

Freedom Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

This independent fostering agency is operated by a private company. It provides a range of fostering services for children and young people up to 18 years of age who have emotional or behavioural difficulties or learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The overall quality rating at this full, announced inspection is good. The service is making continuous progress and achieving outstanding standards of care in several areas. The service is undergoing further improvements and has the capacity and enthusiasm to raise standards still further. Outstanding practice is occurring in ensuring the good health of children and young people; the support of staff and carers; safety, and others areas. Monitoring is particularly strong and the involvement of children and young people in the service is excellent. Improvements have been made so that children and young people are also directly involved in the way the service operates.

The previous requirements and recommendations have been addressed and this report makes six recommendations. The latter relate to some administrative processes, which aim to ensure that standards of panel member's knowledge, recruitment, and dealing with any children or young people who go missing, are as high as possible. A recommendation is also made to ensure that any potential conflicts of interest are addressed in a transparent way.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection made two actions and two recommendations, which have all been addressed. Suitable checks are now in place for all staff and suitable agreements with placing authorities are in place for children and young people. These changes help to ensure that appropriate standards of care and support are in place for all children and young people. Medication in all households is stored safely to avoid the risk of inappropriate administration, and procedures for the panel have been improved.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy excellent attention to their health needs. Routine matters are addressed well and special needs receive prompt attention. Input to

children and young people's emotional health, for example, has led to improvements in their emotional well-being, education and family contact. The organisation monitors appointments centrally to double-check that children and young people attend health appointments on time. The organisation also promotes healthy eating through events during which children and young people participate, and via articles in regular children and young people's newsletters. Carers receive appropriate training on health matters, which is supplemented by additional high quality training on specific issues, for example regarding eating disorders. This means that carers implement and promote healthy lifestyles well with individual children and young people. Health promotion is rigorously promoted by the panel too, which has the benefit of a high standard of medical advice.

Carers have a thorough understanding of children and young people's health needs arising from their cultural and religious backgrounds. This means that such needs are addressed promptly and effectively. Children and young people also benefit from comfortable and well-presented homes, which facilitate good physical and emotional health. All children and young people feel that their health is given a high priority.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy a high level of safeguarding. Their safety and protection are monitored consistently with excellent results. For instance, children and young people confirmed that bullying is rare, also, few are at risk from being absent without authority. These matters contribute substantially to the overall effectiveness of placements. For example, children and young people feel safe in their foster homes. One said, 'I am loved and well cared for.' Standards of practice are improved wherever possible, for example in recruitment processes. Children and young people are helped to express concerns through a dedicated email address.

Appropriate written procedures are in place although those relating to children and young people who are missing are not sufficiently up-to-date; in practice this shortfall has minimal impact on children and young people. The organisation continually invests in staff and carers awareness of safeguarding matters, for example by the use of expert consultants. This helps to ensure that carers have up-to-date knowledge of issues such as internet safety, which they share with children and young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people are helped to behave positively through strong matching with suitable foster carers who provide clear role models. Excellent outcomes for children and young people are demonstrated by the low number of instances where children and young people resort to particularly negative behaviour. Also, carers establish very good relationships with children and young people, which leads to

them feeling as settled as possible and to confrontations being avoided.

Foster carers show excellent insight into the needs of children and young people and adjust their care accordingly. The organisation keeps practices under review and improves them wherever possible, for example with regard to the training carers receive on de-escalating challenging situations.

Education is also emphasised particularly well. Children and young people are given every opportunity to flourish and they attain academic success. School and college attendance is maintained at a high level. Prompt additional individual tuition is provided to any children or young people who are struggling with their education so their key skills are maintained. Special needs are monitored to ensure that the diverse range of children and young people's needs are met. This means they can access social, recreational and other opportunities equally with their peers despite their historical difficulties.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Effective consultation with children and young people is a highlight of the service. Children and young people all feel they are listened to well and that their views have an effect. A new social work student commented, 'They change the service to fit the young people.' A young person said, 'They always take notice of my opinions.' Excellent practice is demonstrated by children and young people's award ceremonies; a dedicated email address for their concerns; a children's panel that contributes to the organisation's procedures, and training courses for children and young people about their rights. In addition, children and young people attend events in other parts of the country and have been supported to make representations at a national level. The organisation also invests in independent assessments of the views of its children and young people. Such measures contribute substantially to improvements in the self-esteem and confidence of children and young people.

