

# Talawa Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	319 Baker Street, ENFIELD, Middlesex, EN1 3LF
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<b>Telephone number</b>	02083676555
<b>Email</b>	admin@talwafostering.com
<b>Registered person</b>	Talawa Fostering Services Limited
<b>Registered manager</b>	Jannette Lord
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Kamy Joseph
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	08/08/2008

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This privately owned agency has 31 foster placements in 14 fostering households. Seventeen children are currently in placement. The agency offers a range of placements from short-term to mother and baby through to long-term and permanence.

### 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**.

This agency is a good agency with an outstanding quality of service provision. One of the agency's major strengths is its careful matching which gives children and young people a head start in their placements. The agency is also very strong at promoting good health outcomes for children. This includes outcomes in relation to their physical and emotional health and children and young people make significant positive progress in their placements. Although safeguarding allegations have been appropriately referred to the local authority, the agency has not notified Ofsted of these.

Foster carers are well-supervised and prepared and make very good use of training opportunities. This helps them work well with some children's complex behaviours. They have also been successful in working positively with separated siblings. Foster carers are very committed and skilled at keeping children and young people as safe as possible. Supervising social workers are very effective in helping foster carers develop their skills but it is not clear how often children and young people are seen alone on unannounced visits. The fostering panel is also very effective and provides a very useful sounding board for the agency's leadership team. From time to time, following the panel's recommendations, there are issues over the timescales for decision making.

The leadership and management of the fostering service are strong both in their professional and organisational skills. The agency is able to effectively drive improvement which promotes better outcomes for children and young people.

However, children and young people are insufficiently involved in developing the fostering service and monitoring does not identify patterns and trends. The agency is well thought of by local authorities who see it as having children's interests at the heart of the service.

## 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
36 (2011)	ensure that any notifiable events are reported without delay to the relevant bodies. (Regulation 36 (1))	08/04/2013

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that children's wishes and feelings and those significant to them are taken into account in developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)
- ensure that the fostering service provider's decision maker is able to make a considered decision on the fostering panel's recommendations in a timely manner (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that how often children and young people are seen alone is reviewed and made explicit (NMS 21.8 )
- ensure that the service's regular monitoring identifies patterns and trends. This specifically relates to tracking outcomes for children and young people. (NMS 25.2)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people are carefully matched with the most appropriate carers and this generally ensures what local authorities see as, 'a good fit between carers and young people.' This gives carers a head start in meeting young people's needs and they do this successfully from very stable placements. Disruptions are rare and siblings generally stay together. Local authorities see this as one of the agency's strengths.

Children and young people's health needs are strongly promoted. This results in notable improvements in young people's physical well-being; for example, chronic eczema being successfully managed and dental pain being treated. Some young people grow taller, others fill out and develop shiny hair and clear skin. Some children who were previously frightened by water develop good daily hygiene rituals and begin to enjoy and look forward to them.

Many children grow in self-confidence, moving from being quiet and shy to being chatty and assertive. Independent reviewing officers comment that, 'the leaps and bounds children make means they are barely recognisable at reviews as the same children.' Health professionals see carers as, 'proactive in attending all health appointments and meetings.' They also note skilful understanding of a child's disability needs with the foster carer having, 'visual aids in her home to support the child's understanding of routines.'

Children and young people regularly attend school and the agency works well with education professionals; for example, working together to keep a young person in mainstream education. The agency strongly supports young people if they are excluded from school and this helps both maintain placements and get young people back into education. Other young people are supported with their homework, exam preparation and reading skills and this means that some young people make significant academic progress. Generally young people are strongly encouraged to develop their interests in the world. Some young people have discovered a passion for dinosaurs and others love reading, sport or drama.

Some young people are involved in learning independence skills, and are rightly proud of their abilities to manage money and are confident about shopping. Children and young people generally enjoy family life with their carers, their achievements and drawings are proudly displayed and they have a formal opportunity to influence their care at reviews. They relate warmly to their foster families but are still well supported in keeping up productive contact with their natural families. Local authorities confirm this saying that the agency, 'is very keen on promoting contact between separated siblings.' This means that young people have valuable opportunities to maintain and build on key, lifelong relationships.

## Quality of service

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

This small agency is steadily growing in a carefully managed fashion. Recruitment is a constant activity. It is helped by a highly visible shop front location in a busy area and informed by thoughtful, research-based marketing. The agency has been successful in securing some effective national publicity through a lead article in a glossy magazine and foster carers and staff have appeared not only in print, but on television and radio as well. This effective recruitment strategy means that the agency has a good range of foster families to help meet children and young people's needs.

The agency carefully sifts potential carers for an initial selection visit, and some carers will leave the process at this point. The formal assessment stage is then done by a small group of very experienced staff and the numbers of visits done and time taken is totally led by the characteristics of particular, potential carers. Not all carers in assessment will go to the fostering panel and the agency is confident and proactive about not proceeding with applicants who may not be well-suited to fostering. Local authorities say that the agency is, 'very careful about who they take on and recruit.' The fostering panel has an important quality assurance role in assessing the quality of assessments and the vast majority are described as, 'very good quality.' On the rare occasions that assessments are unsatisfactory, the agency acts quickly to remedy this.

