

Quality Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Kristen Judd
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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

Quality Foster Care is an independent fostering agency in Benfleet, Essex, situated in the main high street close to local transport, shops and amenities. The agency provides emergency, short and long-term foster placements for children of all ages.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

This fostering agency offers an outstanding quality service to looked after children in foster care placements. The outcomes for children are excellent.

Children benefit from an extremely well-organised service. A high priority is placed on ensuring that children's identified individual care and support needs are carefully matched to the skills of foster carers, and as such, placements are very stable. There is excellent effective consultation with children to ensure their needs are well met. Records examined and discussions with foster carers and agency staff demonstrate that the service is very child centred. Comments made by an independent reviewing officer include: 'Very positive feedback at statutory reviews with a proactive approach.' The recruitment and assessment of potential foster carers are robust. Foster carers speak very highly of the supervision, support and training they receive to equip them to provide such positive placements for children. The manager and directors provide the service with sound leadership.

There are two minor shortfalls. Not all foster carers are achieving the Training, Support and Development Standards within the required timescales and there is a lack of clarity about the manager undertaking the role of panel advisor. Despite this, outcomes for children are excellent, and children, foster carers and independent reviewing officers are extremely positive about the quality of the service.

Improvements since the last inspection

No requirements or recommendations were made at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service pays very excellent attention to the promotion of healthy eating and lifestyles which ensures that children are able to develop positive lifestyles and emotional well-being. Carers promote children's physical, emotional and

psychological health and make arrangements to ensure they are able to access the health services. There is detailed guidance for carers in health, administering medication and first aid. All children are promptly registered with doctors, dental and optical services, and other specialist health services as required. Carers support children to attend essential routine health checks and confirm that they receive relevant information in relation to health issues. The agency ensures that all carers have signed consent to emergency medical treatment, at the time a child is placed, so that they can access timely medical intervention should a child require it. Foster carers demonstrate an excellent awareness of their role and responsibility in ensuring children's medical and health care needs are well met. They maintain detailed records of any health appointments attended and additionally keep clear records of the administration of medication. These records are regularly examined by their supervising social workers to ensure that children's health care needs are being prioritised. Regular supervision visits incorporate a detailed discussion of how carers are meeting children's health care needs and the records of these discussions are used well to inform reports for the looked after children reviews. Children's responses to questions about health in the pre-inspection survey are very positive.

The fostering agency ensures that their foster care placements provide a good physical environment for children in their care. There are efficient systems in place that ensure that each foster care household undergoes an annual health and safety check. This is very well evidenced on files. This ensures that those households are properly monitored to ensure that they consistently provide a safe environment for children to live in. In addition, the agency makes unannounced annual inspections of carers' homes to ensure that they are consistently safe, clean, secure and very well maintained. Carer households provide children with a very homely environment, with an excellent range of toys and games to stimulate and motivate them to learn and to enjoy their leisure time.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children's safety and welfare are very well promoted by the agency. The robust assessment process of prospective carers keenly explores issues relating to the safeguarding of children. Children feel safe and very well cared for in their placements. They are able to talk to their carers should they have any worries or concerns and feel that their carers listen to what they have to say. Staff and foster carers regularly receive excellent advice, information and training that promote the protection of children they care for. There is an excellent range of training, support and information about safe caring and there are written plans for this in place. These arrangements provide important safeguards for children.

Children who go missing are protected. The service works in accordance with local police and safeguarding protocols for children missing from care. Foster carers are aware of the procedure to follow and report that they are confident that they would respond appropriately in the event of this happening. Children do not run away from their placements.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children receive excellent support, which is responsive to their individual needs. Children thrive within their foster homes and enjoy warm, nurturing and supportive relationships with their foster family. Their social and emotional needs are very well promoted to enable them to develop resilience and self-control. Placements are positive, secure and very well sustained. Placement disruption is rare and children clearly benefit from this. Children receive exceptional care based on strong structured boundaries. This impacts positively on their behaviour and helps them develop very good social skills. The agency undertakes a risk assessment, as part of the matching process, and this identifies any support carers may need in relation to meeting a child's individual needs. Foster carers receive excellent guidance and support in their management of challenging behaviour. Children demonstrate positive relationships with carers.

Children are positively encouraged by their foster carers to pursue leisure interests. This helps the children to develop skills and improves their self-confidence. There is a clear understanding by foster carers of the kinds of activities that can be pursued, taking into account health and safety considerations. The agency supports foster carers to involve the children in normal family activities in the community; these include majorettes, scouts and sporting activities. Additionally, foster carers routinely take children in their care on family holidays.

Children, carers and their families enjoy social occasions that are organised and facilitated by the fostering agency. These activities are greatly enjoyed by staff, carers and children.

The promotion of educational attainment of children in placement is a clear strength of the fostering service. Foster carers consistently encourage children to maximise their educational potential and success. Their educational development is consistently reviewed during supervisory visits and statutory reviews. Foster carers act proactively on behalf of the child to ensure that they have the same academic life chances as other children.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers support and encourage the children to develop their self-confidence. Children experience life in a family environment where they can exercise choices within reasonable and sensible limits. Comments from children include: 'Our foster carers always make us feel our opinions matter.' They are supported and encouraged by their foster carers to take an active part in their statutory reviews. Foster carers are fully briefed about the child's care plan. They are able to make delegated decisions on the same basis as a reasonable parent would, taking into account risks and the emotional maturity of the child.

