

Community Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Diana Waters
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Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

Community Foster Care
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20/12/2007

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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

Community Foster Care is an independent foster care agency, established to provide professional foster care for Looked After Children (LAC). It was set up as a limited company in 1999 and is also a registered charity and not-for-profit community business. The agency has a board of trustees that meets regularly to ensure it fulfils the responsibilities of a registered charity.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

The agency continues to offer a very good overall standard of care to children placed, with two outstanding outcome areas identified. The strengths of the service are helping young people to make a positive contribution, encouraging young people's participation in the community and understanding, promoting and supporting important contacts. The needs and welfare of children are at the forefront of the service and this is verified through the stability of most placements and young people's positive comments about their carers consistent support. Foster carers report a high standard of support and supervision from agency staff and children comment that they feel safe and at home in their placements.

Following this inspection there are three statutory requirements. These relate to: verifying why previous employment has ended; including the e-mail address for the chief inspector in the children's guide and revising the information about delegated decisions for carers to grant permission for young people to stay overnight with friends.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous requirement to ensure Criminal Record Bureau checks and references are available before a person starts employment has been rectified. This demonstrates staff are safe to work with young people; however, more information to verify the reasons why previous employment has ended is not sufficiently robust. The previous recommendations have been implemented. The service has helped carers prepare for foster panel, two colourful children's guides are available and summaries are provided when review minutes are awaited. These guides help to ensure carers, children and staff receive better preparation and information about the service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

A good service is provided to help each child or young person in foster care to receive health care that meets their needs. The agency's foster placement agreement includes the required information regarding foster children's health needs, and arrangements for giving consent to their medical or dental treatment. Carers ensure that foster children are registered with a local doctor, dentist and optician or young people remain registered with their own practitioners. Young people's health is a standard item for discussion during foster carers' supervision. First aid training is provided to foster carers on an annual basis.

The service keeps clear records of the number of foster children who have had an annual health check and most foster children recently placed have received such a check or appointments are booked. Young people are able to visit their doctor or receive a visit from the LAC nurse.

All young people are encouraged to participate in community events with their foster carers and a range of leisure activities aimed at promoting physical activity and increasing self-esteem. The placement support worker offers a range of community activities that encourage healthy exercise and participation for young people and their carers, for example, the popular weekly football club. Young people benefit from observing positive role models and some carers and staff have successfully undertaken a stop smoking campaign.

Foster homes are assessed both initially and during annual reviews to ensure they continue to provide a safe and suitable environment for young people, documents relating to home and car safety are on carers' files and annual unannounced visits are undertaken.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Young people say that they feel safe in their foster placements and that they are helped to develop strategies to help keep themselves safe in their future lives. Foster carers are skilled at discussing concerns with young people in areas such as personal relationships, behaviour management and keeping themselves safe. Young people report that they are not bullied in their foster placements, though it occasionally happens at school. Foster carers are proactive in working with schools and colleges to ensure that any concerns, including bullying, are addressed.

The service receives safeguarding awareness training, which is regularly updated. The service ensures foster carers have a signed safe care policy for each family. Individual safe care statements with additional information for specific children when needed are updated when necessary. There are good links between the agency and local safeguarding team. The supervising social workers and manager are

experienced and have sound knowledge of safeguarding arrangements. Foster carers work together well as part of a team to promote the safety of children and young people.

The agency does not have a formal protocol in place with the local police; however, the agency policy on young people missing from placement does give clear written guidance on how to respond if a young person is absent without authority. A small number of young people are occasionally absent from their foster homes. These incidents are monitored by the agency and placements are regularly reviewed. All appropriate agencies are notified of any absences. Foster carers do not exceed the measures they can use to prevent young people from leaving the home.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are consistently well supported by their foster carers in developing positive behaviours. Foster carers provide good role models to young people and set realistic expectations for young people. Relationships between foster carers and young people are excellent and feedback from young people is consistently good. Young people say 'I am very happy with the family I live with, they are a lot of support and we are happy with each other'. Practice in this area is outstanding. A social worker comments 'attentive and consistent carers have helped stabilise some difficult behaviour'. Foster carers display an understanding and knowledge of the young people's previous experiences and how these may impact on their behaviour.