The agency has a good core programme of preparation training for carers. Carers continue make excellent use of the more advanced training they receive using it, for example, to successfully manage complex behaviour and help move children into permanent placements. They receive regular supervision visits and use these for specific advice and support as well as standard items. Foster carers say that, 'supervision is worth its weight in gold.' The effective duty system means carers feel very well supported at any time of the day or night. Foster care families too are positively involved with the agency, enjoying routine celebrations and trips out as part of the wider fostering family. The agency also funds bespoke support packages using professionals with specialist skills. This excellent initiative means that the agency can offer stable placements to young people with highly complex needs.

The fostering panel is highly effective. It has a good range of different professionals from diverse cultures and has representatives with valuable experiences of both fostering and being a looked after child. The training programme is both relevant and of a high quality and all panel members, including the chair, are routinely appraised. The very experienced chair produces an annual report, which provides an excellent summary of activity and issues and useful development points. All carer reviews go to the fostering panel and most include views from young people. The experience and outcome of these reviews provide very useful development opportunities for carers. As well as the annual report, the fostering panel helps drive improvement in the agency by giving a considered view on both developments and specific complex issues. The agency decision maker is very confident about the quality of decisions made by the panel, but on occasion there is an issue about the length of time it sometimes takes for recommendations to reach her.

Foster carers feel very confident that they are valued core members of the team around the child. Some have been highly influential in key decisions such as whether to separate siblings or not. All feel very involved in matching decisions. Foster carers think the agency is particularly good at matching, saying that 'they talk to you, send you details, mostly children visit or you meet them. Really respect them for the care they take with this.' Local authorities agree with this saying, 'the agency is very strong on matching.' This meticulous work means that children and young people start with the best chance of being in placements that will have highly effective outcomes.

Highly effective matching means that, in most cases, cultural understanding is high. This helps children and young people feel comfortable with key elements of everyday life like food choices and skin and hair care. Some young people have specific communication needs and foster carers are both proactive and imaginative in finding highly effective ways of encouraging mutual communication. Other young people display significant behaviour challenges and the agency actively supports foster carers to understand and work positively with such challenges. This means that children and young people, with the most complex needs, can benefit from stable placements with highly skilled carers.

## **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 placement and are clear about who they would tell if they were worried about anything like bullying. They are more able to keep themselves safe than they were previously because they now feel more confident in expressing their views. One young person said, 'My carer talks to me and listens to what I say.' Another said, 'they have helped me to feel better about myself by encouraging me in a good way.'

Local authorities have been appropriately involved in any safeguarding investigations. Foster carers are very aware of safeguarding issues and their training and supervision has given them good general strategies in relation to privacy and unexpected visitors. Some young people require a more bespoke arrangement to keep them safe and for these young people individualized placement plans appropriately reflect strategies to minimise risk. Young people rarely go missing and there are comprehensive medium-term strategies in place to protect those that do. These are having a positive impact on the degree of risk young people are putting themselves in.

Recruitment of staff and foster carers reflects thorough safeguarding practice, with all referees being personally contacted or visited and key checks being redone every three years. Health specialists comment that, 'there is a healthy relationship between carers and agency staff which is supportive and respectful, and it is clear who is monitoring things.' Unannounced visits to carers are done annually and they are sometimes done more frequently than this but this is not agency policy. Children and young people are seen alone on supervision visits but there is not a policy on how often this should happen. Carers keep records of accidents to young people and these are monitored on supervision visits. Supervisors also recheck health and safety matters in carer's homes on the unannounced visit and this includes carer's pets. This all helps to keep children and young people as safe as possible.

Local authority colleagues are very positive about the agency's approach to safeguarding. They see the agency as, 'making decisions based on children's needs, not focusing on the adults but doing what is right for young people.'

## **Leadership and management**

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

There is a very good leadership team in this agency, with an excellent balance of business and professional skills. The very experienced Registered Manager is well - respected and expects high professional standards. Any deviation from this, such as varying quality of assessments, is effectively dealt with in a timely manner. Staff and panel members positively note that the manager regularly circulates relevant good practice information, to support appropriate professional standards. Staff are very positive about their professional development, are appraised regularly with views taken from appropriate others and feel well-supported by the agency. Although, generally compliance with regulations is closely monitored, the agency has not sent copies of notifications to Ofsted.

The leadership team has a very good capacity to drive improvement at various levels. For example, significant improvements have been achieved both with training compliance, overall resourcing and with marketing. These have been successful because of effective monitoring systems and clear reviewed strategies. These are underpinned by a very effective development planning cycle, involving an annual report and regular reviews. However, there is insufficient monitoring of patterns and trends relating to outcomes for children and young people.

The leadership team positively involves foster carers in its development, for example to review its foster carers' charter and handbook and some have also been involved in marketing initiatives. Young people are looking forward to being involved in the agency's preparation for new foster carers in the future, but not all young people have an opportunity to be involved with the agency and its activities at an appropriate level.

The agency has very effective working relationships with other services, who make positive mention that, on occasion, the agency will rightly challenge poor professional standards. Various external colleagues comment positively on the reliability of staff in attending reviews, being 'very child focused', and, 'working very well together.' The agency is described as having, 'great integrity', this means that children and young people have the best chances of being well-served in their placements.



## 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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.