

# The Homefinding & Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Terry Casey
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	15/02/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The Homefinding and Fostering Agency is privately owned. The agency currently supports 59 fostering households, providing placements for 104 children and young people. This number includes a small number of young parents who are placed in foster homes along with their young children. In addition to mother and baby placements, the service seeks to provide both short- and long-term foster care placements for children and young people of all ages throughout the south east of England with a focus on Kent, London and Sussex. The agency ensures that sibling groups are placed together whenever possible.

### 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**.

Experienced and knowledgeable staff effectively support committed and enthusiastic foster carers to ensure that children and young people's needs are identified and met. Matching is carefully considered through a robust process, leading to a limited number of unplanned endings compared to similar agencies. A key strength of the agency is the long-term nature of many placements. These represent a higher proportion of all placements within the agency, compared to other independent agencies. This helps children and young people to experience consistency and continuity in their placements. No changes in schools resulted from changes in foster placements within the past year. The agency ensures that siblings are placed together, whenever possible, helping to promote individual and family identity.

Foster carers are carefully selected, prepared and developed in a way that makes them feel valued members of a team. This ensures that children and young people are cared for safely and effectively. Children and young people confirm that they feel safe and can trust those who are caring for them. The number of children and young people who go missing is extremely low, when compared to national figures. Children and young people see themselves as part of a family. They appreciate that their foster carers can make decisions on their behalf. This allows them to develop a positive self-view by spending time with friends, enjoying wide ranging activities and

family holidays.

Overall monitoring processes lack clarity and do not provide for the views of children, young people, foster carers or placing authorities to be considered in plans for improving the agency. The children's guide does not include all necessary information and the Statement of Purpose is not published on the agency's website. The appraisal of fostering panel members does not currently take place. In addition, some panel meeting processes and the minutes of panel meetings require improvement to ensure that decision making is clearly recorded and understood. These shortfalls have limited direct impact upon children and young people.

## 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.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
35 (2011)	provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority; provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority when reviewing the quality of care (Regulation 35 (2) and (3))	26/04/2013
3 (2011)	place a copy of the statement of purpose on their website (Regulation 3(2))	26/04/2013
3 (2011)	update the children's guide to the fostering service to include a summary of the procedure (the representation and complaints procedure) established under regulation 18(1) and the address, email address, and telephone number of the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3(3)(b)(i) and (c))	26/04/2013

### Recommendations

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

- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the foster carer or prospective foster carer is informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation is sent to them within five working days (NMS 14.10)

- ensure each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services paragraph 5.15)
- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. (NMS 25.1)

## Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children and young people experience continuity through established and stable placements. A particular strength of the agency is the permanent nature of many placements. Over 58% of children and young people have been placed for longer than 18 months. Of the 43% of children and young people placed with the same family for longer than two years, many have experienced considerably longer placements. One young person said, 'They're family, I wouldn't ever refer to them as my foster carers.'

The agency recognises the importance of keeping families together. Children and young people are always placed with their siblings whenever possible. More than half the children placed are with at least one sibling. Children and young people are positive about the care they receive, saying that their foster carer's families have, 'brought us into their lives.' The quality of placements ensures that children and young people feel safe and secure. Children and young people clearly express that they trust those who care for them.

Children and young people enjoy a positive experience of family life and are involved in everyday decisions accordingly. Children and young people build confidence over time and are fully supported to express themselves effectively when plans about their care are being discussed. Placing social workers identify growth in confidence in individual children and young people.

Children and young people grow and develop through engagement in an extensive range of activities in the wider community. These help to identify and develop individual interests and skills. Children and young people enjoy diverse holiday experiences with their foster families. All those spoken to during the inspection had a passport. This helps to strengthen their personal identity and sense of self, in addition to enabling them to benefit from the opportunity of international travel.

All children and young people attend nursery, school or college. On the rare occasion when education is disrupted individual tutoring is arranged to ensure individual learning opportunities are maximised. The agency promotes stability through providing consistent transport to and from school. When appropriate this enables children and young people to remain in the same school after they are placed in foster care. Children and young people say that they are able to highlight when they need additional educational support and this is forthcoming. Placing social workers acknowledge the assistance foster carers provide in supporting transition from

primary to secondary education.

