

Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The head office of Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Ltd is in Sittingbourne, Kent and operates a sub office in South London. The service provides foster placements for assessment, support, respite and rehabilitation, as well as emergency, short, medium and long-term care for children. The service also provides parent and child placements.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Overall the service is judged to be satisfactory with some good and outstanding features. Outcomes for children and young people progressively improve from the point that they are first placed with the agency's foster carers throughout the duration of the placement. The fostering service pays good attention to children and young people's health care matters and ensures that identified health care needs are well met. Children and young people thrive academically and their general learning and development are excellent.

The fostering service provides an outstanding level of support to its foster carers. This enables them to provide good care for the young people. However, the fostering service has failed to follow good recruitment practices to ensure that all staff are suitable to work with young people. Also, foster carers and staff do not consistently follow the correct child protection procedures which are devised to ensure that there is effective protection and support for those children making allegations.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection resulted in three actions. These related to the young person's guide, health and safety information for annual reviews of foster carers and the inclusion of a photograph in personnel files. All actions have been resolved satisfactorily and as a result outcomes for looked after children have improved.

The previous inspection also made eleven recommendations. These related to information for young people, health promotion, recording matching evidence, safeguarding training for all staff and updating the complaints procedure. The majority of recommendations have also been addressed satisfactorily by the service, so that children and young people now benefit from these improvements to service operation. Those unmet recommendations regarding quality assurance of foster carer assessments and safe care policies, have, if applicable been transferred to the new National Minimum Standards.

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 people placed with the agency.

Foster carers know their health-related responsibilities and the roles of involved professionals. Foster carers 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. They also produce monthly reports, which include information on health. These records are checked at each supervision visit by the carer's supervising social worker. 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 mental health services. Staff and foster carers have access to written guidance about the safe administration of medication. However, record keeping does not always comply with such guidance and procedure.

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 such as gym attendance, participation in rugby and football, dance classes, cycling and swimming.

Children and young people live in foster homes which provide good, private space and properties that are comfortable, well furnished and decorated. Foster carers' 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. The agency implements individual safe caring plans for foster carers' homes. However, these are not consistently updated with relevant information which would have an impact on any risks and strategies for the young person. For example, on keeping young people safe when outside of the household, the safe use and monitoring of information technology and young people's particular social vulnerabilities. There is a

procedure for child protection and recognising the signs of harm. However, this has not been followed on occasions. For example, by staff not following reporting protocols to work in partnership with the local safeguarding board.

Foster carers demonstrate a commitment to building positive and mutually respectful relationships with children. Foster cares receive good support from supervising social workers regarding understanding how young people's experiences can manifest in challenging behaviour and how foster carers can manage their own feelings in response.

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. The panel has monitored compliance with these procedures to ensure good practice. The fostering service has 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 outstanding.

The promotion of educational attainment of children and young people in placement is a clear strength of the fostering service. This is of clear benefit to children and young people. Foster carers proactively and consistently encourage children and young people to maximise their educational potential and future success. Foster carers have access to written guidance and training that promotes educational attainment. Supervisory visits consistently explore children and young people's educational development. Staff and foster carers work effectively with educational professionals to ensure educational needs are well met.

It is the expectation that foster carers liaise regularly with education establishments and attend the necessary events. Carers of younger children purchase educational toys and engage in learning through play. The agency actively supports foster carers to promote early development. Foster carers' homes are well equipped with play and learning materials appropriate to the learning and developmental needs of children and young people being cared for. The vast majority of children and young people in placement at the time of the inspection are attending nursery or a school provision.

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 looked after children with rewarding experiences that enhance the potential for positive outcomes in the future.

Children and young people are appreciative of their foster families' efforts to provide them with an environment that promotes and supports positive behaviour.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

There are a wide range of systems for children's participation in discussions and decision making about their future. This includes consultation documents, staff discussions and outings. All young people, including birth children, are canvassed for their opinions during the foster carer annual review process and records. Children's views are also sought during supervision visits in carer's homes. The agency continues to facilitate trips and outings during the school holidays with the aim being to gather children's views through both informal and formal avenues. The agency now also holds consultation groups and has acted on feedback from young people using this, for example redesigning the children's guide.

The agency seeks to obtain ongoing feedback from the foster carers through the annual review process, supervision visits and meetings with the directors. Children receive care from an agency which aims to empower both the foster carers and the children and promote their rights. Foster carers are made aware of the importance of listening to children. The needs of individual children in placement is an essential focus on home visits. Foster carers keep relevant memorabilia for the children they foster and work with them on understanding their past history. Supervising social workers provide guidance and support to the foster parents. Foster carers also benefit from training which ensures children move into and out of their home in a sensitive manner.

Children have the opportunity of living within family-based placements, which will encourage and promote continuing links with their families. Maintaining and developing family contact and friendships are integral to the service provided. This is emphasised through the training and support given to foster carers. 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 and drivers to facilitate visits being conducted out of the local area. Children have access to independent advice. Their guides contain contact numbers for advocacy services and Ofsted.

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. Such matters are covered in the foster carers' handbook, supervision and training. 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.

Staff and foster carers ensure that the transition from foster care placement to alternative living arrangements is as smooth as possible. Many former fostered children maintain good contact with their foster carers and are often considered as extended members of the foster carers' family.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Overall the fostering service has excellent arrangements in place to support staff, foster carers, children and young people. The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Children's needs are individually assessed and met and they are afforded many opportunities to participate in all aspects of life.

There is a clear marketing strategy to promote the recruitment of foster carers from diverse backgrounds. Young people's identity needs are well addressed in placement; formal forums such as statutory review meetings confirm that this is the case. The fostering service recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children seeking foster care placements. The fostering agency has efficient policies and systems that facilitate a consistently prompt response to all foster care enquiries from the public. Designated staff conduct effective yet sensitive screening interviews to ensure applicants are aware of agency expectations.

