

# Futures for Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC057840
<b>Inspection date</b>	09/08/2012
<b>Inspector</b>	Joanna Heller
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	18/03/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This is an independent fostering agency providing support to 62 children and young people in the Essex area. The agency has 47 foster households. The fostering agency is able to provide task centred fostering, short breaks, long term placements, permanent placements and parent and child placements. The fostering agency has contracts with a range of local authorities.

The fostering agency has separate offices in Wanstead and Dedham, which operate under the umbrella of the Southend branch. Further registered offices exist nationally in Camberley, Maidstone, Durham and Milton Keynes. Futures for children also owns three independent fostering organisations.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The fostering service is adequately effective overall. The service is child focused and demonstrates a commitment to enhancing children's lives. Children are making sound progress in all aspects of their lives. They benefit from stable placements and placement breakdown is rare. Such continuity of care enables children and carers to build strong attachments with each other.

Foster carers are caring and committed, ensuring positive outcomes for children. Foster carers feel well supported which enables them to meet the demands of their role. Foster carers and staff feel that the commitment to training is a strength of the agency.

The management of the agency over the past year or two has not been as strong as seen at the previous inspection. It is clear that the lack of direction and leadership has had a significant impact on staff morale and some staffing difficulties have been experienced. As a result of this, a number of management activities, such as, supervision of staff and monitoring of the quality of care have not taken place, or

have not been sufficiently robust. Four requirements and six recommendations have been set. A new management structure has been introduced and a new manager employed to address these concerns.

## Areas for 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 person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

<b>Reg.</b>	<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Due date</b>
21 (2011)	ensure that all staff receive appropriate supervision (Regulation 21(4)(a))	12/10/2012
11 (2011)	give full consideration to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster carers following an allegation of abuse or neglect. In particular, ensure that recommendations raised by the local safeguarding board and the agency's panel following safeguarding concerns are enacted (Regulation 12 (3)(e))	15/09/2012
6 (2011)	submit an application for registration of a suitably qualified experienced manager (Care Standards Act, section 12)	12/10/2012
11 (2011)	ensure that before making any decision affecting a child to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. In particular, identify training and support needs and how these will be met when making cross-cultural matches. (Regulation 11(b)(ii))	15/09/2012

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that systems are in place to encourage and facilitate foster carer peer support and self help groups (NMS 21.4)
- ensure that the experience of panel members is such that the panel is able to make recommendations which fully take into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for, specifically with reference to diversity (NMS 14.8)
- implement a proportionate approach to risk assessments. In particular; detail the strategy to be followed in response to events (NMS 4.5)
- implement an effective system for monitoring the adequacy of record keeping

and take action when needed. In particular, ensure copies of all statutory information is on each child's file and that signed copies of key documents such as foster care agreements are held on file (NMS 26.2)

- ensure that foster carers are clear as to their ability to make reasonable decisions in accordance with the level of authority delegated to them (NMS 7.4)
- ensure that fair and competent employment practices provide good support for all staff. Particularly, that staff have access to appropriate support and advice and are provided with regular individual supervision by an appropriately qualified and experienced staff. (NMS 24)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children are nurtured within stable and secure environments where they grow and develop. Placement breakdown is minimal and some young people stay with their carers post 18. Children are generally placed with carers who are committed to their welfare and who are able to meet their needs. They say that carers provide an environment where they feel safe. Children develop strong attachments to their carers, who in turn, help them to develop a positive self view and understanding of their background.

Children have made good individual progress in the time they have been living their carers. Strong attachments develop between children and the foster families who nurture them to develop good emotional resilience. This underpins the success in effecting change for some children. Children's experiences of the fostering service are positive and they rate the service as good. They highlight very positive relationships with particular supervising social workers who have been involved with the fostering family in some cases for many years. The vast majority of children felt that their individual carers were outstanding and the others felt they were good. Young people spoke about the strong bonds they have developed with their carers. One child referred to their carer being, 'amazing, she's really lovely. She treats me like a daughter, it doesn't feel like I'm in care.' Similarly, other young people commented that their carers, 'take care of me and listen to my everyday problems'. One child spoke about how they have chosen to call their carers 'mum and dad' adding that they loved the fact that they now have a dog. Placing authorities refer to the agency as their agency of choice and have absolute confidence in the care provided. Parents surveyed felt that their children were safe, happy and progressing well in their placements.

Children feel consulted about decisions in their day-to-day life and commented that carers do have different rules. Young people, however, understood why these boundaries are set and were able to consider that this reflected the concern of carers for their safety and welfare.

Children are treated as part of the family and enjoy being involved in key family events and holidays. Children refer to the sometimes very strong bonds they have

with foster siblings and how positive they can be, both as role models and someone to talk to about any issues. An example of this was older foster siblings attending school events to support them. Risk-taking behaviours such as offending and going missing are limited to very few young people. Where these events take place the fostering service ensures that support is provided. Children consistently say they feel safe and well cared for. Children are able to pursue interests and hobbies, secure in the knowledge that any equipment required will be provided.

