

Reach-Out Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	Reach Out Care, Hope House, Burnhope, NEWTON AYCLIFFE, County Durham, DL5 7ER
Telephone number	01325 310 009
Email	lynnebrown@reachoutcare.co.uk
Registered person	Reach-Out Care Ltd
Registered manager	Lynne Brown
Responsible individual	Joyce Whitfield
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Reach Out Care is an independent fostering agency (IFA). It is a private limited company owned by two directors. The agency is managed by a registered manager who reports directly to the Responsible Individual (RI) for the agency. There are 44 children placed with 35 approved foster carers.

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 **outstanding**.

Children placed in foster care by this service receive a high level quality of care. They make significant progress socially and emotionally. This is positively enhanced by the strong commitment of the agency to ensuring matching arrangements are carefully thought out. A clear outcome is that the fostering agency is outstandingly successful in placing children especially those with complex and challenging needs.

Children's needs are at the forefront of the operations of the service. They are provided with family placements that offer stability, love and safety. This supports them to achieve their potential and enhances their capacity to develop trust in adults. The assessment of prospective foster carers is very thorough and this is reflected in the very low disruption rates.

The quality and content of reports in respect of the children and foster carers is high. The children are provided with an impressive pack of information when they are placed with foster carers. However, the children's guide does not include the contact details of the Children's Rights Director or the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). This omission however, does not detract from the very clear and child friendly information provided to the children.

A strong feature of the fostering agency is the passionate commitment to finding the most appropriate placement for children. This is demonstrated in the high level of successful placements of siblings enabling them to remain together. The stable and caring family environments enjoyed by the children positively enhance their safety

and in meeting their complex emotional needs.

A significant feature of the service is the successful record of children who achieve educationally at school and in higher education. All the children placed by the agency attend school or college full time. They show impressive achievements academically compared to their starting points prior to being placed with their foster carers. The impact of the input from the foster carers and agency staff has significantly improved the life chances of the children both educationally and socially.

Children are at the forefront of all operational activity and the service ensures that they are consulted on a wide range of changes planned for the service. This is a listening organisation.

There is strong and clear leadership of the fostering agency provided by an experienced manager. Staff feel valued and positively supported. The manager ensures high standards of practice are maintained through a rigorous and regular monitoring of all aspects of the operations of the agency. There is a strong commitment throughout the service for improvements to be an integral part of the culture of the service. The directors of the organisation demonstrate a strong commitment to the core values of excellence and high quality care for children. This is a forward thinking service and plans are in place to further develop the service in order to meet demand from local authority commissioners. The agency has achieved the Gold standard from the Investors In People organisation.

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 the Children's Guide includes the contact details of the Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted. (NMS 16.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children enjoy living with their foster families. They feel safe and have learned to trust adults. This compares significantly to their previous experiences where their trust in adults has been adversely affected.

This independent fostering agency has a positive commitment to ensuring that fostering is a well thought out choice for children. It works proactively and creatively to provide flexible, effective and well-managed support, based on the individually assessed needs of all the children. The agency works closely with health, educational professionals and social workers to ensure that the care and emotional needs of the children are met. For example, one child said, 'I was afraid that we might be

separated but we are now together and this makes me very happy.'

Children make exceptional progress at school compared to their starting points prior to being placed with their foster families. All the children are in full time education and where assessed as appropriate, extra tuition support is provided by the agency. Excellent exam results have been achieved by children as a result of the positive support of their foster carers. One young person gained an A* in maths at Advanced Level following extra tuition provided by the foster agency. All other children have achieved on average ten GCSE's grades A to C and all have gone onto further education. Some of the children have achieved awards from the local authority for their achievements in education. Foster carers take a personal interest in the education of the children and they have establish strong links with teachers at schools attended by the children. This proactive approach positively promotes the educational as well as social achievements of the children.

The children are involved in all aspects of their care planning and reviews. This promotes their understanding of decisions made on their behalf, increases their self-confidence and broadens their outlook on life. One child who previously attended a special school now attends a mainstream school. This is due to the significant improvement in their self-confidence gained from the excellent support and encouragement from the foster carers.

