

Foster Care Associates - Yorkshire and Lincolnshire

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This agency is part of a nationwide fostering service. The registered manager is based at a regional office and oversees five area offices in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Within each of the area teams is a manager, a team of qualified supervising social workers and administrative staff. Children and young people's support services (CHYPSS) workers, educational officers (EO) and therapists are attached to specific offices.

A range of family placements are provided including emergency, short term, assessment, bridging, long term and parent and child. The agency is currently supporting approximately 490 approved foster carers in 305 households offering 569 placements; there are also two short break placements.

This inspection focused on the regional office and the Leeds office.

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 **good**.

At the last inspection this agency was judged to be operating to a good standard; four recommendations were made. These have been addressed and there are on-going improvements to the service. In particular, there is now careful consideration of any physical intervention by carers with foster children, which helps to protect both children and carers from allegations. Carers also receive training on family contact so that this goes as smoothly as possible for children and young people. The agency is effective in arranging and sustaining appropriate placements for foster children. Children and young people feel integrated into the agency, make clear progress and recognise the high levels of support they receive.

There is particularly good work undertaken to provide children and young people with education and emotional support. This is an essential contribution towards sustaining and improving the effectiveness of placements.

Carers themselves are very positive about the agency and its philosophy of support. The supervision they receive is excellent. They are also encouraged to develop their skills and undertake additional roles. Carers appreciate the support that is provided to their own children. They are kept up to date with professional developments and benefit from the international links of the organisation.

The agency is strong in all areas. This inspection identifies developmental issues in monitoring, carers' training and a small number of other areas that the agency can use to improve standards further.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- review each panel member's performance annually against agreed performance objectives. This is with regard to members who are employees (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.15)
- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been obtained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure the manager monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. This is with particular regard to notifications and complaints (NMS 25.2)
- ensure the service implements a written policy that clarifies the format of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. This is with regard to consistent application of the dating protocol on electronic records. (NMS 26.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people are extremely positive about the service they receive from the agency, both directly and through their carers. They benefit from regular consultation in their localities and social opportunities. These are arranged with their ages and abilities in mind so that all children and young people can be involved. In addition, children and young people's representatives attend national as well as international meetings and contribute to training and other events. As a result of these excellent opportunities, children and young people feel thoroughly involved in the agency as a whole and consider that their voices are heard. One said, 'It's like a huge family; I like the big events best.' Another said, 'It makes you feel you're not alone.' They all keep memorabilia, such as photographs and awards, to remind them

of the many positive events that have occurred. This contributes to the development of their self-confidence and their effective preparation for adulthood.

For a few children and young people the initial matching process is not effective enough, especially when they are admitted at short notice. However, the agency makes substantial efforts to ensure that placements are supported, as much as possible, in whatever way is necessary. Additional direct support is provided to carers through supervising social workers, therapists and support workers. When individual children or young people have to move, their subsequent placements are often to other carers within the agency in order to minimize the disruption. These usually prove to be effective and the vast majority of children and young people are satisfied. One said, 'They are good carers and it's a good agency; they treat you right and you feel part of the family.' Children and young people rarely feel the need to complain.

A particular highlight is the help that children and young people get with their education. Expert help and tuition is provided to a large proportion of the children and young people and it makes a significant difference. School attendance rates are high; all children and young people have placements; individual examination grades are often higher than anticipated and participation blossoms. Young people's personal expectations and ambitions are raised. While academic attainments do not match the national average, children and young people make substantial improvements from their starting points. Carers are extremely positive about the personal support they receive including help liaising with local education authorities. One carer described the education team as 'magicians' because of their success in obtaining and supporting placements.

Children and young people develop positive relationships with their carers, in most cases, which often last after they leave. Young adults who have been fostered with the agency stay in touch and some continue to contribute, for example at training events. Regular meetings are held for care leavers. The agency helps young people remain with their foster carers as part of their supported lodgings arrangements. These are important contributions that are not necessarily financially rewarding for the agency but show children and young people that their welfare is central. They assist children and young people to develop emotional maturity and practical independence.

Children and young people receive close attention to their health. There is particularly effective direct and indirect therapeutic work too. There is substantial investment in this area and it is of immense support to both carers and children and young people. Recent training provided by therapists has addressed helpful topics, such as the power of play, attachment issues and the agency's team parenting approach. Some children and young people receive therapy in person. For some this has contributed to them learning how to accept the answer 'no' more readily, which is a fundamental part of their development. The organisation has recently developed a sophisticated recording tool to measure the progress of children and young people. This is an important improvement that focusses carers on successes rather than difficulties and allows everyone to see changes in a succinct, graphical form. Over

time it will become an increasingly important record for children and young people.

Quality of service

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

Carers feel extremely positive about the recruitment and assessment processes they experience. They are dealt with promptly and effectively and continue to receive excellent support afterwards. They establish strong relationships with staff, which are reflected in their dealings with children and young people. Initial assessments are carefully monitored and as a result the large majority of reports are fit for panel consideration. The assessors are mostly independent and are trained and supported well. A substantial proportion of applicants withdraw before they reach panel but very few drop out afterwards. Senior personnel are aware that this raises questions about the initial screening process and this is under review. Otherwise, however, it indicates an effective and child-centred process. Recruitment is organised by a separate team and produces a steady increase in carers; existing carers have opportunities to become involved in recruitment too, which is an important contribution to their development and to successful recruitment.

