

Eastern Family Services Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Joanna Heller
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Date of last inspection	07/12/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a small independent fostering agency providing support to children and young people predominantly within the Suffolk and Essex areas. The agency is newly registered and as such has to date four foster households and is actively recruiting more. The agency has placed two children within these households. The fostering agency is able to provide task centred fostering, short breaks, and longer term placements.

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 agency is newly registered and has placed a very small number of children to date. The evidence of outcomes for children is therefore very limited and as placements have been very recent, these have yet to fully establish. The service is, however, clearly child focused and demonstrates a strong commitment to enhancing children's lives. Children are beginning to make progress particularly in relation to their educational commitment and emotional well-being. Despite the newness of placements, strong bonds are developing between children and their fostering families. Feedback from placing authorities is very positive about both the care of children and how the agency works in partnership. Children say they like living in their foster home and feel safe and well cared for.

Foster carers are caring and committed, ensuring sound outcomes for children. Foster carers are well supported which enables them to meet the demands of their role.

The agency has yet to be registered for a year and only very recently had children placed. As a result of this, it has not been appropriate to undertake some management activities, such as, unannounced visits to carers, annual appraisals, carers' annual reviews and monitoring of the quality of care. The management team, however, have established systems for such activities and retain a clear view of the development of the service and how they wish it to progress.

Recommendations have been set in relation to ensuring that all statutory paperwork is obtained from the placing authority, the further development of education and short break policies and providing the children's guide in alternative media.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the children's guide is available, where appropriate, through suitable alternative methods of communication (NMS 16.6)
- implement a written education policy which values and promotes children's education which is understood by carers (NMS 8.5)
- ensure the fostering service has a clear Statement of purpose, specifically, that it details how short break arrangements will be managed (NMS16)
- ensure information provided to foster parents about a child must include the child's up-to-date care plan, and the placement plan, including information regarding arrangements for consent to medical treatment, and medical history. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.6)'

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children have not been living long with their new foster families. However, children placed to date are nurtured within environments where they have the opportunity to grow and develop. Children are placed with carers who are committed to their welfare and who are able to meet their needs. Children say they like living with their foster carers and feel safe. They have begun to develop attachments with their foster carers, who in turn, are beginning to help them to develop a positive self-view and understanding of their background.

Children have made progress in the time they have been living with their carers, in areas such as school attendance and behaviour. Attachments are developing between children and the foster families who nurture them with a view to them developing good emotional resilience. Children's experiences of the fostering service are positive and they rate the service as good. Children enjoy the family environments and love that they now have dogs. Placing authorities are highly positive about the care provided.

Children are consulted about decisions in their day-to-day life and are beginning to understand why boundaries are set. Carers support children through times of crisis and are sensitive to why children behave in the way that they do. Children are treated as part of the family and enjoy being involved in daily family events and

planned holidays. They develop positive bonds with foster siblings and look for them when they come home from school. Contact arrangements with siblings and other family members, are clearly outlined and actively supported.

Children are healthy and are helped to become more aware of how to maintain healthy lifestyles. They undertake regular physical activity such as country walks with dogs and going swimming every week. Children are registered with a dentist, doctor and optician. Children know that their carers will be there to support them at school meetings and events. Carers are establishing close links with schools to ensure that they know how best to support the child and that key information is shared appropriately. Children have the opportunity to pursue interests and hobbies, secure in the knowledge that any equipment required will be provided.

The agency has formal systems in place to assist young people in developing skills and preparing for adulthood but has yet to have the opportunity to implement these. A 'staying put' policy is in place which outlines how the agency will work with carers and placing authorities to enable young people to stay with their carers after the age of 18.

Quality of service

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

The agency at the point of this inspection has only placed two children, one of which was for a two day placement; therefore the service has limited experience of providing care for young people. However, those placements made have been positive. 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 information in their possession. The placing authority has yet to provide a care plan and the agency has attempted to bridge this gap by devising a basic care plan. The placing authority has also yet to provide copies of other documentation such as the looked after child medical. The agency is in the process of following this up with the placing authority. The diversity of carers is limited but is reflective of the local demographics of the area and the children referred for placement.

Matching processes are sound and are child focused. The agency only passes to placing authority possible matches where the agency feels the needs of the child can be safely met. Carers are not pressured to take placements and are clear that placements are only offered if suitable for both the child and the fostering household.

Foster carers are part of the team around the child and feel their views are respected and taken into consideration. Carers are not, however, always clear as to the level of authority delegated to them, due to the lack of statutory paperwork. They may, therefore, not be able to make reasonable and appropriate decisions without having to seek unnecessary consent. As looked after child medical reports have yet to be provided carers have limited medical history of the children placed. Carers seek to redress this and have been proactive in ensuring that children are registered with

local doctors, dentists and optician and that initial health checks take place in order to ensure positive health outcomes for children. Each child has an individual health passport which is updated as these checks take place.

Members of the fostering household plan attend all educational events and plays so that children know that there is someone there for them. However, the education policy does not guide carers as to what are the minimum expectations of them and how to support children in their school career.

