

Anchor Fostercare Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Lucy Ansell
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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

Anchor Fostercare Services is an independent fostering agency based in Medway, Kent. The service supports foster carers in Kent, Sussex and London. Long term, permanent, time limited and emergency care placements are offered for children and young people aged 0-17.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This satisfactory fostering service has a number of significant shortfalls. There are five regulatory and seven minimum standard shortfalls. The overall management of the organisation is competent and the staff team provides a good service. However, the lack of robustness of paperwork, lack of good quality training and low level of quality assurance monitoring has led to an overall judgement of satisfactory. Despite this, standards of care given to the children and outcomes achieved in some areas are very good. The initial assessment, training and recruitment of foster carers is comprehensive, and ensure the service has professional carers. Young people are matched to the foster carers, ensuring placement stability that secures good outcomes for the young people. Foster carers are clear about their roles and responsibilities to safeguard children, but a lack of child protection training for foster carers weakens this outcome. Educational attainment and a strong child focus are strengths of the agency. The agency demonstrates a strong commitment to equality and diversity throughout all the outcome judgements.

Improvements since the last inspection

The last inspection of the agency was four years ago and three requirements were made. Two have been fully met. This was to ensure a foster carers' and also a child's register was maintained. A third requirement was about staff recruitment records. The agency has made some improvements to their recruitment processes, however records are dispersed, and still do not evidence a full record.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children and young people live in healthy environments where their physical, emotional and psychological health is promoted. They are able to readily access services necessary to meet their health care needs. Staff and foster carers ensure that all known health and medical needs are highlighted at placement negotiations.

Children and young people in placement are promptly registered with primary health care services. This ensures placements adequately meet health care needs of children and young. However, foster carers do not hold documentation that gives them authority to consent to medical treatment, so that medical assistance is available if required for the young people in their care.

Foster carers know their health-related responsibilities and the roles of involved professionals. They understand the importance of their role in securing a good standard of health care for children. They promote healthy lifestyle choices by ensuring regular physical activity, providing healthy meals and supporting health appointments where this is required. Where specialist medical advice and support are required, foster carers proactively seek relevant information through a number of channels. There is also good liaison with local looked after children's nurses and child and adolescent mental health services. Staff and foster carers have written guidance about the safe administration of medication.

Children and young people have access to a range of sport and physical activities that promote exercise. Staff and foster carers encourage them to identify appropriate interests to support this, including sporting activities. Children and young people live in foster homes which provide good, private space and properties that are comfortable, well furnished and decorated. Foster homes are clean, hygienic and homely in appearance. All foster carer homes are subject to a health and safety inspection check at least annually as well as unannounced visits to the home. Children and young people are happy with their surroundings. Children and young people's bedrooms are appropriately decorated and furnished and meet their needs and individual tastes.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers generally provide a safe, secure, stable and nurturing environment. However, the vast majority of carers are not trained in appropriate safer-care practice and therefore there is a potential risk in ensuring that children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm. Safeguarding practice is inconsistent. The agency does not implement effective safe caring plans for foster carers' homes. These do not include relevant risk information or strategies to reduce risk to the young person; for example, the safe use and monitoring of information technology and young people's particular social vulnerabilities. Whilst there is a clear child protection policy and procedure, senior staff do not always follow this and does not always make notifications to Ofsted about safeguarding allegations.

Children and young people rarely go missing from their foster care placements. Staff and foster carers have access to good written guidance that outlines policies and procedures to be followed in the event of unauthorised absences and children who are deemed missing. These protocols are shared with relevant bodies to ensure compliance with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care procedures. These procedures are well known by the foster carers and implemented well.

However, the management monitoring of these is poor and does not identify trends or patterns for children. The fostering service does have an effective 24-hour support system for foster carers, which foster carers find essential during distressing times. Children have their own guide which contains information on agencies dedicated to their safety and welfare. This includes information on how to complain, report concerns and access advocacy services.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The promotion of educational attainment of children and young people is good, and a clear strength of the fostering service. This is of benefit to children and young people. Foster carers are proactive and consistently encourage children and young people to maximise their educational potential and future success. Foster carers have access to comprehensive written guidance and training that promotes educational attainment. Supervisory visits consistently explore children and young people's educational development and look for ways to further enhance this. Staff and foster carers work effectively with educational professionals to ensure educational needs are well met. The fostering service also provides educational tuition and financial support for educational trips and gives incentives such as driving lessons for young people attending college.