The agency values the input from children in any changes to the way the service operates. Children can present their views with the knowledge that these will be taken seriously. They fill in an annual survey with their opinions on a wide range of issues relating to the service they experience. For example, the children were involved in producing the anti-bullying policy for the agency. They are also actively involved in the skills to foster training programme. This is an excellent demonstration of inclusivity.

The children are placed with foster carers who have a clear understanding of child care and good parenting. The matching process is sensitively carried out to ensure children are appropriately placed. The care and emotional needs of each child is balanced with the attributes of individual foster carers to ensure the best match possible. For example, one reviewing officer commented about the positive change observed in some children during a review, 'they became normal children again full of beans and happy.'

The annual awards event hosted by the fostering agency is a celebration and recognition of each child achieving outcomes at whatever level. Achievements include attending school full time, gaining exceptional results in exams, having the confidence to help in the training of foster carers in the skills to foster programme, attending their reviews and having the confidence to take an active role in the outcome of their review.

Quality of service

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

The recruitment of high calibre foster carers is key to the success of the service. The preparation, training and assessment of prospective foster carers is robust. This intensive process is intended to ensure they are properly trained and prepared to meet the complex care needs of children.

Children take an active part in the selection of prospective foster carers through the skills to foster training programme. Assessment reports of prospective foster carers are of a high quality. This provides the foster panel with the necessary information on which to make recommendations to the agency decision maker. The training programme for foster carers is thorough and provides a sound base to enhance their development. Equality and diversity is at the forefront of the agency's procedures and practice. Foster carers are recruited from any background, culture, race and gender to meet the complex needs of children who need a family. The agency ensures that children are matched with foster carers who are able to meet their care needs and, where possible, reflect their background and culture. They are positively motivated and demonstrate a positive commitment to ensuring that they provide high standards of care. The children are very satisfied with the care they receive. For example, one child commented in a letter about their foster carer, 'thank you for everything you have done for me including the bullying at school and making me laugh when I am sad.'

Foster carers demonstrate an enthusiastic commitment to their work with the children in their care. They are supervised by the agency's support social workers who take a personal pride in the way they work with foster carers. The following examples reflect the relationships established between the agency and their foster carers. One foster carer wrote to their support worker: 'just to say thank you for your support over the past few days,' and, 'thank you for building up a trusting relationship and going the extra mile.' Where required the agency is proactive in ensuring extra support to maintain stability of placements. This support has extended to the provision of domestic cleaners to help foster carers, and finance to provide special trips for children who had never experienced treats such as a surprise trip to Lapland to meet Santa Claus. This demonstrates a strong commitment to enhancing the quality of life for children.

The comprehensive training programme for foster carers is aimed at continually improving their skills and competences. This has resulted in a team of foster carers who are confident in role and provide children with safe, caring and stable family placements. The local authority commissioners of the services are highly satisfied with the quality of the care provided by the foster carers. One local authority manager described the role of the foster carers as: 'outstanding and professional,' and, 'I can't speak highly enough about the professionalism of the agency and the calibre of the foster carers we are using for our children.' Another spoke about, 'the input from the fostering agency to support the children has been fantastic.'

Foster carers are treated as trusted partners who are fully involved in all aspects of the care planning process and their views are valued by the fostering agency.

The fostering panel ensures that sound recommendations are made to the agency decision maker. The panel maintains a quality assurance function in respect of all reports, thereby promoting high standards. The administrative support to the panel is efficient, ensuring that all reports are received by panel members at least five days before the panel meets. Applicants to become foster carers are always invited to attend the panel and are encouraged to express their views on the way they have been treated by the agency. For example, one couple stated, 'it was a good experience and the chair went out of his way to make us feel comfortable.'

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children feel safe living with their foster carers. They are aware of how to make a complaint. They have a clear understanding of their rights to feel safe and live in foster homes that provide them with a caring and secure home environment. The welcome pack given to all children contains the contact details of various organisations who offer support and advice on safeguarding issues.

