

Family Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC384460
Inspection date	17/11/2011
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Type of inspection	Social Care Inspection

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Date of last inspection	11/05/2009

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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

Family Foster Care is a privately owned independent fostering agency with a Midlands office base that also supports operations in the south and north of the country. The agency provides a wide range of placements for children.

Summary

The overall quality rating is inadequate - notice of action to improve.

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

This inspection finds that the service breaches a significant number of regulations and national minimum standards in how it safeguards children. This is due to inadequate recruitment practice and poor organisation and management. There has been a period of managerial instability since January this year that has resulted in an inability to ensure that the functions of a fostering service were efficiently and effectively carried out. The management team at the service, including directors, has been strengthened since May 2011 and there is now the capacity for improvement.

There are areas of strength and the service meets young people's health needs. Young people have positive relationships with their carers, who offer good opportunities for young people to develop interest in hobbies and leisure and provide good support for success in education. The service helps young people to develop skills for independence. The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory.

Young people, staff and foster carers are wholly enthusiastic about the quality of the care for children and have confidence that the current management team will continue with the plans for improvement already in place.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous full inspection in May 2009 found five regulatory shortfalls relating to the quality of information for and about foster carers. These were: poor foster carer agreements; the lack of information for carers about contacting Ofsted and the local authority; inadequate retention of records of those who are refused or withdraw from being foster carers; and failure to keep foster carer and children's records up to date.

Ofsted carried out a visit in response to concerns in 2010 and previous regulatory requirements were judged to be met. However, three further shortfalls were identified. These related to the failure to carry out an assessment on a foster carer, poor assessments and a lack of scrutiny by the fostering panel of the conduct of assessments carried out. There continue to be poor assessments and a lack of rigor in panel considerations.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service promotes children's physical, emotional and psychological health and makes arrangements to ensure they are able to access the health services they need. Foster carers have a good understanding of how to translate needs in respect of culture, identity and disability into individual health and personal care. They are good at promoting messages about healthy lifestyles and have worked well to improve children's quality of life through active leisure and good eating habits. Carers work in partnership with health services to make sure children receive the treatment they need and that they administer and store medication safely.

Children live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and the space they need. The service makes regular health and safety checks, unannounced inspections supports carers to provide for children's diverse needs. For example: children with disabilities have privacy, equipment and safety barriers so they are safe in the home. Foster homes are adapted to be child-friendly, with gardens for play and access to a range of community activities which promote children's development. However, training for carers does not establish that all will have training in medication, health and hygiene, although most are trained in first aid. Accident reporting mechanisms do not ensure that the organisation has an overview of significant health incidents in children's lives. These are two areas where the service has not organised effectively to ensure that it equips carers with the skills they need to care for children or that the managerial monitoring systems is able to pick up on health issues and so improve the quality of the service.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is inadequate.

The organisation's recruitment process does not ensure that people working in the organisation are safe to do so. The service has not always worked effectively in partnership with agencies concerned with child protection because staff have not always grasped the level of concern, or implemented recommendations for training and close supervision made at safeguarding meetings. Policy and procedure for safeguarding has not been submitted for consideration and comment to the local safeguarding children board and it contains out-of-date information. Fostering social workers have not had safeguarding training with the organisation and so may not be up to date with inter agency procedures for protecting children.

Foster carers are, however, clear about safe care principles but worry that they may not always have the information they need about particular safeguarding issues because placing authorities do not supply accurate information or placement plans promptly. Carers, children and placing social workers do not raise any concerns about safeguarding issues in practice. A placing social worker described carers as, 'vigilant about young people's individual needs.' Fostering social workers also promote equality and diversity and the rights of individuals and minority groups in

their support to foster carers who talk about children as unique. Children said they felt safe with carers. Fostering social workers help foster carers understand the triggers and implement strategies to reduce the incidence of children running away. Those who go missing are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return. The service works in accordance with local police and safeguarding protocols for children missing from care. The service has, however, compromised children's safety by a lack of rigor and seriousness about safe recruitment practice and child protection process.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children enjoy sound relationships with their foster family, interact positively with others and behave appropriately. One young person talked about how he felt cared for because his carers, 'give him space' when he needs it and they respect him. Foster carers and staff communicate well with young people and encourage positive behaviour. Those with children who may occasionally need to be restrained are trained to do this safely; but not all carers looking after children with challenging needs have had the training they need. Foster carers have worked with some very challenging children and have felt overwhelmed at times. The service has now begun to recruit support workers who are able to support children in placements and fostering social workers promote good practice through regular supervision which now focuses on outcomes for children.