Supervising social workers monitor incidents and notifications from carers and regularly discuss young people's progress and the support needs of carers. Foster carers report being very well supported by their supervising social workers and particularly value the additional support provided for young people and carers by the family support worker. One carer comments 'there is a high standard of care and support'.

Foster carers are very skilled in helping young people develop strategies for managing their own behaviour. Carers support young people to challenge any discrimination they may face and with support from the service they liaise with schools and act as advocates on behalf of young people.

Young people are encouraged to participate in a range of leisure activities and hobbies that will promote self-confidence and esteem. There are community activities provided throughout the year by the support worker, for example, weekly football training, which are effective in integrating young people into sociable community activities. Activities enjoyed by young people vary and take into account a wide range of diverse needs.

Foster carers explain how they welcome young people into the home and young people confirm they are quickly made to feel comfortable in their new placements. Many foster carers maintain regular contact with young people after the placement

has ended, with some young people residing with their carers on a supportive lodgings basis. This ensures continued stability and support for young people into adulthood. Young people confirm they feel part of the foster family and are treated equitably.

Young people's educational attainment is well supported by foster carers and staff working for the agency. Liaison between carers and supervising social workers to encourage young people to maintain their education is excellent. Foster carers advocate on behalf of young people if needed, with support from the agency; they ensure young people attend school regularly and any difficulties are resolved. If young people are not attending school, the support family worker will arrange activities for young people. Fostering staff and carers regularly liaise with schools. A placing social worker comments 'while waiting to start school, my young person was provided with an outreach worker to support him'. Many young people make significant improvement in school or college as demonstrated by their regular attendance, school reports and exam results which are celebrated by the service and carers. Involvement in school activities, after school activities and school trips are actively supported.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Young people's views and wishes are actively sought by the agency. Young people say that they are given good opportunities to comment on the service. All young people were invited to attend a recent consultation group and young people, with support from the placement support worker, gathered their views and reported back. This group is known as the shadow board. At this recent consultation event, young people commented about feeling scared about moving into new placements. As a result the service has initiated the use of carers albums, including details of regular visitors to their households to enable young people to familiarise themselves with their new environment. Whenever possible, pre-admission visits continue to be arranged. However, many placements are unplanned or made at short notice, especially on the three placements commissioned by the local authority 28 day agreement scheme.

The service consults with foster and birth children. They all contribute to the annual reviews of foster carers. All young people of an appropriate age are invited to attend their placement reviews and some are able to chair their own reviews. Young people confirm that supervising social workers and the family support worker seek their views about the care they receive. Young people are very positive about the way that the family support worker supports them 'there is football club and activities in the holidays'.

The agency will represent young people's views and if necessary advocate on their behalf with placing authorities. Young people are clear that, if their views and wishes cannot be acted on, foster carers and staff explain the reasons why. Young people know that they are supported by the service and confirm they know how to raise any

concerns.

Children and young people are provided with highly individualised care which is able to meet their needs and reflects the personal differences of each young person. Carers say 'they do everything possible to support young people and carers'. Young people are supported to develop their self-esteem by the use of praise, the celebrating of achievement and mutual respect. Young people are encouraged to exercise choice over day-to-day matters such as foods, clothing and leisure activities.

All foster carers receive training in promoting equality and diversity and respect for the views of others. Young people are supported to acquire life and social skills that enable them to develop independent lifestyles. Feedback from young people, foster carers and supervising social workers indicates that many young people make significant progress in developing an understanding of their personal circumstances. This affords young people greater emotional resilience as a result of living in their foster homes. Stability in placements and trust in their carers aids this experience. Carers and workers are developing ways to help more young people to keep photographs and mementos to add to their personal histories.

