and agency social workers give practical support to contact arrangements. Foster carer training includes the importance of maintaining contact and the expectation of the agency is that foster carers will work with parents for the benefit of the young people. Foster carers are involved with maintaining complex and frequent contact arrangements and are understanding of parents' perspectives when their child is being cared for in foster care.

The agency consults with children and young people and ensures that they have opportunities to raise any concerns or complaints. Details of the complaints procedure of the agency, and agencies which young people can access directly, are

in the children and young people's guides and supervising social workers routinely meet with them on home visits. Monthly summaries include the views of the young people. The agency has recently employed an independent complaints and children's rights worker to enhance support to young people.

Foster carers are encouraged to participate in the development of the agency and to express their views and ideas for change. Examples were given where changes have been made as a result of listening to foster carers. Foster carers own children's views are routinely sought.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Young people are prepared for adulthood and are encouraged and supported to develop life skills. Foster carers are balancing young people's need for independence with safety issues. Their preparation training includes issues about leaving care and moving to independent living.

Written information is provided to foster carers in respect of financial issues. Effective systems are in place to ensure that foster carers receive payments regularly and immediately after a placement is made. They expressed satisfaction with the financial arrangements and are clear about allowances.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Examples were given which show that young people's religious, ethnic and linguistic needs are being met and foster carers are active in equipping themselves with relevant information through a variety of sources. Foster carers ensure that children have mementos, photographs and life story work to take with them when they move on. The promotional materials of the agency reflect a multi-cultural society. Valuing diversity and equality of opportunity runs through the policies, procedures and practices of the agency.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose which outlines its aims and objectives and services provided. The young people's guide has details of how to contact Ofsted and is available in two formats for different age groups.

Appropriate policies and procedures are in place which inform the work of the agency. The document on supporting and working with foster carers outlines the expectations of the agency and their responsibilities to foster carers, including supervisory visits, unannounced visits and training. All foster carers are members of a national organisation which will give them access to independent support in the event of an allegation being made against them. A foster carer handbook provides comprehensive guidance and is a useful resource for them. The whistle blowing policy includes guidance for all people involved, including foster carers.

The manager and responsible individual are suitable people to run an agency and have considerable experience and skills in the field of social work and fostering. They are presently the only social workers in the agency (apart from two social workers who are employed on a sessional basis as panel members). They are aware of their responsibilities in terms of auditing and monitoring the functioning of the agency. Systems are in place which will be strengthened as the agency employs more staff. Arrangements for the formal professional supervision of staff have yet to be put into place. There is a clear improvement agenda.

The agency has a director of health and safety and administration who has over 30 years experience in the care sector. A finance manager has been appointed recently who has set up robust financial management systems. Regular business meetings ensure that the directors have full financial information. A firm of accountants provide auditing services. The clerical and administrative staffing has been strengthened to provide continuing support to social work staff. This also ensures that enquiries from prospective foster carers and requests for services continue to be dealt with in a timely manner as the agency grows. Administrators are clear about their roles and do not carry out social work tasks. A business manager has been recently appointed. Not all support staff have a contract and job description.

The agency has systems in place to respond to enquiries from people thinking about fostering. Foster carers were positive about their first contact with the agency and the pace of the assessment process. Thorough assessments of carers' abilities to parent looked after children are undertaken. Family members who are part of the applicant's support systems are involved. The agency now carries out face to face interviews with referees and have access to a medical adviser who signs off the health reports, and who is available for consultation. Foster care agreements are in place which contain the information needed to ensure they carry out their role as foster carers effectively.

The agency provides a three day training course for applicants which effectively prepares them for the tasks of fostering. Verbal and written feedback from attendees has been positive, particularly about the opportunity to meet with experienced foster carers and learn from their experiences. On approval foster carers start the Children's Workforce Development Council standards and then move on to vocational qualifications. There is a clear commitment from the agency to develop foster carers' skills through ongoing training and a clear expectation that they will attend. Training is also planned to meet specific needs of children in placement.

The agency has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers. The provision of support to enable foster carers to meet the needs of children is a priority. Supervisory visits monitor outcomes for children. Foster carers say they are very well supported, they can ring at any time for assistance and staff are approachable and available. An effective out of office hours system is in place. Childcare arrangements are provided which allow foster carers with young children to attend support groups.

The agency operates from an office within a building owned by the manager. It has its own designated office, computer and telephone system. The building has a reception and waiting area that can be used for the agency and there is a facility to use other rooms in the building for training. The building is alarmed and regular fire checks take place. There is adequate space for the secure storage of records. Case records for children and foster carers are well organised.

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):

- ensure that safe caring guidelines are cleared with the child's social worker (NMS 9)
- ensure that all staff receive management supervision and appraisal (NMS 20)
- ensure that all staff have clear written details of the duties and responsibilities expected of them (NMS 20)
- ensure telephone enquiries are made as well as obtaining written references (NMS 15.3).