Excellent links with health services from placing authorities efficiently promotes the health and well-being of children and young people. Individual appointments for each child or young person are consistently arranged and followed up. Progress is carefully monitored. Liaison with primary health care professionals ensures individual needs are met. Each child and young person retains their own healthy care book which logs their own medical background in an accessible way. This enables them to improve their awareness of their personal history and encourages them to take responsibility for their own health over time.

Children and young people benefit from positive contact experiences with their families and others who are important to them. Placing authorities highlight that in addition to transport costs, the agency includes the cost of promoting contact within its fees. Contact facilities at the head office are sensitively designed and decorated to meet the needs of different aged children and young people. Linked rooms enable expansion to provide large family contacts when appropriate. Alternative facilities are identified when this is helpful to improve the experience of contact for children and young people. For example, children and young people enjoy activities in the wider community with family members when this is appropriate. Carefully selected staff provide continuity for children and young people in transport to and supervision of contact.

Foster carers and placing authorities embrace the concept of delegated authority. This enables children and young people to enjoy visits to and from their friends, further promoting an experience of normal family life. Young people say that they are encouraged to develop life skills that will help them when they become independent. However, many maintain positive links with their foster families beyond the formal end of their foster placements.

## **Quality of service**

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

The fostering agency recognises its strengths and position in the market. As the demand for placements change, the agency adapts to ensure that suitable families are able to meet the wide ranging needs of children and young people. Rigorous referral processes ensure that children and young people are matched with suitable carers. Positive relationships with placing authorities enhance the assessment of children and young people's needs. Accurate written information is consistently shared with the agency, ensuring that only appropriate carers are considered. Commissioning managers say, that the agency 'provides a home for these children, not just a placement in a family.'

Foster carers confirm that they are provided with all information known to the agency prior to any placement. This enables them to make the final decision when agreeing a placement. Foster carers say that they have to be comfortable about any placement as they want each one to be successful.

Foster carers feel valued by the agency. They say that they feel 'part of a professional team', but recognise that the agency provides a 'personal touch'. They indicate that after doing their own research they identified the warm and welcome response they received as a key factor in applying to foster with this agency. Foster carers highlight the support they receive from the agency as a key strength. They are reassured to know that a member of staff is always available to them in an emergency, or simply to offer advice. An established staff team within the agency means that foster carers experience consistency over many years. Children and young people comment that their own social workers may change, but their foster carers' supervising social workers remain constant.

Processes for recruitment selection and preparation of new foster carers are rigorous and ensure that only the most suitable applicants progress to assessment. Assessments are thorough and well evidenced, highlighting the competencies and skills prospective foster carers have. Foster carers say that they enjoy the assessment process and build positive relationships with assessing social workers who 'leave no stone unturned'.

The panel functions well. Panel members demonstrate commitment to maintaining the same high quality of carers registered by the agency. Supervising social workers describe a 'healthy tension' between themselves and the panel. However, this inspection highlighted some shortfalls. Minutes of panel meetings do not always clearly set out the reasons for the panel's recommendations. In limited circumstances, evidence of the decision maker's final decision being communicated to foster carers is not recorded. This leads to confusion regarding the circumstances in which specific foster carers are no longer registered with the agency. The agency's own policy states that panel members and the panel chair should have their performance appraised annually. No appraisals have been undertaken, meaning that potential development needs of panel members have not been considered. Although recommendations are made to rectify these shortfalls, it is acknowledged that their direct impact upon children and young people is limited.

Children and young people are not currently involved in the recruitment, preparation or training of foster carers or staff. However, their views are consistently sought and contribute to the annual review process of foster carers. Placing social workers and supervising social workers from the agency also contribute to the reviews of foster carers' approval. However, reports of these reviews are prepared by a different member of staff, providing an element of independence to this process.