All young people are encouraged to participate in community events with their foster carers and a range of leisure activities aimed at promoting self-esteem. Children are supported in maintaining any hobby or interest they have prior to being placed with carers or they can develop new interests. These are planned in consultation with placing social workers and take into account the local authority plan for the care of the child. Young people confirm they take part in a range of activities, for example, clubs, dancing, cricket, youth clubs and visits to friends. Foster carers are clear about the level of decision-making that can be delegated to them so there is no confusion.

All foster carers receive training in the importance of maintaining contact between children and their families and other significant people. Contact arrangements are detailed in young people's placement plans, carers are clear about their role in promoting and supporting contact arrangements. Practice in this area is outstanding; carers are skilled at establishing mutually respectful relationships with parents and other significant people which benefits the young people in placement. A social worker confirmed this, 'the carer has been able to make progress in helping the parents in a very supportive way'.

Foster carers give good descriptions of how they welcome young people into the home, and most young people say that they were made welcome and comfortable in their new placements. Many foster carers report they maintain regular contact with young people after their placement has ended; these include young people who remain in supportive lodging placements with their carers. Commitment to these young people is impressive and placement stability is valued.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are encouraged to develop life and social skills in order to make successful transitions into adulthood. Foster carers receive training in the importance of supporting young people to develop these skills and moving into independence. Initially this is through an informal process of involving young people in decision making, taking greater personal responsibility for themselves and undertaking household tasks.

Foster carers are very aware of working with young people to improve their self-confidence, self-esteem and appropriate independence skills. Young people say that they are given good advice and guidance by their carers which will help when they leave care. Carers are proactive in working with social workers and contribute to young people's plans. They assist young people to attend college, seek employment or participate in work experience, providing transport and support to enable young people to gain new skills.

Young people are supported to remain in their placements beyond 18 years and foster carers are very good at keeping in touch with young people when placements end. Carers confirm they provide advice, guidance and stability to enable young people to progress and continue to thrive. Several young people remain within the same foster home on a supportive lodgings basis and report how important continuity of placement is to them, 'The same people support and listen to you'. 'I am very happy with my family, I have been here several years'.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. The agency is proactive in ensuring that foster carers promote equality in all areas of practice. The agency has a robust system for assessing foster carers and assessing social workers challenge prospective carers' attitudes and responses as part of the assessment process. Pre-approval training for prospective carers includes raising awareness of good practice in this area. The agency has sound policies and procedures, which promote equality and diversity.

Carers say that their enquiries to become foster carers are dealt with promptly and fairly. The assessment process is thorough and carers say they are treated respectfully throughout the assessment. Foster carers say that the assessment and approval process can be intrusive and challenging; however, they fully understand the need for the agency to fully explore personal views and attitudes. Assessments are carried out by skilled and experienced social workers. Carers report the pre-approval training is of good quality and covers key areas of knowledge they need in order to be able to meet the needs of young people. All statutory checks are completed, prior to completion of the assessment and pre-approval training. The

agency monitors the quality of assessments and reports to panel through the use of staff supervision and additional quality checks undertaken by an independent social worker. All reports presented to the foster care approval panel are quality assured prior to presentation. The panel chair also provides feedback to the service on the quality of assessments submitted.

Minutes of panels are detailed and are of a good quality and show that the panel is correctly constituted. Panel members are suitably experienced practitioners. Specialist knowledge, such as medical advice, is available to the panel if required. The panel comment on the quality of assessments and first annual reviews of carers. The administration of the panel is good with panel members receiving information well in advance of panel meetings. However, an experiment to video conference/teleconference three panels in the last year met with limited success and did not provide prospective foster carers with the opportunity to attend panel. Subsequently, this practice has ceased.

Carers say that they are consulted prior to a placement being agreed and that their views about their ability to meet children's needs are given due consideration. On occasions the agency does not receive sufficient information at the time of placement to make robust matching decisions. Persistent attempts to gather this information are not always evidenced; however, carers confirm the agency share whatever information they have with carers and request further information from the placing social worker. Generally young people benefit from a good matching process that assesses young people needs and links them to carers who have the skills to meet them. Any shortfalls in experience or skills can be met by additional training or support provided for carers. Placement outcomes are monitored by the agency; this information is used to improve matching and practice.

