

Futures For Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sophie Wood
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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

The agency's head office is based in Maidstone, Kent. Fostering households are located across the county and recent company expansion now includes Sussex and additional regional offices throughout the country.

The agency provides for a variety of placements which includes; short and long term, emergencies, bridging, enhanced, for example, disability, illness, sibling groups and parent and child placements. The latter provision is rapidly expanding due to demand.

All social workers employed by the agency are qualified and experienced and other employees include a qualified director of therapy and sessional workers. For those young people not in mainstream school, the agency negotiates a minimum of 10 hours sessional work per week, funded by the placing authority.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The recent acquisition of existing fostering services has resulted in the growth of this organisation. Senior managers are implementing positive changes to ensure consistency and to amalgamate all of the organisation's foster carers and services.

Foster carers view the appointment of the registered manager and new supervising social workers as a very positive move. They say the anxiety of big changes are outweighed by the inclusive approach of a dynamic team which provides them with excellent support.

Children and young people are thriving in nurturing households because they are well matched and their carers receive the training and support they need. The number of parent and child placements has dramatically increased and the agency is focusing on strengthening its expertise in this area.

Quality assurance and monitoring processes are being targeted for further development; as are recording systems and team resources. The agency knows where it needs to improve and has clear plans to address any shortfalls. One requirement and two recommendations are made as a result of this inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Three requirements and three recommendations were made from the last inspection visit of September 2007. The requirements were all related to the health needs of children and young people and included the quality of health care records and

training for foster carers.

Improved health care records enable children and young people to take greater responsibility for their own well-being. They all have their own health passports and foster carers ensure all incidents of illnesses and accidents are swiftly reported to ensure their safety. Additional training such as managing medication provides additional safeguards for young people.

Recommendations were concerned with the written recording of gaps in employment, the provision of basic child protection awareness training for administrative staff and matching evidence in terms of recording any foster carer's additional training needs have all been satisfactorily addressed. Children and young people are better protected as a direct result.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people enjoy active, healthy lifestyles within nurturing fostering households. Comprehensive matching processes explore all health care needs at the earliest stage and young people are supported by their carers to maintain their own health passports. This educative and inclusive approach encourages young people to think about their own health and well-being, and to take appropriate responsibility for it.

Foster carers provide effective and appropriate support to young people because they receive the training and guidance they need. Routine topics include childhood development and healthy eating. Foster carers say, 'the basics are really good but I particularly value the training that's specific to my child' and 'even if it's only you who needs it, they'll get you on the training course you need.'

Young people are appreciative of the support they receive. Comments include, 'my carer understands my difficulties' and 'I get a lot of support at home and at school.' Foster carers demonstrate an acute awareness of the psychological impact associated with medical and physical health problems. Young people benefit from this level of understanding which fully recognises the need to look after their mental and emotional well-being.

Young people are supported to attend appointments with external health professionals, where necessary, and the agency has its own therapy provision. Foster carers demonstrate empathy and understanding and act as strong advocates to ensure young people receive the services they need.

Fostering households provide young people with warm and comfortable surroundings. Robust systems ensure households continue to offer a safe physical environment within which appropriate equipment and resources aid their development. Young people confirm this level of good quality by saying, 'I love my bedroom', 'it's safe here' and 'one of the best things is the food.'

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people say they feel safe and protected. Comments include, 'I'm really well looked after', 'I always tell my foster carers if something is worrying me' and 'I just know I'm safe here.' Foster carers view this aspect as their key role and say, 'making her safe is what it's all about' and 'if a child doesn't feel safe then he won't make progress.'

Administrative staff ensure that all fostering household health and safety checks remain up to date. Supervising social workers execute the same rigorous approach when conducting home visits, including those which are unannounced. Records are diligently monitored and this results in the reduction of potential risks and hazards for the young people in placement.

Foster carers receive regular safeguarding training. Their competence is demonstrated through their actions in terms of the swift reporting of concerns, incidents and accidents to relevant third parties. Clear systems are implemented by the manager who works in close partnership with all safeguarding agencies. Policies and procedures with regards to e-safety and being missing from care continue to be developed to ensure they remain clear and up to date. Episodes of young people being missing are extremely rare but foster carers know exactly what to do should such an incident occur.

Foster carers pay strict attention to the presenting and developing needs of the young people in their care. To this end, their own safe care policies are regularly monitored and changed accordingly. Individual risks and concerns are very well known within each household and foster carers are good at allowing young people to take appropriate and measured risks which enhance their growth and development. Comments from foster carers include, 'she's learning to think things through for herself and that's great.' The agency is aware that this aspect requires further development in respect of its parent and child placements where potential risks are uniquely different. This aspect of service provision has rapidly grown of late and the agency is targeting this area as a matter of priority.

