

New Routes Fostering

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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Inspector	Martha Nethaway
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Setting address	Father Hudson's Society, Coventry Road, Coleshill, Birmingham, B46 3ED
Telephone number	01676 434 000
Email	enquiries@fatherhudsons.org.uk
Registered person	Father Hudson's Society
Registered manager	Anna Sharkey
Responsible individual	Kevin Patrick Caffrey
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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

New Routes is a small, voluntary fostering project which was set up in 1992. It is one of the services provided by Father Hudson's Society and is based at their head office in Coleshill, Warwickshire. The project recruits carers within a 25 mile radius of the office and in Birmingham city centre, but is willing to consider carers outside this area, providing they are willing to travel to training and support groups.

This service offers a range of placements, short-term or permanent, single or sibling and short break.

The aims of the project are to offer high quality family care experiences to young people through the recruitment and retention of a wide range of carers who can offer placements consider fully each young person's race, culture, religion and disability, to enable their individual needs to be met.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This was a full inspection that focused on all the national minimum standards.

This fostering project continues to maintain outstanding outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Responses to questionnaires indicated a high level of satisfaction with the fostering project. One of the key areas highlighted is the characteristic of having a small fostering project with the benefit of knowing the supervising social workers and managers at the project really well. They demonstrate unyielding commitment to provide outstanding support, supervision, help and guidance. This is highly prized by foster carers. In turn, foster carers provide excellent care, support and guidance to the children and young people entrusted into their care. One staff member summed this up: 'The fostering project has a stable staff group and a committed group of long-standing and motivated foster carers.' The fostering project achieves most successfully, one of its core aims which is about 'achieving stability, security and permanence for children and young people placed within the service.' This is underpinned by comprehensive policies, procedures, thorough assessment, well-matched placements, training and quality assurance processes that help support the complex task of providing effective outcomes for children and young people. This is bolstered by high quality management and a very clear strategic overview of strengths and areas for continual development.

As a result of this visit, there are no requirements or recommendations set.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection in February 2008 there were no actions or recommendations set.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Outcomes for individual children and young people are excellent and demonstrate highly individualised care and support that reflect each child or young person's needs exceptionally well. Children and young people live in a healthy environment where their physical, emotional and psychological health is exceptionally well promoted and where they are able to access the right services to meet their health needs. The health and well-being of all children and young people is promoted through the thorough assessment, training and continuing supervision of foster carers. Practice is well focused with a clear direction because children and young people are encouraged to participate in decisions about their health. The supervising social workers demonstrate how they continually strive for further improvement through evaluative and reflective practice. This is evident with the supportive work undertaken with foster carers and the children and young people in placement.

Foster carers are provided with a raft of helpful information, support and guidance. All health matters related to children and young people's well-being are carefully considered during the initial matching of the child's placement and in the subsequent support offered to foster carers. Children and young people learn to value their health. For example, healthy eating is actively encouraged through a nutritious diet which includes a regular intake of fresh fruit and vegetables. One supervising social worker commented: 'The young person engaging in their own food preparation is critical to establishing a sense of responsibility, while broadening their knowledge and skill base.' This helps to establish in young people an overall healthy lifestyle.

It is an established practice for all children and young people to be registered with a doctor, dentist and optician. Foster carers support the children and young people in keeping appointments. This means that no health matters are going unchecked. Foster carers are proactive in seeking additional support for the child's emotional health. Foster carers work with specialist support such as educational psychologists, play therapists and counsellors to meet the particular needs of children and young people. This is underpinned by the fostering project's excellent training programme which includes training on the effects of attachment difficulties in the emotional well-being of young people, child protection, the importance of the role of foster carers in promoting the physical, emotional, and sexual health of the young people in their care, first aid, and the provision of a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Children and young people have equal access to activities to promote their health. Many children and young people are members of their local youth club and may attend football, swimming, dance and drama, climbing, netball, volleyball and horse-

riding. The fostering project regularly provides social events for children, young people and foster carers. Children and young people with specific interests and hobbies are actively encouraged to pursue these. This can include keeping pets and small animals.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide adequate space and are decorated and maintained to a good standard. Foster carers know and understand how to keep their homes safe and free from avoidable hazards. All children and young people in placement have their own room. Part of the recruitment process of foster carers is to ensure they have a spare room suitable for a child or young person. All foster homes visited reached a good standard with some being of an exceptionally high standard.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. Many of the children and young people have experienced abuse, harm and emotional and psychological trauma. The core guiding principle of the fostering project is to ensure that children and young people have a positive experience while entrusted to foster carers and are kept safe from harm.