Children's records confirm that staff regularly meet with children. The children's guide contains information about other adults who can be contacted if required. This is a well-designed document that is child friendly. The children are confident about raising any concerns with their foster parents.

Children are supported and encouraged to develop and maintain constructive contact with family members and friends if it is safe to do so. The agency understands its duty to promote contact. Case files detail contact arrangements, especially where contact is supervised or prohibited. Contact arrangements and the impact these have on children and young people are regularly reviewed in supervisory visits. Foster carers are aware of the difficulties that may arise from working with birth parents. These can be emotionally challenging situations and foster carers are supported to manage these situations with sensitivity.

The fostering agency provides children with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes individual identity. Children are welcomed, and supported positively to integrate, into the foster family. The service undertakes careful matching of children and foster carers to help ensure appropriate and stable placements are maintained that can meet children's needs well. It is evident that this is normal practice within the fostering agency. Staff and foster carers receive information and training that explores issues of attachment well. The matching process is robust and ensures that children's individual needs are well met within identified placements. Children are very settled in their foster homes and are clearly very happy.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers have access to training and supervision focused on this aspect of the fostering task. Foster carers are aware of the importance of supporting young people to develop these skills and moving into independence. They provide age-appropriate support to children in developing independence skills through an informal process of involving young people in decision making, taking greater personal responsibility for themselves and undertaking household tasks. Supervision records and discussions with carers confirm that children are valued as individuals and that their personal, educational and social development is promoted. Carers support children in achieving their hopes and ambitions.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Overall the fostering service has excellent arrangements in place to support staff, foster carers and children.

The fostering service's robust and effective matching process enhances the potential for placement success. Staff are skilled in identifying placement issues and seeking foster carers who are best equipped to meet identified needs. Children are well matched to their foster carers, and they are very settled and happy in their foster homes. Effective matching of children with carers helps to ensure placement stability.

Fostering social work staff are knowledgeable and experienced in children's social care. Comments from independent reviewing officers include: 'I am very impressed with how the supervising social worker is aware of the children's needs.' Processes for the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers are exceptionally sound. Form F assessments are diligently completed. Foster carers spoken with confirm that the assessment process was thorough and explored their life experiences, skills and knowledge of caring for children, and included exploring their views on equality and diversity. Carers confirm that the pre-assessment training prepares them well for the challenges of fostering. Foster carer annual reviews are consistently held on an annual basis and more frequently if circumstances dictate. Staff provide comprehensive and relevant reports. Comments from independent reviewing officer include, 'detailed reports are consistently provided by the agency', and, 'the agency receives very positive feedback at statutory reviews with a proactive approach'.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The organisation respects difference and the rights and values of all individuals. Children feel that they are treated fairly by carers and say that they are treated as part of the family. Carers support children from various backgrounds to achieve very well within education and to move positively into adulthood.

All staff are provided with regular supervision and feel that support from colleagues

is invaluable. Social work staff have access to good training opportunities to ensure that they are able to provide high quality support to carers and young people. Foster carers receive excellent training which thoroughly equips them for their role, and are very complimentary about the quality of training provided. Foster carers have a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities and know how to refer any issues or concerns to the agency. Staff encourage and support carers to complete the Training, Support and Development Standards, but currently the required timescales are not always being met. Carers are very positive about the ongoing training and regular supervision that they receive. Foster carers talk positively about the responsive, reliable support from the agency. Comments include: 'On the few occasions I have needed support for emergencies Quality Foster Care have been wonderfully supportive', and, 'small friendly agency always willing to help'. Foster carers receive excellent individual support.

The constitution and practice of the fostering panel takes account of the new regulations. There are clear policies and procedures governing panel constitution and practice. The fostering panel consider carers' approvals and relevant annual reviews. Applicants to become foster carers are always invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. On occasion, the manager acts as a panel advisor to panel. However, there is no clear guidance in relation to this role. Records indicate that, on occasion, the panel use the advisor to clarify information that would normally be addressed by panel or presenting social workers. While this has had no impact on outcomes for children, it has made the lines of responsibility and accountability of the manager unclear.

The fostering agency is managed by those who are suitable to work with children. It is managed effectively and efficiently, delivering a service which meets the needs of the children placed. The manager has an excellent knowledge of childcare and fostering. Children benefit from a reflective and highly supportive service with dynamic leadership. All staff are well qualified, extremely experienced and passionate about the service that they provide. The directors of the organisation play an active role in developing and monitoring the service. They ensure that working practices, processes and systems are comprehensive and encourage ongoing good practice.

There is a Statement of Purpose and a children's guide, so that children, carers, parents, staff and placing social workers can be clear about the aims and objectives of the service. Staff recruitment processes are sound. Appropriate checks are undertaken to ensure that staff are suitably qualified and experienced and do not pose a risk to the safety of children. There are systems in place for managing financial viability, serious incidents, allegations, complaints and notifications to Ofsted. Staff are provided with robust administrative support by a knowledgeable and experienced team. All files relating to young people, staff, and carers are securely stored and are very well maintained. Carers confirm that they receive their payments in a timely manner and there are no issues with their payments.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within the required timescales (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that the level of delegation and responsibility of the manager and the lines of accountability are clearly defined. (NMS 25.3)