The manager maintains clear and effective systems to monitor and manage allegations and complaints. Swift actions maintain young people's safety and effective procedures provide foster carers with the support they need while an investigation is underway. All foster carers have access to external support mechanisms, such as the fostering network.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Young people say they are happy. They talk of feeling loved, valued and being a part of the family. Foster carers use similar language and comments include, 'yes there

are boundaries but you have to do your level best to make children feel that this is their home too.' The agency is explicitly clear in its expectations and this is delivered through training, written guidance and staff practice. The commitment of foster carers to achieve this outcome is further supported by the high number of placements which become long term and very settled. Foster carers attribute much of this to the amount and quality of information the agency obtains and passes on at the matching stage.

Young people say, 'it is just a family here, we all fit together' and 'I love it, it's my home.' Comments also refer to young people feeling safe through the actions of their foster carers. Examples include, 'I know what I am and am not allowed to do' and 'I sometimes do naughty things and get told off.' Young people live within safe and loving households and receive the guidance and boundaries they need.

Foster carers who provide targeted pieces of work give mixed feedback with regards to the quality of the information they receive at the start of a placement. This relates specifically to parent and child placements. Foster carers say they receive excellent information in some cases but a real lack of clarity in others as to the purpose of the placement and the role of the foster carer. Such shortfalls present risks for the foster carer and indeed the parent(s) who is subject to the assessment. The agency has already identified this gap and is revising its systems to address this issue.

Young people grow in confidence and self-belief because foster carers implement a 'can do' approach which is underpinned by high expectations. Foster carers recognise where individual difficulties lie but they continue to appropriately push young people to be ambitious. School attendance and achievement is actively promoted and richly rewarded. Foster carers are strong advocates. They are appropriately supportive and challenging of the education providers for their young people. Comments from young people include, 'I feel better about myself now and this gives me more confidence about school.' Agency staff say, 'she (foster carer) is always chasing the school to make sure they are doing what they are supposed to.'

Young people make significant progress in terms of widening their own social networks and exploring the local community. Foster carers carefully research local resources and provisions and encourage young people to try these for themselves. Fostering households are suitably equipped with toys, games and age appropriate resources which are of benefit to and fully used by those living there.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people trust that their foster carers and the agency value their thoughts and opinions. Effective processes are implemented to enable young people to contribute to their own reviews, as well as the foster carers' annual ones. Comments from young people include, 'I always talk to my carers about anything that's bothering me' and 'I'm always being asked by different people if I'm okay.' Some young people have utilised formal complaints procedures and have received the guidance and

support they needed to do so. Such practice lends itself to young people developing a sense of self-worth whereby they learn that their opinions do matter and are taken seriously; they feel empowered.

The agency delivers on its philosophy of valuing diversity. Matching processes are diligent in this regard. Young people are placed with foster carers who demonstrate a welcoming and respectful attitude towards a young person's own personal circumstances, background and history. To this end, foster carers receive good quality guidance and training with regards to a range of cultures, ethnicities and beliefs. Great emphasis is placed upon the value of completing life story work as a continuing theme from the young person's beginning and throughout their stay within the fostering household. Young people are being encouraged to make sense of their pasts and to look positively towards their futures.

This value is equally placed upon the importance of positive family and friends contact. Placement plans prescribe clear guidance and details. Foster carers provide the practical support arrangements agreed and young people commend this aspect as vitally important to their emotional well-being.

Many young people have benefitted from joining their current households in a planned way. Foster carers say the agency's efforts to obtain appropriate information serves to ease the anxieties for a young person joining a new home. Older children and those living in parent and baby settings commend their foster carers for their efforts in making emergency admissions as comfortable as possible. Comments include, 'I was made to feel at home straight away', 'things were explained to me so that I could understand' and 'I was so nervous but felt comfortable really quickly.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people receive guidance and support which is tailored to meet their own specific needs. This starts by their foster carers knowing them well and understanding the specific issues they face on a very personal basis. The agency provides foster carers with targeted training and this explores areas including pathway planning, moving on and sexual health. Although a pre printed assessment tool and monitoring booklet are used as a template, foster carers receive clear guidance to tailor such systems to fit the young person and this method achieves positive results. Foster carers say their biggest frustration is young people being required to leave the foster home sooner than they are ready because they have reached a specific age. Comments include, 'it's an issue but I try to focus upon doing the very best I can to give them the skills they need' and 'I already know she will stay with us beyond leaving care age.'

Foster carers with younger children demonstrate a keen desire to equip them with independence skills which are also appropriate to their age and understanding. Those with parent and child placements are also keen to create an environment

within which parents are given the opportunity to demonstrate independent competence as much as they are able.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency is proactive in recruiting and assessing a range of new carers to meet the future needs of the agency. Assessments are comprehensive and ensure carers possess the right skills and experience. Robust checks and references further protect the young people. Reviewing processes for foster carers are thorough and effectively seek the views of people significant to the foster placement.