Foster carers liaise regularly with education establishments and attend necessary events. For example, one foster carer has also become school governor in order to support the young people with their education. The vast majority of children and young people in placement are attending nursery or a school provision. Foster carers and young people know the fostering service recognises and celebrates all the young people's educational achievements.

The agency considers leisure and recreational pursuits to be an important part of children's social education. Children enjoy developing their interests and grow in confidence and skills. Foster carers are keen to provide children with rewarding experiences that enhance the potential for positive outcomes in the future. Children and young people are appreciative of the efforts of their foster families to provide them with an environment that promotes and supports positive behaviour.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from participation in discussions and decision making about their future. There are a number of excellent systems in place including consultation documents, staff discussions, outings and a child's forum. Children's views are also sought during supervision visits in carers' homes. The agency actively facilitates trips and outings during the school holidays with the aim of gathering children's views through informal avenues. The children's individual identities are celebrated and all foster carers have training in life story work to encourage young people to have an

understanding and knowledge of their backgrounds.

The agency actively seeks to obtain ongoing feedback from the foster carers through the annual review process, supervision visits and meetings with the senior management team. Foster carers are made aware of the importance of listening to children. The needs of individual children in placement are an essential focus on home visits. Foster carers keep relevant memorabilia and photos for the children they foster and work with them so they have an important keepsake of their time within that family. Supervising social workers provide guidance and support to the foster carers. Foster carers are robustly supported to ensure children move into and out of their home in a planned and sensitive manner. Many former fostered children maintain good contact with their foster carers and are often considered as extended members of the foster carers' family as well as the agency.

Children benefit from placements which encourage and promote continuing links with their families. Maintaining and developing family contact and friendships are integral to the service provided. Foster carers receive appropriate training and guidance on this subject. They promote and support positive contact through a variety of ways, including letterbox, telephone calls and visits. The agency further promotes contact by providing resource workers, a contact suite and drivers to facilitate visits out of the local area.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are prepared for and supported into adulthood. The fostering service provides foster carers with support and advice regarding the promotion of independence, but does not provide specific training in this skill. There is a policy regarding enabling children to remain with their foster carers into adulthood. Foster carers work with young people to help them develop the essential skills for independent living. This includes shopping, meal preparation, managing finances, public transport and travel. Young people receive encouragement to engage with appropriate agencies and networks that help prepare them for independence. One young person stated that the foster carers were good at preparing them, 'because I am getting what I need to become an adult'. Staff and foster carers ensure that the transition from foster care placement to alternative living arrangements is as smooth as possible.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The agency recruits new carers because they possess the right skills and experience to become professional foster carers. Assessments are robust and comprehensive, with all appropriate checks and references completed. Reviewing processes for foster carers are not consistent or good enough. The service does not effectively seek the views of people significant to the foster placement. Panel have reapproved foster

carers without consultation with young people, placing authorities or birth children having taken place.

The fostering panel is properly constituted and benefits from members who bring a wide range of skills, knowledge and experience in fostering and childcare. All panel members have completed the necessary recruitment checks, training and are registered on the central list of persons considered to be suitable. However, they do not always provide a good quality assurance function. For example, by ensuring all checks of foster carers are complete prior to the first review. Panel does not always take a rigorous approach to questioning foster carer's professionalism, particularly with respect to lack of training and attendance at support groups.

Placements are stable, with children staying with the same carer for many years. Overall, the agency has careful and comprehensive informal matching processes. Referral procedures and matching arrangements ensure that children are placed with families who can meet their needs. However, there is insufficient evidence of this, particularly identified shortfalls or gaps in the match. Where practicable, each child has the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed foster carer, to support their settling into new placements. Disruptions and breakdowns happen rarely, but if they do occur they are managed well, and the young person has usually moved to another carer they know within the agency.