Assessments of prospective carers are conducted by suitably qualified members of the team. There are occasions when independent social workers are also commissioned to complete assessments. All of the key elements are covered and foster carers find the assessment process thorough and detailed.

The fostering service's fostering panel is chaired by an extremely experienced individual. The panel plays a crucial quality assurance role within the service on a number of differing levels. However the agency's feedback and analysis of any improvements to the panel regarding any highlighted trends and patterns is not evidenced. Examples of this include Form F assessment quality assurance and the training attendance of carers. The constitution of the panel is appropriate. The fostering service has undertaken an appraisal of the panel Chair who in turn will now undertake appraisals for all the remaining panel members soon. The administration of the panel is extremely efficient and staff take clear and accurate records of panel meetings.

The fostering service has a robust matching process that is recorded and overseen by the Registered Manager directly; this enhances the potential for placement success. The fostering service has a dedicated referral service that collates information about children and young people and their placement needs. The service's referral process and disruptions are very carefully monitored by the

placements manager.

Two age-appropriate, easy-to-read and creative children's guides are available to children and young people. Both written guides, one for young children and the other geared towards young people, contain useful and relevant information. These are an excellent child-friendly source of information about the organisation's foster care placements. Staff spend time with newly placed children, presenting them with a welcome pack which young people appreciate and ensuring they understand the contents of the guides. The children's guides are available in three different languages and also in an audio version. This ensures that children and young people have good access to key information about the service at the commencement of the placement. However it does not include how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer.

The manager of the service is appropriately qualified in both social work and management. Social work staff are qualified and experienced. Staff of the fostering team are highly skilled, motivated and industrious. The fostering team works cohesively together in the interests of children and those placements they are responsible for. Staff feel appreciated, well supported and managed by line managers, with the effect that staff turnover is extremely low. Foster carers therefore benefit from the consistent practice of a stable staff team. The fostering agency is financially sound and there are effective financial monitoring systems in place. The service's business plans confirms its financial viability.

There are recruitment and selection policies in place. However, processes do not consistently follow good practice as not of all the checks required by regulation are evident. For example, a staff member has started work before a completed Criminal Records Bureau check is obtained. This unacceptable practice is also reiterated in the fostering service's policy. Additionally there are inconsistent written records to confirm qualifications and verify why staff members left previous employment when they have previously worked with vulnerable adults and children. Furthermore, recruitment records do not evidence the date on which each check was completed nor who carried out the check.

The learning and development of foster carers is good. Training records are maintained for foster carers and they do now have individual training plans. Foster carers' feedback about training and the relevance of it is very positive. All newly approved foster carers receive an induction and there is a rolling programme of core and specialised training. Foster carer's training needs are explored during supervisory visits and feature in annual review discussions. The fostering service has made efforts to ensure foster carers have access to Children's Workforce Development Council training, as a result a high proportion of carers have completed this.

Foster carers benefit from excellent support to ensure they meet the needs of children effectively. Foster carers find a superb level of support available to them from supervising social workers in particular, but also the organisation as a whole. The fostering agency has a responsive out-of-hours system which foster carers appreciate. Foster carer households benefit from the allocation of individual

supervising social workers to support and manage their case. Foster carer agreements are in place and the foster carers' handbook is a useful source of guidance and information. The fostering service has clear respite arrangements.

The fostering service maintains excellent communication with looked after children's social workers and foster carers are appreciative of this. The fostering service's commitment to effective partnership working with placing authorities acts to enhance successful foster care placements. Agency supervising social workers are explicitly clear about their own role and how this fits with the responsibilities of the young person's own social worker; placing authority social workers report positively about the communication received from foster carers and the agency staff.

Overall, the fostering service has good monitoring systems. However, written reports of monitoring do not evidence that the service is improving the quality of care. For example, some information is repeated every three months or is a description of the monitoring process itself rather than an analysis of any trends and patterns or the actions taken to improve outcomes. The fostering service ensures all files are kept secure and confidential and are subject to periodical auditing. However, the foster care register was not up-to-date regarding annual reviews not forwarded to the agency's panel.

Written foster carer agreements contain all of the necessary information. The responsibilities of foster carers and the agency are clearly outlined. The office premises are fit for purpose with sufficient space for staff, meetings and training rooms. There are robust administrative systems in place and electronically held information is appropriately secure. The fostering service has contingency plans in the case of emergency or disaster.

Foster carers receive appropriate payments promptly and at the expected rate. There are clear financial policies in place and foster carers have access to key financial information in the service's foster carer handbook.

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
20 (2011)	ensure that no person is employed by the fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters in Sch 1 (Regulation 20 (3) (c))	02/04/2012
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times.	02/04/2012

(Regulation 11 (a))

Recommendations

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

- demonstrate, including from written records, that the fostering service consistently follows good recruitment practice (NMS 19.2)
- ensure that records of recruitment show the date each check was completed and who carried out the check (NMS 19.4)
- ensure an effective system for monitoring the quality and adequacy of record keeping (NMS 26.2)
- ensure that all foster carers keep a written record of all medication, with reference to the fostering service's policy (NMS 6.11)
- ensure that all allegations are reported by the fostering service to the Local Authority Designated Officer (NMS 22.6)
- ensure that all foster cares understand what they must do if they receive an allegation (NMS 22.1)
- evidence that action is taken to address any issues raised regarding patterns and trends found by the fostering service's panel (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the procedures for monitoring the fostering service are effective in controlling the activities and ensuring the quality of the service (NMS 25.1)
- make sure the children's guide includes how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer (NMS 16.4)