Carers are active advocates for children's educational success and promote imaginative leisure pursuits and ordinary friendships and opportunities. One young person reported feeling continually encouraged by carers to do well at college. Carers describe getting good support to help in organising educational placements and financial bursaries. They describe excellent provision particularly for children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, in private tutor and language support. One talked of positive arrangements for their foster child who really integrated into the local school and community, becoming a prefect and receiving a special school award. Children, who need it, have specially adapted computer equipment to help them with school work. This supports children to achieve their educational potential.

Children pursue interests, develop confidence in their skills and are supported and encouraged to engage in leisure activities. Carers in Cumbria report much lots going on for foster children: girl's groups; trips and activities that enhance children's confidence. This helps children develop friendships and ordinary relationships in the community, feel comfortable in their placements and develop a sense of self and belonging in their foster family. One young person summed it up, 'all I want to say is that without the help of my foster carers, I wouldn't have come as far as I have.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children know that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account in all aspects of their care. They say they know what plans have been made and are they kept informed of decisions and changes. One talked about how she and her carer sit down and talk things over, and about compromise, so they can agree on the best way forward. Another young woman said her carer helped her because, 'she's always around to listen to me and give me help when needed.' Carers report satisfactory to outstanding practice in how the fostering social workers talk to children about their care. A carer described how the link worker spoke regularly to the child and, 'included her openly in decision making.' However, complaints information does not refer to Ofsted and children do not have the right information about how they can make a complaint, contact an advocate or the Children's Right's Director. The fostering service does not yet formally gather and take account of the views of others with an important relationship to the child about their care.

Children make good introductions to and departures from the foster home where possible. There is outstanding practice from one set of carers in making information accessible to a child that really made a difference to a smooth transition. A social worker described the excellent placement preparation and liaison by the agency and foster carers, and that although the child was still quite new there, the introductions were extremely smooth and the child's speech had already improved.

Children have a positive self view, develop emotional resilience and knowledge and an understanding of their background through personalised care. One young person said of her carers, 'they'll sit down and listen to what I say.' Carers promote self esteem when they enable children to exercise choice about the food they eat, clothes and personal items. Carers in Cumbria comment on the diversity of children placed with them and how well the agency gathers and shares information and discusses the individual needs of children in placement.

Foster carers support children's constructive contact with their parents, extended family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. Children talked about how relieved they were to be able to live close to their home communities and the difference that this made to keeping in touch with friends. A parent reports good relationships with link worker for foster carers and that she gets to read the foster carer recording on a regular basis. This sense of care, in partnership with parents, keeps children in touch with their family and community and promotes a sense of positive identity.

The fostering service plans for stable placements that meet children's needs. Social workers report that children make good progress and form good attachments to carers and children report feeling part of their foster families. One young person said they felt cared for because they were not unhappy and were contented in the foster home. They are not treated differently to the foster carer's own children living in the

household. One placing social worker said, 'the child has become immediately part of family life.' This helps children to feel loved and valued.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service makes sure that children are prepared for, and supported into, adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. Young people have occasionally remained with carers into legal adulthood and say their carers help to prepare them for independent living. Foster carers work jointly through an independence booklet providing opportunities to learn independent skills, appropriate to their age and development. One carer said the agency played, 'a very supporting role' in helping to ensure planned moves into independence.

Organisation

The organisation is inadequate.

The fostering service has had turbulent, inconsistent management. This has meant that the service has not been provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children or who have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. The Registered Manager withdrew from his role in January 2011. There have been three people acting in a managerial capacity within the last twelve months and two responsible individuals. Directors have not notified changes to their membership to Ofsted. The current leadership team indicate a willingness and ability to make improvements but are yet untested.

Children, their parents, foster carers, staff and the responsible authority or placing authority cannot be clear about the aims and objectives of the fostering service and what services and facilities it provides because information is misleading. For example the Statement of Purpose presents information that the newly appointed manager has registered with Ofsted.

The promotion of equality and diversity is satisfactory. One carer reports, 'great respect for understanding the child's cultural background, religion and dietary requirements.'

Arrangements for recruitment and assessment of foster carers are compromised because assessors are not safely recruited and may not be trained or have experience of family assessment work. This means that assessments have not been carried out properly. The responsible individual stopped unchecked staff from direct work during the inspection.

The fostering panel and decision maker have not made timely, quality or appropriate recommendations decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care. Applications have been recommended for approval

before all essential checks so that a child-centred decision cannot be made. Assessments reports have not been countersigned by a manager to ensure quality and completeness. The decision maker does not currently take account of good practice guidance for considered documentation of his decision. The agency decision maker is the responsible individual for the agency, and is also a back-up carer; he has assessed prospective foster carers and signed off minutes of panel meetings where he has presented applications. There are three panels operating in each of the three geographical locations of the business and some minutes show confusion about the nominated decision maker for the agency. The agency has not previously notified foster carers about approval decisions or changes to their approval category and foster carer agreements are not always signed before children are placed. These basic primary functions have been badly managed. However, there is now a new panel advisor and new procedures to guide the agency in good practice for panel processes and approval recommendations. New administrative systems now track approval processes and reviews, all of which are currently considered by the panel.