Children have been able to develop new friendships and maintain existing ones, helping them to have more rounded peer support. Some young people have enjoyed being able to have friends sleep-over, minimising their feelings of being 'different' from their peers. Children are, where possible, placed together with their siblings. Where this is not possible, contact arrangements with siblings, as with other family members, are clearly outlined and actively supported.

Children are healthy and are aware of how to maintain healthy lifestyles. Every child is registered with a dentist and doctor and all, apart from the most recent placement, have had a medical within the last year. Where parent and child placements are made the health care outcomes of both are fully considered. Children are encouraged to live healthy lifestyles and undertake regular physical activity. They have some access to local specialist health professionals, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Additional therapy is sought on a case-by-case basis in partnership with placing authorities. Children and young people informally develop self-care and independence skills as appropriate to their age, such as, getting involved in shopping, cooking and learning to do their own laundry. Training and support is available to carers. A workbook style guide is available throughout the organisation, but has yet to be effectively implemented in this branch.

Children know that their carers will be there to watch school plays, attend parents' evenings and cheer for them on sports day. They are supported to maximise their educational potential. 97% of children and young people are attending school with some 3 young people having current fixed term exclusions. Children have a 97% school attendance rate across the fostering service. For one recently placed young person, there is no information on the plan for them in the next academic year, the placing authority purely stating that they will not be attending this school year. The fostering service has commissioned a review of the education of young people within the service. It envisages this will highlight such situations and prompt the agency to be more proactive in identifying strategies to support such young people. Children are supported to do well in school and carers are aware of each child's individual educational progress and goals. Young people are encouraged to have high aspirations, such as, attending university to complete a drama therapy degree. Young people are also supported in gaining part-time employment and developing curriculum vitae. The local education department say the agency has a range of intervention and support which is particularly strong in enabling children to access good quality education.

## **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

Foster carers ensure that children's needs are met through individually tailored care. They demonstrate a solid commitment to ensuring the best life outcomes for children and ensure that care and support provided is in accordance with the care plan devised by the local authority. The diversity of carers is reflected by the demographics of the agency's area offices. However, where there are gaps in cross-cultural matching, there is not a robust process of assessment to ensure that carers are able to meet the children's needs and that gaps in knowledge would be filled. For example, white carers had children from African/Caribbean heritage placed with them. Some carers have limited awareness of children's cultural and personal care needs and how to effectively support the placement because no assessment was carried out. In practice, new supervising social workers have been able to identify shortfalls in the matching process and address gaps, ensuring successful placements.

Foster carers are part of the team around the child and particularly in long term placements their views are respected and taken into consideration. Carers are not, however, always clear as to the level of authority delegated to them. They may, therefore, not be able to make reasonable and appropriate decisions without having to seek unnecessary consent. Members of the fostering household attend all educational events and plays so that children know that there is someone there for them. Carers ensure that children's physical, health and emotional needs are met. Each child has an individual health passport. Where mother and baby placements are made, carers ensure that suitable midwifery and post-natal care and support are provided, as well as supporting mothers to develop their nurturing skills.

The agency has a robust panel process which ensures assessment of the suitability of carers is thoroughly explored. Decisions are clearly documented, reached in a timely manner and effectively shared with carers. The panel has a strong quality assurance role. The panel benefits from a wide variety of experience and expertise. However, the panel is not culturally diverse and panel membership has barely changed in the last nine years, with only one new member joining in that time. So the panel does not benefit from fresh thinking and questioning processes.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers focuses on the needs of young people and prepares carers for the role they are to undertake. Carers feel they are individually well supported through the supervising social workers monthly visits and the on-call service available to them at all hours of day and night. Staff vacancies have resulted in extra stresses to supervising social workers; however, carers emphasised that they never felt alone and continued to receive support and advice as required. The needs of the whole of the fostering family are considered in these monthly visits, as well as the fostered child. Support groups have not been a regular feature of the service and the recent introduction of carers' group supervision addresses this. There is no formal system for supporting or mentoring new carers. Longer standing carers tend to informally support each other through the friendships they have developed.

A good training programme is available to support carers. Carers complete mandatory core training before fostering and this builds on the pre-approval training. This covers such key areas as safeguarding and first aid. Training is available in all three offices and child-care support is provided, ensuring that training is accessible to all. Training covers a wide range of relevant areas such as, managing challenging behaviour and diffusion techniques, sexuality, self harming behaviours and working with young people with disabilities. Carers are able to request particular training which they feel would be helpful and relevant. Carers who have been approved for over a year have completed their Children's Workforce Development Council training standards. Workshops have been arranged to support carers through this process. Carers feel that training is a key strength of the agency.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The agency has sound overall arrangements for safeguarding children. Children say they feel safe and are safe. There are clear links with local safeguarding boards and any concerns are fed through appropriately. Where safeguarding concerns are raised which relate to carers, annual reviews are brought forward and returned to panel. This ensures that concerns are followed through and where appropriate, approval categories changed. On one occasion the agency failed to implement the increased supervision arrangements recommended by both the panel and the local safeguarding board. This appears to relate to a staffing shortage and communication failure in a particular instance and is not indicative of wider issues. Carers subject to allegations are offered independent support from Fostering Networks. The agency has also recently developed a support pack of practical information which will be delivered to carers should an allegation is made.