A good standard of personalised care is provided for each child and young person. With effective matching of their cultural needs and good preparation of placements, children and young people are encouraged to feel positive about themselves and their identities.

Individual packages of activities mean children and young people are treated in a way that makes them feel valued. Carers make sure that they attend clubs and groups. As in other areas, the organisation 'goes the extra mile' by providing a seaside holiday caravan for children and young people to use. The organisation also provides information about local activities so that children and young people get the most from their free time.

Children and young people feel that family contact is supported well. Arrangements are clear and meetings are attended at the agreed frequencies. Improvements have

been made so that, where appropriate, sessional workers provide assistance with contact meetings. This means that carer's time is better managed for the benefit of all the children and young people in their households.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children and young people are successfully prepared for future independence. They understand what their plans entail and take part in training sessions about such issues as managing their money. They are confident about the advice they are given. Individual matters that are important to children and young people are identified and addressed. This includes making links with local people of the same cultural background so that children and young people feel integrated into their communities.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The service is particularly well led and several areas are outstanding. There is strong monitoring and managers routinely seek to integrate improvements. Monitoring ensures effective practices occur by checking issues in several ways and by ensuring impartiality, for example in foster carer reviews. All staff and carers are enthusiastically focussed on the best interests of children and young people. This informs all aspects of the service from recruitment of culturally diverse carers to training and paperwork. In particular, staff and carers benefit from excellent support. Support, such as visits to carers and training, is adapted to individual circumstances. Written guidance for staff and carers is regularly updated so it is current and relevant. One carer represented the views of most by saying, 'I can't think of any way it could be improved.'

Children and young people are kept safe by thorough recruitment and assessment processes, which mean that only suitable staff and carers are engaged. Arrangements are made to recruit carers with particular backgrounds, so that the mix of carers meets the needs of children and young people. Good practice is also represented by the use of a small group of external assessors so that consistency is maintained. However, written records do not clearly demonstrate that all aspects of the staff recruitment procedure are followed, for example regarding the interview process and asking referees specific questions. This is an administrative gap with minimal impact on children, young people or carers.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The organisation successfully recruits a diverse work-force that ensures that children and young people's needs arising from their race, sexuality or religion, for example, are addressed well. Children and young people have appropriate and positive role-models, who contribute to building their self-confidence and understanding of their backgrounds. They are routinely consulted about the service and the care they receive; they have a direct impact on the way the service works. This gives them self-confidence and

means they are able to take as much advantage as their peers of the educational and other opportunities available to them.

Children, young people and carers all benefit from an independent and effective panel. The views of the panel play an important role in maintaining and improving the standard of service to them. In particular, there is rigorous attention to the suitability of new households. Independent observers feel the panel is 'warm and positive' towards carers. The panel operates to high standards and is well managed in most regards. There are slight shortfalls in the training of panel members to ensure they are familiar with company procedures and with annual appraisals of panel members to confirm their ongoing suitability. Also, the minutes of the meetings, while thorough, show the owner and certain family members as being 'independent' which is inaccurate and potentially misleading. However, these shortfalls have a low impact on children and young people.

Safeguarding is given a high priority too. Staff and carers attend appropriate courses and issues are routinely considered at meetings. Written procedures are in place too. However, there is a lack of transparency regarding how potential conflicts of interests arising from relationships between several members of staff are to be addressed in the event of an allegation about one of them and in terms of their supervision.

The training of staff and all foster carers is outstanding and includes the children of carers. When deemed necessary, specific courses are provided for individual carers. This demonstrates a particularly high standard of attention to children and young people's personal needs. Staff and carers are also kept up-to-date with legal and practice developments and feel extremely well-supported in this regard. The effectiveness of training is also checked to ensure that carers are able to implement it effectively. New carers receive thorough and extended training to ensure they are suitably equipped to care for children and young people. A new carer showed the success of this by saying, 'No turning back; I love fostering!'

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 the service's procedures are compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located (NMS 5.6)
- ensure each person on the central list has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance (NMS 23.11)
- ensure each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance,

paragraph 5.15)

- ensure the written minutes of panel business are full and accurate, with respect to the status of panel members (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.25)
- ensure there is a record of the recruitment and suitability checks for foster carers and those working for the service, including a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children, and a record of interviews (NMS 19.3(d))
- ensure the service's safeguarding procedure is known to foster carers, fostering service staff, volunteers and children, and that it addresses any conflicts of interest amongst staff. (NMS 22.2)