Allegations and suspicions of harm are handled effectively, making sure that young people are protected; foster carers' training includes child protection. Independent support is available for foster carers who are subject to allegations. Notifications of significant events are reported to the relevant agencies to ensure young people's welfare is promoted.

The Statement of Purpose is reviewed regularly and was updated in September 2011. The children's guide was reviewed at the same time and is presented in two formats. Both documents clearly and accurately describe the services provided and include information for young people about how they raise any concerns they may have about the service. However, the address and e-mail address for the chief inspector of Ofsted is missing and the policy for overnight stays/sleepovers is not consistent with guidance issued from the Secretary of State. The agency is aware of the changes in legislation and standards and most policies and procedures have been updated to reflect those changes.

The service is well managed. The new Registered Manager, who is undertaking an appropriate level 5 management qualification, is a qualified and experienced social worker and was registered by Ofsted in 2011. The manager provides good leadership and support to the staff and carers. The manager is supported by the Chief Executive

Officer who is a qualified social worker and staff confirm they are able to access sound advice when needed.

All social workers employed by the agency are appropriately qualified, registered with the appropriate body and experienced. Most statutory checks are completed before they start work. However, verification of the reason why previous relevant employment has ended is not undertaken.

The staff team reflects a range of skills and expertise that enhances the quality of the service offered to young people. Staff are committed to their work with carers and young people and staff are quietly dependable, dedicated to achieving good outcomes for children and young people and praised by carers for their support. 'We feel valued and are well supported, staff are friendly and professional' and 'they often go the extra mile'. Staff receive regular supervision and annual appraisals; training opportunities are available to further their development.

All foster carers receive regular supervision from their supervising social workers and young people benefit from the support from the family support worker. Foster carers say they are well-supervised, supported and trained. Almost all experienced carers have completed their Children's Workforce Development Council's Development Standards and this work is continuing for newer carers. Foster carer reviews are conducted annually to ensure carers remain suitable to foster. The celebration of 11 years of foster care with young people, carers, staff and trustees was linked with the long service awards in December 2010.

Young people's safety and welfare is promoted by the agency. Staff and carers all receive regular training in safeguarding awareness. The staff team is experienced in childcare practice and managers and staff have good knowledge of child protection procedures. The agency has good links with local safeguarding teams and the Local Authority Designated Officer. Allegations or suspicions of any harm are appropriately referred and notifications made to appropriate agencies in a timely manner.

The service is monitored by the regular checks undertaken by the manager through a range of management strategies. The service is introducing improvements to monitor key information and activities. The strength of the service is that it retains a clear focus on improving the quality of young people's experiences and is committed to facilitate personal growth and development by enabling both carers and young people. The quality assurance Regulation 42 reports and operational monthly reports contribute to the monitoring of the service.

The premises used by the fostering agency are suitable for use; all confidential information is kept securely in locked metal cabinets or securely held on password protected electronic systems. Secure backups are undertaken daily.

Foster carers report that payments are made promptly and accurately. All payment rates are transparent and available to interested parties. The administration of the financial systems appear robust and well managed. The administration of the service is good and foster carers' records are generally well maintained and monitored with

regular audits. At the time of the inspection young people's records were in the process of being transferred from paper to electronic files and were not easily navigable. The service accurately describes the transfer of files 'as a work in progress'.

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, when a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, verification is obtained, so far as reasonably practicable, of the reason why the employment ended (Regulation 20 (3) (c) Schedule 1.4)	31/01/2012
3 (2011)	ensure the children's guide includes the address, including e-mail address, of the chief inspector (Regulation 3 (3) (c))	31/01/2012
4 (2011)	keep under review and revise the children's guide. In particular include information about delegated decisions for carers to grant permission for young people to stay overnight/sleepovers with friends as normal practice and included in the young person's placement plan (except in exceptional circumstances or where court restrictions apply).(Regulation 4 (a) (CA1989: Volume 4: (3.18))	31/01/2012