The manager maintains a positive link with the local safeguarding service and ensures that all staff and foster carers attend safeguarding training.

The service maintains a strong emphasis on very thorough assessments of prospective foster carers. There is a positive emphasis to ensure that children are placed with foster carers who have been appropriately vetted for their suitability to provide safe care. The service operates a robust recruitment and selection process to ensure all staff and panel members are safe to work in this challenging environment. The suitability of prospective foster carers is considered on an inclusive basis. This is based on their potential to meet the needs of the children irrespective of their culture, sexuality, disability or marital status. The training provided adequately equips the foster carers with the competence and skills, to enable them to effectively care for children who have experienced abuse.

The welfare of the children is further enhanced through periodic unannounced visits to foster homes by support social workers and the manager. This promotes the safety of children.

Leadership and management

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

The fostering agency is committed to improvement in service delivery through the active involvement of the staff, foster carers and children. It has an inclusive culture that welcomes and encourages all stakeholders to participate in developing the service. This is an organisation that has a demonstrable capacity to improve. The recommendations made at the last inspection relating to improving the foster agreement to include support required, and ensuring children are aware that they

can access their records, have been complied with. The improvement to the foster agreement means that they are better supported to care for children especially those with challenging needs. In accessing their records children are able to have an influence on the contents and to make changes as required.

This is a well-managed service where there is a robust monitoring of the day-to-day operations and quality of foster placements. The quality of work with foster carers is underpinned by the investment in regular training programmes provided by the agency. Additionally, research information is used to add value to the development of the service. For example, an innovative current research project supported by the agency has looked into the possibility of linking a residential children's home with foster carers to provide a combination of care for children. This will enable those children assessed as not yet ready for a family placement to be able to benefit the best of both systems of care. The agency has a strong commitment to using research in order to improve services to children. This is an excellent example of collaboration with a local university to significantly explore ways of improving the service with evidence that is supported through academic research.

The agency staff are committed to their role and work to high professional standards. Relationships between the fostering agency and placing local authorities are excellent and this positively supports effective planning for children and young people.

The manager provides staff with strong leadership and direct support through formal supervision. All staff and foster carers are positively encouraged to develop their competences through training and development opportunities. There is a strong commitment from the directors of the agency to maintain a highly qualified and trained team of professional staff. For example, staff are supported to obtain the advanced qualification in social work. This promotes the knowledge and competences of staff in working in a challenging complex environment.

The fostering agency has a team of foster carers who thrive on the challenges posed by the demands of caring for children, many of whom have experienced difficult life circumstances within their own families. Foster carers are committed to improving the life chances of the children. They are actively encouraged to be involved in service development through the foster care forum. This is a significant feature of the service demonstrating a strong commitment to change through the involvement of stake holders.

The agency continues to operate to the aims and objectives identified in the Statement of Purpose. The guide for children is a colourful document that is child focused and complemented with pictures and photographs. It does not however, include the contact details of the Director of Children's Rights or the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The welcome pack provides the children with a wealth of information about fostering and what they can expect from their foster carers and the agency. The information is child friendly and very well presented. An audio MP3 listening device is included to inform those children who may have reading difficulties. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to ensuring that children

are fully informed about the service irrespective of any disability.

The manager has established strong professional links with commissioning local authorities who are highly satisfied with the work of the agency. This is exemplified in comments from the representatives of some of the commissioners: 'I am very impressed with their operational information systems and they always provide speedy responses for information we require before placing a child,' and, 'I would certainly use them again.'

The directors of the agency are confident in the way the service is being operated and they are fully aware of the need to review the management structure as the service expands. This ensures that the agency continues to meet the care needs of children and in the provision of high calibre foster carers.

This is an organisation that listens to its stakeholders and values their contribution to the planning of improvements to service development. The achievement by the agency of the Investors In People Gold Standard award is a testimony to the positive way the service is managed. This provides children with high quality care and stability through committed foster carers.

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.