There is inadequate process for the selection of staff, fostering households, volunteers and to the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel. This includes staff, the responsible individual and independent assessors carrying out assessments. Safer recruitment procedures are not in place and staff involved in making appointments have not had training in current statutory requirements and guidance or operated good practice. This means there has been no managerial steer or monitoring to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children.

Foster carers receive some training to carry out their role effectively. One carer commented positively about the training, advice and information about children in their care and training was helpful. However, there is not a clear framework of training and development in place. There is no system for identifying their training and development needs. Carers do not routinely have training in managing challenging needs, medication and health care, health and hygiene and safe care and this affects their ability to respond to requests for placements for vulnerable children with the experience and skill required.

Foster carers receive support and supervision in order to care for children placed with them. This good support impacts positively on the quality of care that children get in foster homes. Some carers report really responsive and skilled support. Some say that knowing they can depend on fostering social workers has helped them maintain often very challenging placements. One carer said her supervising social worker, 'goes the extra mile.' The quality of this support means that several carers have chosen to follow particular workers from different agencies to this one. One carer described working for the agency as, 'a very positive experience in which children and carers are always supported and valued.' Carers acknowledged that there had been times when they were concerned about the service, and one said, 'it flies by the seat of its pants'. However, the majority felt that there had been significant improvements since the new management team of the Responsible Individual and manager took control. One carer said, 'I believe in this service,' and others felt that the new team were good at identifying issues and dealing with them.

Allegations and suspicions of harm have not been 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. There have been occasions when areas of concern about carers, or need for additional support, are not addressed at the time they are identified, but wait for a review. This means that children may not be well supported in the placement by the timely actions of the service. There was evidence of improving practice about the management of concerns, but procedures are out of date and lack critical information about the correct routes and referral procedures. The service is not yet fully aware of the new good practice guidance for ensuring carers are provided with a summary of the action and conclusion of any allegation.

The organisation has not ensured that children and foster carers receive a service from staff, panel members and decision makers who have the competence to meet their needs because checks have not been made to ensure staff are suitable people or that have the skills to do the work they are expected to do. Staff carrying out assessments this year were not trained in assessment. There is not a good quality learning and development programme which includes induction, post qualifying and in-service training. While managers are currently undertaking managerial qualifications, there has been no safeguarding training for social work staff. Staff have not had consistent skilled support and guidance from managers to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children. Supervision has been haphazard and there is no appraisal system for staff. There are signs that this is happening now. Staff do, however, say they feel valued, respected and listened to by the new management, and that the agency values the welfare of children. The fostering service is beginning to develop strategies for assessing current and future needs of children and has plans to recruit, assess and support a range of foster carers that will meet the needs of children who need placements locally. A social worker described carers as, 'fantastic, flexible, welcoming and professional.' Matching is satisfactorily managed. A social worker had full confidence in the ability of the agency to, 'make sure they match the right child with the right family.'

There are some areas of real strength in the work that some carers do with children to compile life story information and help them to understand their heritage and path through care. One carer reported that information to support the child in placement was, 'relevant and easily accessible' and described a constant sharing of ideas and information. However, this has not always included an up-to-date care or placement plan from the placing authority. The fostering service does not consistently chase children's placement and care plans to ensure that carers have the right information.

Other records about the service and about children and foster carers are not clear, up to date or stored securely, and therefore do not contribute to an understanding of the child's life. These include: foster carer agreements (not produced in a timely way); notification of approval categories; accident records; and the lack of a robust record system for withdrawn, rejected or refused applications to become foster carers. There is a lack of clarity about the legal status of respite or back-up carers who have not been through a full approval process, yet who appear on the register

of foster carers.

There have not been clear or effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service that have been sustained throughout the management changes. This has resulted in the recent ineffective and inefficient functioning of the service. There are not yet proper systems for managing serious incidents, allegations or complaints or ensuring quality. Not 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. Roles and responsibilities are becoming clearer but have been hopelessly confused and conflicts of interest have continued to occur. The organisation's directors have not managed the agency with skill or competence through the past twelve months as evidenced by the high number of regulatory shortfalls. There are, however, signs of a fresh commitment to get this right from the current three significant managers: the responsible individual, the appointed manager and the new company director.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