Children report that they do not experience bullying and are confident that if they did that their carers will act to ensure their safety. Where children have bullied others in school, carers have responded and liaised with the school. Children know how to complain and are provided with information in the initial children's pack. Children said that in most cases they would speak to their social worker, or family and friends, about any concerns they had. Carers are clear about children's rights and how they can support them to access an independent advocate. The majority of children rarely go missing. Those who do, are helped to understand the risks associated with this and their individual vulnerability. When children do go missing carers try to locate them and notify the appropriate agencies in line with local guidelines ensuring their safety. Where young people have a pattern of going missing the reasons for this are explored; discussions take place regarding boundaries and freedoms for older young people.

Carers' initial preparation training for fostering focuses on caring for children who have experienced abuse. Carers are made aware of all issues known to the agency and feel they receive good advice and support. Individual household safe-care guidelines are sufficiently detailed, as are risk assessments. However, such assessments do not always lead to clear management strategy guidelines for carers.



Children are safeguarded from unsuitable people gaining employment in the agency either as staff, a panel member or carer, through robust vetting practices. No staff, panel member or carer is employed until checks on identity; employment history and suitability of character have been undertaken. Carers are subject to additional checks in line with current best practice. All carers, back up carers and staff are subject to having Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check updated every three years. Unannounced visits to carers' households are carried out at least once a year. These visits are comprehensive, taking into account the child's needs, the fostering household composition and any health and safety issues.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **inadequate**.

The agency is in a period of transition and growth. As a result of this, a number of management activities, such as supervision of staff and monitoring of the quality of care have not taken place, or have not been sufficiently robust. The actions recommended following one safeguarding case have not been followed through. Recruitment was undertaken within the past year to address staffing shortages and a new manager has been in post for just under two months. Staff and other stakeholders experience the new management structure as positive and they have confidence in the new manager to address any issues of concern. The manager is in the process of collecting all information in order to submit an application for registration.

Carers and young people enjoy positive relationships with office-based staff and regularly pop in. The agency has positive links with other agencies, such as: placing authorities; education departments and local looked after children's health teams, all of whom speak very positively of the fostering agency. The induction process for new staff is robust and fully equips them for the role they are to undertake. Staff have not, until very recently, received effective regular individual supervisions. The only individual supervision provided to staff in the past twelve months has taken place since the new manager came into post very recently. Newly qualified social workers, who were also new to fostering, had received only one individual supervision in their first six months of employment. Staff referred to feeling 'lost' and 'without clear direction and guidance' from the previous management team. This leaves staff, those who are newly qualified in particular, carers, and therefore children, in a potentially vulnerable position.

Staff are, however, confident in the new manager and new wider management structure; they have experienced a significant increase in support and direction since its implementation. They are able to access all training available to carers and also further specialist training which they feel would be of benefit. A number of staff are funded and supported to undertake recognised qualifications. Like carers, staff feel that the commitment to training is particular strength in the organisation.

Administration systems are not always sufficiently robust to evidence the care given.

For example, pieces of information such as pathway plans, personal education plans and matching assessments are not always on file. Some documents such as the foster care agreement and risk assessments are not signed by all parties. The impact of this is that key information is not always accessible. Quality assurance systems have recently been introduced with the aim of enabling clear monitoring of significant incident such as complaints, child protection and outcomes for children as a group. This system is being developed with a view on how to include the views of children and young people. Consultation regarding the agency as a whole, both for young people, carers and other stakeholders is somewhat new to the fostering service and is yet to become fully and effectively embedded. However, young people said overwhelmingly that they were consulted about all aspects of their day-to-day care by their carers and carers feel that their views and opinions are listened to and given full consideration.

The internal quality audit carried out prior to the inspection has identified a number of areas for development and all staff and stakeholders have confidence that the new management structure will be proactive in improving systems in the agency and outcomes for young people. The agency therefore has good capacity for improvement having taken on board comments for consideration during the inspection and identifying areas where the manager feels that the service could improve.

The agency is sufficiently resourced to meet the need of children. The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clear and detailed. Some changes are planned to the children's guide to make it available in different formats and therefore more accessible. The vast majority of carers feel well supported by the organisation and rate the levels of support as excellent. Complaints are rare. It is a testament to the competence and quality of staff that issues within the office did not in the main, filter through to the service provided to young people and their carers. Carers continue to feel core members of the team around the child and are well respected.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.