The fostering project ensures that robust safe-caring guidelines for foster carers are effectively implemented and reviewed with full adherence in day-to-day practice. Foster carers and staff ensure that safeguarding support and guidance is at the core of the quality of care that children and young people experience. They learn that they have a right to be protected from any form of abuse. All children and young people know how to protect themselves because of the robust approach taken with the safe care policy and its effective implementation by foster carers. This is underpinned by the fostering network guidance. Supervising social workers regularly review practice through the supervisory visits, which include regular analysis of good practice, for both new and experienced foster carers. Individual placement plans address risk assessments for specific children and young people and their particular circumstances which are implemented effectively and regularly reviewed. The fostering project meets its aim to enable each child or young person to develop the skills and confidence to keep them safe, whilst supporting them to avoid unnecessary risk.

Young people rarely go missing but if they do, they return quickly. This is attributed to the fact that the fostering project provides planned and well-matched placements. This enhances the child or young person's investment in the placement and results in low levels of unauthorised absence. During the past year there have been no cases where children or young people have been missing. There are a tiny number of young people who have unauthorised absences, where the whereabouts of the young person is unknown for a short time because they have stayed out with friends, later than was agreed with foster carers, or missed the last bus home.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers support and encourage children and young people in their care to achieve well at school, participate in family life, engage in activities which promote and develop their inter-personal skills and build relationships. Children and young people enjoy sound relationships with their foster family, interact positively with others and behave appropriately. Foster carers offer very positive and stable environments and this ensures that children and young people feel comfortable in their placements. As a result they develop a strong sense of self and belonging in their placement.

Foster carers have high expectations and high aspirations for children and young people living in the household. To underpin this practice foster carers follow in practice a 'code of conduct for foster carers' which covers the principles at the core of good practice and reflect the philosophy and policies of the fostering project. Foster carers who are embarking on their first placement are provided with outstanding support. Similarly, more experienced foster carers are provided with excellent support that is sensitive to and meet the needs of the child placed with the foster family. Foster carers are provided with an outstanding programme of training that equips them to work effectively with children and young people. For example, the key aspect of the fostering task has included training on, 'Building Positive Relationships', 'The Drama Triangle', 'The Parent-Adult and Child Model', and the 'Take 3 Parenting Programme'.

Children and young people are able to enjoy their interests, develop confidence in their skills and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Foster carers are active and supportive of the children and young people in their care, engaging in intellectually stimulating, creative and physical activities. Friendships and leisure activities are encouraged and fully supported.

The education and achievement of children is actively promoted as valuable in itself and as part of their preparation for adulthood. Children and young people are supported to achieve their educational potential. Children and young people develop a positive attitude to learning because the fostering project ensures that education opportunities are available, appropriate and supportive to the child and young person's needs. Foster carers engage in regular communication with the child or young person's school to ensure that issues arising either at home or in school are addressed consistently and quickly.

Foster carers take a proactive role in promoting and encouraging educational achievement, ensuring that children and young people attend school regularly and are equipped to engage in the school day. Attendance levels at school are good. Foster carers attend children and young people's open evenings at school. Foster carers regularly share reading activities, playing board games and card games and

outings into the countryside and to places of interests which supports their development, learning and achievement. Children and young people benefit from the formal support that foster carers provide with home work and foster carers also become involved with school admissions and any non-attendance issues. Achievements by children and young people are celebrated in the fostering project's young person's newsletter.

Children and young people are encouraged to participate in a range of extra-curricula activities. The activities which children and young people are currently engaged in include swimming, horse-riding, football, netball, walking, climbing, bike riding, guides and the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are integral to decision making and there is a wealth of evidence to show how children and young people's views make a difference to the fostering project. Children and young people know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care. They are helped to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases, and know how to obtain support and make a complaint. Children and young people's views are sought in order that the role of foster carers is monitored and the fostering project is developed. The opportunities available for children and young people to express views include regular face-to-face discussions with the supervising social worker, review meetings, formal questionnaires and informal participation in social events. One foster carer summed this up: 'They regularly ask young people their views and always attend reviews and other meetings. They also produce a young persons' newsletter informing young people of things that affect them.'

Children and young people have a positive self-view, emotional resilience and knowledge and understanding of their background. Children and young people in placement have their needs met in relation to their gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, language and identity. Careful consideration is given to placing children and young people with foster carers who have relevant training and experience to support children with specific care needs including children with autism and a range of complex behavioural needs. Foster carers support children and young people in their dietary choices, both in terms of particular restrictions arising from adherence to religious observance, and in relation to particular likes and dislikes. Children and young people are encouraged to involve themselves in food choices and meal preparation.

Children and young people are able to make a positive contribution to the foster home and their wider community. One foster carer commented: they have, in the past, helped us in identifying specialist youth clubs and befriending facilities. They are always willing to research particular activities.' Foster carers provide different opportunities for children and young people to participate in a range of activities.