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 (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg	Statutory Requirement	Due date
22 (2011)	keep a record of all accidents occurring to children whilst placed with foster parents (Schedule 2, Regulation 22(3))	18/11/2011
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed with foster parent is safeguarded and promoted at all times (Regulation 11(a))	18/11/2011
18 (2011)	ensure the procedure for complaints includes the contact details for the Chief Inspector (Regulation 18(3))	31/12/2011
26 (2011)	ensure assessments of any person the service considers may be suitable to become a foster parent, must be carried out in accordance with this regulation (Regulation 26)	18/11/2011
27 (2011)	give foster carers notice in writing specifying any terms on which the approval is given, and enter into a written agreement with them covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 ('the foster carer agreement') (Regulation 27)	18/11/2011
3 (2011)	ensure the fostering service is conducted at all times in a manner that is consistent with its statement of purpose; particularly that information about managerial arrangements are correct and do not present people as Registered Manager who are not (Regulation 3)	18/11/2011
5 (2011)	give notice to the Chief Inspector that the 'responsible individual' satisfies the requirements of Schedule 1 as to fitness (Regulation 5)	31/12/2011

2010	provide information and documents in an application for registration to the Chief Inspector (Care Standards Act 2000 (Registration) (England) Regulations 2010, Part 2, Regulation 3)	31/12/2011
20 (2011)	not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so and full and satisfactory information is available as specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20)	18/11/2011
12 (2011)	ensure procedures for the protection of children protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect; and that staff, foster parents and children have the contact details for the area authority and the Chief Inspector to refer any concern about child welfare or safety (Regulation 12 (3) (e) (f))	31/12/2011
19 (2011)	ensure staff working for the purposes of the fostering service are qualified, competent and skilled (Regulation 19)	18/11/2011
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal (Regulation 21)	31/03/2012
8 (2011)	manage the fostering agency with sufficient care, competence and skill (Regulation 8(b))	18/11/2011
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care. This must provide for consultation with foster parents, children and their placing authority. Provide the Chief Inspector with a written report of any review conducted for these purposes and, on request, to any local authority (Regulation 35)	31/03/2012
39 (2011)	give notice in writing of any change of director, manager, secretary, or other similar officer of the organisation (Regulation 39(1) (e))	31/12/2011
30 (2011)	compile a record of for each person whom they do not approve as a foster parent, or who withdraws their application, which must include assessment information, report submitted to panel and any recommendation made by panel and any notification given under regulation 27 (Regulation 30(5))	31/12/2011
31 (2011)	ensure clarity about particulars on the register of foster parents. For example that only approved foster parents are particulars are maintained (Regulation 31)	31/12/2011
36 (2011)	notify without delay any events of the table in Schedule 7 (Regulation 36)	18/11/2011
17 (2011)	ensure that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3) (d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17(3))	31/12/2011

Recommendations

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

- ensure the child's wishes and feelings and the views of those significant to them, including their family, social worker Independent Reviewing Officer are sought regularly on the child's care (NMS 1.4)
- ensure children know how to access an advocate and how to contact the Children's Rights Director (NMS 1.5)
- ensure written reports on suitability to become a foster carer are countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the providers' fostering teams (NMS 13.7)
- ensure areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed at the time they are identified, where appropriate, rather than waiting for a review (NMS 13.9)
- ensure the fostering panel and agency decision maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations /decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care (NMS 14)
- ensure written confirmation of the agency decision maker's decision is sent to the foster carer or prospective foster carer within five working days (NMS 14.10)
- ensure that the agency decision maker: lists the material taken into account; identifies key arguments; considers fairness of panel process and approach; considers whether further information has subsequently come to light to impact on the recommendation and decision; and identifies reasons for their decision (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 5.40)
- ensure the children's guide includes how children can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Right's Director and Ofsted and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure careful selection of staff, fostering households, volunteers and the central list of persons for the panel, and monitoring of such people to help prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children (NMS 19)
- set out in foster carer personal development plans, how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their developmental needs and experience, for example in health and hygiene issues and first aid, safe care training, and in positive care and control of children (NMS 20.5)
- submit the child protection procedures for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and to the LADO (NMS 22.4)
- ensure a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a member of a fostering household or staff member and includes how the allegation was followed up and resolved, action taken and decisions reached is

kept on the person's confidential file. Supply a copy to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded (NMS 22.7)

- as soon as possible after an investigation into a foster carer is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster should be reviewed (NMS 22.8)
- ensure any staff involved in assessing the suitability of persons to be foster carers are social workers, have experience of foster care and family placement work and are trained in assessment (NMS 23.1)
- ensure all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised annually and this takes account of the views of children (NMS 24.6)
- ensure the board members monitor the management and outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the service is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children (NMS 25.7)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends (NMS 25.2)
- in considering the suitability of any foster carer to also work for the fostering agency, care must be taken to avoid any actual or perceived conflict of interest, if they might have inappropriate influence over matters relating to their fostering task (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services 4.12)
- give a copy of the placement plan to foster carers as soon as this is provided by the responsible authority and follow up if provision of the care plan is delayed. (NMS 31.2)