Recent changes to the fostering panel functions bring improved outcomes for young people. The group 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 and training and are registered on the central list of persons considered to be suitable. The panel provides a good quality assurance function and takes a rigorous approach to ensuring foster carers maintain professional standards and have good attendance at training and support groups. Comments from the panel chair include, 'tighter management and improvement in quality of Form F assessments, the quality of the analysis and the quality of assessors means we are now more focussed on foster carers' skills rather than the quality of the paperwork.' Panel meetings are regular and well attended. Preparatory documentation is of good quality and is being sent to members in a timely fashion.

Young people benefit from stable placements. Many are long term. Others are clearly task related, for example, bridging and parent and child placements. Careful and comprehensive matching processes ensure that children are placed with families who can meet their needs. The agency clearly identifies any shortfalls or gaps in the match and states how these will be met. There are occasions where the written reasons for the proposed match are not explicitly made clear. A recommendation is made to conclude the matching pro forma with this detail. Where practicable, each child has the opportunity for a period of introduction to a proposed foster carer, to support the settling in process.

The Statement of Purpose accurately describes the services offered. Written aims and objectives describe how the agency intends to improve the outcomes for children. Comments from external professionals support this outcome, for example an independent reviewing officer says 'Staff practice is very child centred.' Children's guides are child friendly, with one written in a mainly pictorial style for a younger age range. The guides contain contact numbers for advocacy services, and information about who they can contact if wishing to raise a concern. Children and young people confirm their understanding of this information. They say they feel safe in their homes and trust their carers and the agency staff.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people are placed with foster

carers who are sensitive to their cultural backgrounds and promote a positive self-image. The agency demonstrates a commitment to equality for all. Anti-discriminatory practice 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. An enabling culture is demonstrated through the creative ways in which the agency supports its workers with any additional needs they may have.

The fostering service is managed by an individual with the appropriate skills and experience to deliver an efficient and effective service. He has the appropriate qualifications, required experience and understands his responsibilities and duties. Staff members possess the qualifications and expertise commensurate with their roles. Social workers and administrative staff receive on going supervision, annual appraisals and training opportunities which promote their development. They continue to develop their skills and provide effective support to foster carers. Clear on-call arrangements ensure foster carers receive the same level of expertise 24-hours a day. This provision is highly valued by the carers. Staff recruitment procedures are comprehensive and there are rigorous vetting processes for all. Personnel files contain all the required information to evidence robust processes which effectively protect children and young people. Minor gaps are apparent with regards to a small number of administrative tasks. Such omissions present negligible risks; however, a recommendation is made for administrative staff and those involved in recruitment to be provided with safer recruitment training.

Foster carers demonstrate commitment and professionalism to their roles and responsibilities. They are very positive with regards to recent changes in their annual training programme. Core mandatory courses include child protection, health and safety and first aid. Carers are encouraged to request any additional training they feel they need. All existing carers have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council's training and the National Vocational Qualification, Level 3 award. Such training for newly approved carers is underway. Children and young people benefit by being placed with appropriately trained carers who can meet their needs. Foster carers say the support they receive from the service is outstanding. Methods include monthly support groups, which combine training and a support element, out-of-hours advice, news letters, telephone support and regular supervision from qualified supervising social workers. Informal arrangements, such as group outings and social events are also highly valued. Foster carers say, 'the agency is family orientated rather than financially driven.'

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 concerned. The premises and administrative systems are appropriate and suitable to enable the service to meet its objectives. The company is run by a senior management team which has the skills and experience necessary to ensure good outcomes for children and young people.

Following its last inspection, and within the last eighteen months, the agency has experienced numerous changes and developments. A timely and systematic approach to the recruitment of a Registered Manager, social work staff and the

review and update of key policies and procedures has had a very positive impact. Foster carers say they are very pleased with the changes. Previous requirements and recommendations have been addressed and robust monitoring and quality assurance procedures are becoming embedded. The agency is able to recognise its own strengths and work on the areas requiring further development. A cohesive staff team is providing a good standard of service to its carers and children.

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 each foster carer is aware of all of the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances. This recommendation is made with regards to ensuring foster carers receive explicitly clear instructions about their role when providing a parent and child placement (NMS 3.9)
- ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service are suitable. To further enhance the recruitment practice of the service, it is recommended that administrative staff are provided with safer recruitment training (NMS 19.1)
- ensure foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. This recommendation is made within the context of ensuring all safe care policies are robust and individual, with particular regards to parent and child placements (NMS 4.2)