Carers benefit from a wide range of thorough training courses that clearly address the needs of children and young people. Most carers fully understand the need for on-going training. Courses are provided at a variety of venues and times to facilitate those carers who have other jobs. However, not all carers in every household attend the required amount of induction and core training. This has a relatively low impact on children and young people though because of the high levels of support provided to households. Carer's reviews always address any shortfalls in their development. Training also addresses the needs of carers who have children with disabilities, such as autism. The programme also addresses other important issues, such as those arising for carers who are caring for children who are being adopted. Carers consider that the training and support is a critical factor in them maintaining the placements of children and young people who have complex needs. Staff provide support over and above what carers expect, including visiting when new children are admitted; they provide practical assistance as well as advice, and send cards and gifts. One carer said, 'Our experience of fostering has been fantastic; we even got help at 6 pm on a Sunday night.' This is a major contribution to the supportive philosophy of the service.

Carers attend a variety of local meetings and contribute to improvements in the service, such as the content of the welcome box for new children and young people, and the provision of name badges at meetings. This helps them feel involved with the agency and positive about their work. Carers demonstrate a high degree of enthusiasm for the service and its culture of mutual support at all levels.

The vast majority of carers are positive about the matching process. Improvements have occurred in the identification and support provided when placements become fragile. Support often includes extra practical support at home. Input from therapists, for example, helps carers to understand negative behaviours and a team approach is

used to maximise the benefits. One carer said, 'I'm a better parent now than I was for my own children!' Care is taken to ensure that any racial or religious needs are met by carers and also that suitable amenities, such as places of worship, are available locally so that children and young people do not feel isolated. Similarly, close attention is given to the views and needs of carers' own children through consultation and support groups. Unplanned endings are made as positive as possible for children and young people as well as carers. In many cases outcomes for children and young people are better as a result, for example if a move leads to greater independence or a more permanent placement.

The panel operates effectively. It is appropriately managed so that members are sent agenda items in good time. Panel members receive training and appraisals in order to keep their practice up to date. However, the appraisals for members of staff who also serve as panel members do not take into account their panel duties. This means their performance in respect to these duties is not as well monitored as is necessary. Because it has an appropriate central list, including vice-chairpersons, panel is able to operate adequately in the absence of the chair person. Decision making is undertaken by the Registered Manager, which is satisfactory given the way local offices conduct assessments independently of him. On-going improvements are being made to panel procedures. For example, the panel adviser is now independent of the voting process.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people feel safe in their placements and there are no reports of bullying in placements. Compared to other independent fostering agencies, there is particularly prompt action taken to address any concerns. This helps to ensure that safety levels are maintained and is especially welcomed by carers who are the subject of allegations. In the large majority of cases carers feel well-supported by the agency during these stressful periods because supervising social workers contact them more often. Independent support is also available. All children and young people have good opportunities to raise any concerns with adults independent from the service and they are routinely asked about their welfare by supervising social workers. As a result they rarely feel the need to complain.

There is prompt liaison with other services, such as local authorities and the police. Notifications are made to Ofsted as required and work is underway by the Registered Manager to make these a more intrinsic part of quality assurance. Lessons are learnt from incidents in order to improve the protection of children and young people. Changes are made to safe caring policies, for example, carers receive additional training. In some cases, adjustments are made to the type of needs the agency feels carers are most suited to meeting. This demonstrates careful management of how carers are used that is based on the best interests of children and young people.

Numbers of children and young people who are at risk because they go missing are relatively low and those who are at risk receive appropriate multi-agency support. As

a result they show progress in their abilities to protect themselves, for example, by having better understanding of the relationships they establish; foster carers remain central to this process and are helped to understand the reasons for such behaviour. This increases their tolerance and leads to greater continuity of placements.

The physical safety of children and young people in their foster homes is maintained well. Close attention is given to potential hazards before carers are registered and these standards are maintained afterwards. Safe caring policies for households are kept up to date and clearly address each child's or young person's needs. For example if a learning disability means that the smoke alarm is not likely to be understood, extra precautions are put in place. Similarly, if physical intervention is necessary, the safe caring policy describes what intervention is acceptable. The care that is provided is checked at least monthly and on an unannounced basis at least annually. These steps protect children and young people as well as carers.

Leadership and management

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

Leadership and management are good. The agency is part of a larger organisation in which improvement is continually sought. This inspection shows that improvements are on-going. To facilitate this, the Registered Manager shares responsibility for certain functions, such as those for the recruitment of carers and the assessment process. These and other activities are monitored through frequent management meetings and reported on so that standards to carers, children and young people are maintained at a high level. However, monitoring by the Registered Manager of certain patterns and trends is less thorough than is possible. This means that certain opportunities to improve the agency are missed, for example, regarding some information arising from notifications and complaints.

The administration of the agency is effective. Managers are highly competent and lines of accountability are clear. They ensure that a positive and constructive atmosphere prevails in the agency. The needs of everyone in each household are reviewed regularly, for example, birth children and, where appropriate, young adults who are in supported lodgings. This means that the agency has a clear picture of each household and can support and match accordingly. Improvements are on-going and an electronic recording system has been introduced in the last 12 months. This has many benefits but the dating protocol is not applied consistently. This means, for example, that the most recent records are not always easily found, which causes inefficiencies.

All carers and staff are clear about the purpose of the agency. As one carer put it, 'I really feel that the whole focus of the agency is on supporting us to do a good job.' Effective work has been completed by all parties to ensure that children and young people receive age-appropriate information about foster care. Staff feel that they too are well cared for. One represented the views of most carers by saying, 'I've stayed this long because of the effectiveness of the team approach.' Professional development is encouraged. There are regular meetings and discussions about

practice. Individual team members complete more than enough training to maintain their professional registrations; some are sponsored by the organisation to gain professional qualifications.

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.