A comprehensive framework for the training and development of foster carers is in place. Foster carers highlight the quality of training within the agency as an important factor in their support and personal development. The fostering agency has implemented improvements in the presentation of its annual training programme for foster carers which improves take up of training courses. Previously a written document was forwarded to all foster carers. Face to face presentations by enthusiastic and motivated staff are now made to groups of foster carers. Foster carers say this highlights potential benefits and encourages them to apply for courses

they may not have considered previously.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Children and young people confidently and consistently say that they feel safe. They attribute this to the care they receive. Children and young people do not put themselves at risk by going missing. Incidences of children and young people doing this have been negligible since the last inspection. Clear policies are in place to address any incident of bullying. Children and young people do not identify bullying as a problem, but they are clear that they would have someone to talk to if they were concerned in any way. However, not all children and young people are clear about how to complain. The children's guide does not currently include a summary of the agency's complaints procedure or details of how to contact Ofsted. A requirement is made to correct this shortfall and ensure that children and young people are clear about all options open to them.

The preparation of foster carers helps them to understand the potential impact of the previous experiences of children and young people. Their knowledge is enhanced through comprehensive training and on-going support from appropriately qualified and experienced staff. Links with other professionals and specialists are followed up to ensure foster carers contribute towards and inform each individual child's care plan. Potential risks and hazards to individual children and young people are carefully considered. Personalised plans are put in place to minimize the likelihood of these occurring.

Unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least once a year, but the frequency of visits is increased when required. For example, when concerns are highlighted, regular monitoring visits are undertaken to foster carers and clear targets for improvement are set. If these are not satisfactorily met action is taken to de-register foster carers. This robust response ensures that high standards and expectations are maintained ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded.

The recruitment and vetting of all staff and foster carers are thorough. Furthermore, there is an open and frank culture within the agency. Together, these factors help to ensure that inappropriate people are prevented from being put in a position where they could harm children and young people. Any allegations against foster carers are handled effectively, promptly and fairly ensuring that all external agencies are informed. When necessary immediate action is taken to ensure that the well-being of children and young people is safeguarded at all times.

## **Leadership and management**

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



Leaders and managers ensure that the fostering agency works proactively to promote excellent relationships with placing authorities and other external professional agencies. This ensures that the needs of individual children and young people are recognised and met. Commissioning managers say, 'We get a first class service.' Placing social workers get to know staff and foster carers well. This contributes to the positive identification of potential placements. However, staff in the agency are also clear if they do not believe prospective placements are appropriate. Strong relationships with specialised health professionals ensure that the health of children and young people is monitored and information about health promotion is appropriately shared. Individual foster carers build strong relationships with schools in their local area. This helps to ensure that all children and young people attend schools that meet their needs. Progress is monitored and supported through effective and proactive involvement with education staff.

All staff who supervise foster carers are qualified and registered social workers. Staff receive regular supervision of a high quality. Through effective annual appraisals, personal development is encouraged and supported both financially and through the provision of time. Staff have access to innovative training that ensures that they expand their knowledge and skills and keep up-to-date with current developments in the field.

Following the last inspection prompt and appropriate action was taken to address the requirements and recommendations made. Positive impacts from these continue to benefit children and young people and have become embedded into practice.

Monitoring practice within this service is not of the expected standard. While there is monitoring, it is recorded in a format that makes it difficult to draw out detail. Much information is held anecdotally, due to the direct day-to-day involvement of the Registered Manager and the responsible individual. Along with the majority of the staff team they have extensive experience within the agency, meaning that they know the carers and the children and young people placed with them extremely well. Leaders and managers do monitor all matters set out in the Fostering Services Regulations. Data is routinely submitted to Ofsted on an annual basis. However, it is unclear how information is utilised to promote improvements in the service. While leaders and managers do identify areas for improvement and implement changes, the process by which changes are made lacks clarity. For example, it is difficult to see how the views of children, young people, foster carers and placing authorities are coherently obtained in a way that directly influences these improvements. It is acknowledged that the impact of this shortfall has limited impact upon children and young people, as outcomes for them continue to be outstanding.

Further minor shortfalls are identified in relation to the agency's Statement of Purpose and children's guide. A copy of the Statement of Purpose is not published on the agency's website. Attempts to correct this during the inspection were not immediately successful. The children's guide includes clear messages regarding the aims of the service. These are communicated in clear and concise language. However, a summary of the complaints procedure and contact details for Ofsted are missing from the document. Requirements are made to address the identified

shortfalls.

## **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.