The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects what the agency offers. The aims and objectives have a strong focus on equality and diversity and shows how they aim to improve the outcomes for children. The two children's guides are child friendly and one is written in a mainly pictorial style for a younger age range. The guides contain contact numbers for advocacy services and Ofsted, but it does not include how they can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer or the Children's Rights Director and is not available in other formats or languages other than English. This limits its accessibility and usefulness for a child wishing to raise a concern.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Priority is given to matching children with foster carers who share their racial and cultural backgrounds and will ensure they are can follow their religious beliefs. The agency has a commitment to equality and anti-discriminatory practice which is reflected in all policies and procedures given to carers, and is shown in the practices and recruitment of staff and foster carers of the agency.

The fostering service is managed by an individual with the appropriate skills and experience to deliver an effective service. She holds appropriate qualifications, is registered with Ofsted and is clear about her responsibilities and duties. The agency is run by a senior management team that has the skills and experience necessary to ensure good outcomes for children and young people. While there have been clear improvements in some areas, the quality assurance of the service and monitoring of records is still variable. There is no review of the quality of care of the fostering service that includes a formal plan for improvement. Management monitoring does not effectively identify patterns and trends or outcomes for young people. Staff members possess the qualifications and expertise commensurate with their roles and

responsibilities. Recruitment procedures have improved, and there are proper vetting and assessment processes for all. However, personnel files sometimes do not contain all the required information to evidence a robust process; this does not effectively protect children and young people.

Foster carers are committed to their roles and responsibilities and felt they had benefited from the support and training provided. Core mandatory training includes child protection, health and safety and first aid. However, many carers had not attended the required training provided by the agency and this is not explored thoroughly in reviews. Carers are encouraged to request any training they felt would further benefit them and are actively encouraged to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council's training or the National Vocational Qualification, level 3 award. Foster carers mainly speak very positively about the support they receive from the agency. Some feel the support they receive is excellent. This includes monthly support groups, which combine training and a support element, out of hours, phone support and regular supervision from their supervising social worker. Social workers and administrative staff also receive ongoing supervision, annual appraisals and training opportunities which promote their development; this gives them the skills needed to support foster carers effectively. Supervising social workers effectively manage the on-call arrangements and this ensures families receive the same level of expertise 24 hours a day. Lines of accountability are clear and effective, and student social workers only carry out assessments under the supervision of an appropriately experienced social worker.

The service is financially sound and is able to provide staff, young people and foster carers with the resources they need. Payments and expenses are paid on time and such factors ensure a sense of security for all stakeholders of the agency. The premises and administrative systems are appropriate and suitable to enable the service to meet its objectives. Placing social workers felt the agency was good at communicating with them and keeping them up to date on their child's placement.

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
36 (2011)	notify without delay the persons or bodies indicated in respect of column 2 of the table if any of the events listed in column 1 of Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency (Regulation 36(1))	02/04/2012
28 (2011)	review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. Specifically, seek and take into account the views of the foster parent, any child placed	02/10/2012

	and any placing authority which has had a child placed (Regulation 28(3)(a)(b))	
20 (2011)	ensure fitness of workers and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20(3))	01/10/2012
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. With particular reference to training in safer-care practice and promoting independence (Regulation 17(1))	01/10/2012
35 (2011)	maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35(1)(a))	01/10/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure all foster carers are clear what responsibilities and decisions are delegated to them and where consent for medical treatment needs to be obtained (NMS 6.5)
- ensure children’s safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placement. For example, include all relevant information in individual safe care policies (NMS 4.1)
- ensure panel provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel (14.2)
- ensure where gaps in matching are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)
- ensure the children's guide is available in alternative methods of communication and contains all the required information (NMS 16.4, 16.6)
- ensure the reviews of each carer's approval include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards set by the agency, and in consideration of training and development needs, which are documented in the review report (NMS 20.6)
- monitor regularly 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)