Children and young people benefit because foster carers carefully explain the importance of adhering to appropriate routines, such as helping with household chores, study and bedtime routines. Children and young people are additionally benefiting because the importance of play, hobbies and interests are actively encouraged and developed. In turn, this helps to develop social skills and enhances self-esteem.

Children and young people have, where appropriate, constructive contact with their parents and wider family, friends and other people who have a significant role in their lives. The welcome pack for children and young people clearly explains how contact arrangements are actively supported. Foster carers are very diligent with recording all outcomes of contact visits and note any issues arising from contact which is shared with the placing social worker. Contact is monitored and reviewed at monthly supervisions and at the statutory review.

Children feel part of the family. They are not treated differently to the foster carer's own children living in the household. The child's needs are met and they benefit from a stable placement. Children and young people are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster home in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel cherished and valued. There is excellent preparation for the placement of children and young people which includes a robust exchange of information. This includes up-to-date information from the current care giver, opportunities to make appropriate arrangements for continued school attendance, or the identification of a school place in cases where the child or young person is not in school. Planned meetings between the children and the proposed foster carers, in order that a mutually agreed decision about proceeding with the placement, can be made.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are prepared and supported to make the transition to adulthood so that they can reach their potential. Foster carers are provided with extensive training related to helping young people reach independence. For example, 'Moving On and Transitions Training' and 'Young People and Money'. Foster carers provide all young people with creative opportunities to learn independent skills. This includes personal self-care, cooking, cleaning, using public transport and managing budgets. All children and young people are encouraged to open bank accounts in line with the local authority policy. From an early point they are encouraged to develop awareness around managing their finances. Foster carers work in partnership with the supervising social worker and the local authority in implementing pathway plans. The success with which young people have been supported into independent living is outstanding. One supervising social worker commented: 'We now are providing a 'leavers pack', the contents of which were agreed on, after consultation with young people in foster care.' This complements the local authority leaving care grant. A number of young people have retained contact with carers so that they can access and have the support that they need. In addition, the fostering panel has the

inclusion of a care leaver who is able to reflect on the challenges of attempting to make the transition to independent living. The fostering project has just implemented a programme of 'staying put' options. There are foster carers who are supported in continuing to offer care to young people beyond the leaving care age.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Leadership and management of the fostering project are outstanding. This is due to the strong ethos and underpinning values which meet the guiding principle of providing a high quality service. This is delivered through comprehensive policies, procedures and effective social work practice. The management team lead by example, leading and developing the fostering project to achieve excellent outcomes for children and young people. One foster carer commented: 'The care and support from the fostering project is outstanding. They are always available with good practical down to earth advice.'

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The importance of, and commitment to, providing services in which equality and diversity are promoted, underpins the society's mission statement, the fostering project's Statement of Purpose and policies and procedures. The fostering project has a clear statement on anti-discriminatory practice and equality and diversity. The monitoring of this is through the assessment, training and supervision of foster carers. This is complemented by annual evaluation of all aspects of the fostering scheme. Diversity within the staff group, fostering households and the panel central list membership shows evidence of the fostering project's commitment.

The fostering project recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children they provide care for, and it is proactive in assessing the current and future needs of children. A recent development for the fostering project is a new website that is solely dedicated to fostering. Prospective foster carers are attracted to the fostering project because it is small and can offer outstanding support, guidance and help with meeting the demands of the fostering tasks. The assessment process is thorough, robust and carefully considers equality and diversity.

The fostering panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care. The fostering project has a central list of people who are suitable to be panel members. The pre-existing panel already met the requirements of the new standards and regulations, having an independent chair, vice chair and a range of members with appropriate experience and knowledge. One panel member commented: 'Reports and the necessary paperwork are sent out eleven days ahead of the panel meetings and this means that people have at least two weekends to read the associated paperwork.' There is a comprehensive quality assurance process in place that fully records how all aspects of decisions have been

made and agreed upon.

The responsible authority has information and support from the fostering project which it needs to facilitate an appropriate match between the carer and child, capable of meeting the child's needs and consistent with the wishes and feelings of the child, so maximising the likelihood of a stable placement. Referrals for placement are local to the fostering project within the West Midlands region and are received from the surrounding local authorities. The fostering project actively seeks full information before approaches are made to foster carers. If children or young people are placed trans- racially this is only done with the full agreement of the child or young person, and has tended primarily been for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people who have expressly stated a preference for an English speaking family to improve their language skills. One carer commented: 'The planning around a young person moving into a new placement is organised extremely well. This is one of the best points with regards to matching young people to the right family.'