The agency has a robust panel process which ensures assessment of the suitability of carers is thoroughly explored. Assessments presented to panel are of good quality and evidence the suitability of the household to undertake the fostering task. The panel benefits from a wide variety of experience and expertise. Recruitment of panel members is robust and the training of the newly established panel is well thought through. The cultural diversity of the panel membership is limited but reflects the area in which the agency is situated and the current referrals for young people. The agency has identified that the limited cultural diversity and gender balance in the panel is something that the manager will be seeking to widen when recruiting new panel members. Panel policies and procedures are clearly documented and shared with panel members. This ensures that panel is clear of its roles and responsibilities and those decisions are clearly documented and reached in a timely manner. Panel decisions are effectively shared with carers.

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 are new to the fostering task and emphasise that the agency supports them very well. Carers never feel alone and are well supported by supervising social workers monthly visits and the on-call service available to them at all hours of day and night. Carers say that agency staff are creative, have a very 'can do' attitude and provide practical support, such as, taking a child out. The needs of the whole of the fostering family are considered in these monthly visits, as well as the fostered child. Formal support groups have not been a regular feature of the service. The manager is looking into ways to most effectively provide peer support as the agency grows.

A good training programme is being developed to support carers. Carers complete pre-approval training through the skills to foster programme and begin the Children's Workforce Development Council's training, support and development standards prior to approval. Carers are moving through the mandatory core training programme which covers such key areas as safeguarding, attachment, managing challenging behaviour and first aid. Further training is currently accessed according to need and relevance through each carer's personal development plan. Supervising social workers are able to deliver targeted packages of training in a number of areas relating to attachment and therapeutic ways of working. A useful resource library is available to carers.

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. No safeguarding concerns have arisen within the agency since it has been registered, however, the manager is aware of the local safeguarding board and is clear on how any concerns will be referred. Robust safeguarding policies are in place that includes the management of concerns about carers between annual reviews. Carers subject to allegations are able to receive independent support from an independent social worker as well as Fostering Network.

Children have not experienced bullying; however, carers are able to identify how they will act to ensure their safety. Children are provided with information how to complain in the initial children's pack. Carers are guided by clear policies in the carers' handbook on what to do and are able to access out of hours support from the agency should a child go missing, however, this has not happened.

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 detailed and are clearly well thought through. Supervising social workers are able to do individual pieces of work with carers enabling them to understand the impact of the child's past history and how it presents in the child's behaviour and understanding of the world around them. Carers are sensitive to identifying situations and activities which may cause distress and anxiety for children. Where such events or situations cannot be avoided such as during contact, these issues of concern are fed back to the placing social worker.

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. The manager advises that systems are in place to ensure that all carers, back up carers and staff will be subject to having Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks updated every three years. Some staff are related to each other and the agency has policies that address any conflict of interest, whistleblowing or safeguarding situations. This ensures that a culture of openness exists and that safeguarding remains at the forefront.

Leadership and management

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

The agency having been registered within the last twelve months has only very recently had children placed. As a result of this, it has not been appropriate to undertake some management activities, such as, unannounced visits to carers, annual appraisals, carers annual reviews and monitoring of the quality of care. The management team, however, have retained a clear view of the service, how it is

developing and how they wish it to progress. Quarterly reports of their assessments and plans are produced. Both the Responsible Individual and the Registered Manager are qualified social workers with a diverse professional and management background which gives them a wealth of experience and knowledge to draw on when running the agency. Shareholders within the company are also able to give advice and guidance to the management team in areas such as finance and human resources.

The manager is clear on what constitutes a significant event and who is required to be informed. The agency has invested in computerised systems to aid statistical monitoring of key indicators, such as, educational and health outcomes, safeguarding concerns and complaints. Staff and other stakeholders experience the management structure as positive and they have confidence in the manager to take the agency forward.

Carers enjoy positive relationships with office-based staff. The agency has established positive links with placing authorities and plans to overtime develop these with other partner agencies, such as, education departments and local looked after children's health teams.

Social work staff are qualified and highly trained. Staff have had limited need for induction into the agency as they have been involved in developing the agency alongside the management team. The manager is planning to further develop the current induction system to ensure that is of a high quality and meets the needs of future students and new staff. Staff receive effective regular individual supervisions and feel well supported in their work. Caseloads are appropriate and the manager is able to support carers when the supervising social worker is on leave.

The agency is sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of children. The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clear and detailed. However, short break arrangements are not sufficiently detailed to describe how such arrangements will be defined and supported, nor are such arrangements referred to in the carers' handbook. Some changes are planned to the children's guide to make it available in different formats and therefore more accessible. All of the carers feel well supported by the organisation and rate the levels of support as good. No complaints about the agency have been received. The agency has implemented the foster carer's charter which it feels sits securely within the core principles of how the agency works. Carers feel well respected as core members of the team around the child. They feel that their views and opinions are listened to and given full consideration. Carers refer to an agency with a 'can do attitude' and where suggestions are listened to. Formal systems for consultation about the agency have yet to be fully developed and implemented but are at the forefront of the manager's development plans for the coming year.

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.