Extraordinary efforts are always made to avoid unplanned endings to placements. When this does happen it is solely in unavoidable cases where there are risks to either the young person or to any member of the household such as assault and unfounded allegations being made.

Children, young people, foster carers, staff and the placing authorities are clear about the aims and objectives of the fostering project and what services and facilities it provides. Information is available in the Statement of Purpose and welcome pack and is informative, clearly presented and user-friendly. Alternative means of communication includes the use of interpreters. The fostering project operates within the remit of its Statement of Purpose.

The fostering project is provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children and have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. The registered person and the team leader are highly experienced social workers with a vast background in the fostering field and family placement work. Their depth, breadth, knowledge and experience mean that supervising social work staff are provided with a high calibre of management expertise. One of the foster carers summed this up: 'The fostering project is a dynamic organisation which is keeping abreast of the changes taking place in the fostering standards and are ensuring that carers are being adequately trained to fulfil their role.' All of the supervising social workers are qualified and many have post-graduate qualifications.

The fostering project is financially sound and is a viable business. The finance manager oversees all financial income generated, payroll and procurement of services and resources. There is a clear business plan and budgets set and agreed on by the fostering project ensure that it is covering its own costs. The society also makes additional contributions that are in keeping with its charitable status for the identifiable benefit of children and young people. One member of staff commented: 'Proceeds from a recent annual ball helped with recruitment of foster carers and after consultation with children and young people money was spent on activities and social

events. Finally, for when young people leave care, there is financial provision for the start-pack.'

There is careful selection of staff, fostering households and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, and there is monitoring of such people to help prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and young people. The fostering project is supported in its staff recruitment and foster carer recruitment by the personnel department. They ensure that current employment legislation is implemented effectively. Personnel files are maintained by the department and showed appropriate references, verifying written references by telephone, checking employment histories, confirmation of relevant qualifications, right to work and Criminal Records Bureau checks.

Foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. A clear framework of training and development is in place and this is used as the basis for assessing foster carers' performance and identifying their training and development needs. All newly approved foster carers are formally inducted and commence the Children's Workforce Development Council training standards which include the training, support and development standards for completion within one year of approval. Outstanding efforts are made to ensure training is accessible and relevant for all fostering household members.

Foster carers receive the support and supervision they need in order to care properly for children and young people placed with them. Foster carers are clear about how they may access support. Monthly visits by the foster carers supervising social worker are increased for newly approved carers, and when placements are new, or experiencing difficulties. One foster carer commented: 'As foster carers for the past five years, I can honestly say that the changes are positive.'

Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled in a way that provides effective protection and support for children and the person making the allegation, and at the same time supports the person who is the subject of the allegation. Since the last inspection, there has been one allegation which was subsequently proved to be unfounded.

Children and foster carers receive a service from staff panel members and decision-makers who have the competence to meet their needs. All staff receive monthly supervision including the management team, supervising social workers and the administration personnel. All staff receive an annual appraisal. Staff are fully supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children and young people.

The fostering project is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently, delivering a service which meets the needs of its users. There is a comprehensive monitoring process. This ensures that the fostering project is setting and delivering the priorities in line with meeting the needs of children and young people in placement.

Records are clear, up to date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of

the child's life. There is a clear recording policy in place, which is adhered to in practice by the foster carers and supervising social workers. Great care is taken to promote the importance of confidentiality and data protection. All records are securely stored. The fostering service intends to invest in a more advanced data system to aid and assist the project and reduce valuable time lost through the current system which relies on some staff having to manually gather key statistical information.

The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the service to meet the objectives of its statement of purpose. The fostering project has its own distinct office, and can access the head office's board room and training room for panel meetings, support group meetings, training and other formal meetings. The building is accessible to people with mobility difficulties and there is ample parking. The board room is fitted with a loop system to assist people with hearing loss.

Payments to foster carers are fair and paid in a timely way. Fees paid to foster carers exceed the 'Fostering Network' guidelines and are therefore more than the national minimum allowance for each child. Payments are sufficient to meet the full costs of caring for each child and young person placed. The system for making payments is efficient and ensures that foster carers are paid promptly and accurately. Foster carers are clear about the fostering project's payment structures and the payments due to them. Setting up of payments for purchasing equipment is clearly stated. Replacement equipment is provided as needed.

All significant events relating to the health and protection of children fostered by the service are notified by the registered person to the appropriate authorities. There is a clear process for managing the notification of significant events. These events are relatively low at the fostering project and reflect that placements are planned, stable and well matched.

Children and young people are cared for in line with their placement plan. Supervising social workers are proactive in encouraging full participation of the foster carer and the child and young person in agreeing the contents of the placement plan. The fostering project takes action to chase up outstanding reviews or visits from the responsible authority, contributes to those reviews and assists the child to contribute to their reviews.