

Core Assets Fostering - Thames Valley

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Core Assets, Thames Valley region, is a local branch of a well-established national organisation offering a comprehensive range of fostering placements to placing local authorities. The Thames Valley branch has its operational headquarters in Wendover, Buckinghamshire and a smaller, additional office in Reading. The branch offers emergency, short and longer placements for children of all ages, with a particular focus on more difficult to place young people for whom an enhanced package of care based on a team parenting model is available. The agency currently supports 109 fostering households, offering 157 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 **good**.

Core Assets Thames Valley is a progressive, well led and innovative service with a clear focus on improving outcomes for children and young people. This is achieved by good matching between children and young people and the foster carers they are placed with to secure stability, which in turn promotes the development of secure attachments. Children, young people and foster carers have access to networks and resources that support placements at difficult times.

Children and young people speak highly of the service and feel an important part of it. One young person said, 'They have always got time for you.' The service proactively seeks children and young people's views and these influence the development of the service as well as informing their individual care and support.

Robust recruitment, assessment and flexible, responsive support and training equips foster carers to provide children and young people with good quality placements that enables them to make consistent progress. Foster carers say that despite the considerable growth of the organisation, 'It has maintained a sense of family, it's about us' and 'They always put the kids first.'

The varied and robust monitoring systems ensure that the management team have a good understanding of the strengths of the service and the areas for improvement.

There are two requirements and five recommendations for improvement arising from this inspection. There are minor deficits in a small sample of staff recruitment records and the agency does not send a report to the Chief Inspector of the monitoring as required. The recommendations primarily relate to records in respect of matching, foster carers' supervision, measures of discipline and ensuring that these accurately reflect the work of the agency. The agency is also asked to review the panel composition and their restraint policy in the light of the relevant national minimum standards.

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
20 (2011)	ensure full and satisfactory information is available in relation to all staff working for the purposes of the fostering agency in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20 (3)(c))	31/05/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure the child's placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required to address any gaps identified in the matching considerations (NMS 15.1)
- ensure foster carers supervision records are sufficiently detailed so as to evidence how the standard is being met (NMS 21.8)
- review the central list of panel members to ensure that the standard is fully met (NMS 14.8)
- review the agency policy on restraint in the light of guidance and consider foster carers' training needs accordingly (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.98)
- review the systems for recording measures of control, restraint and discipline. (NMS 25.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people develop self-esteem, emotional resilience, confidence and social skills while fostered with this service. Children and young people are happy in their foster placements and say, 'We are part of the family', and 'We can trust them.' They have a sound understanding of the reasons they are in care. The stability of placements provides children and young people with a strong platform on which to build attachments appropriately, with foster carers and people important to them. A placing social worker said, 'This placement has enabled him to make progress in his relationship with his parent.' Children and young people benefit from good support from foster carers to ensure that contact with birth families is a positive experience.

Children and young people are positive about the difference being fostered with the agency has made to their lives. They are increasingly engaging with education and a wider range of leisure and community activities, individually, as part of a group and on a one-to-one basis with support staff where necessary. Their progress and achievements in all areas of their lives are recognised, well recorded and celebrated. A placing social worker said, 'He's a different person. His behaviour has completely turned around. He is now on target in most of his subjects, an amazing achievement.'

Children's health care needs are well met and foster carers are skilled at identifying issues for which specialist help is required. Children and young people demonstrate a sound understanding of a healthy lifestyle and what they can do to achieve this, taking on more age-appropriate responsibility for themselves when ready. This fits alongside the acquisition of practical life skills which are nurtured and promoted in foster carers' households and through organised events such as the annual independence week-end.

Children and young people are listened to and their views influence their care plans. Some young people work with foster carers to update their records, identifying a key achievement of the week for example. They also have a voice in the development of the service, through organised activities and events that they enjoy. One young person spoke enthusiastically about the Core Assets choir of the year competition and the excitement of coming second (an experience enjoyed and celebrated by the staff and foster carers who were also in the choir).

Quality of service

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

The agency has a clear focus on ensuring that it can offer a range of good quality placements that lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

The number of foster carer households has remained fairly static over the past few

years, with those leaving the service, for a wide range of reasons, being replaced by newly approved foster carers. There is a national lead on advertising and interest rising for the recruitment of foster carers. This is supplemented by local events and initiatives, such as the foster carers' information café, being held in a coffee shop in an area where commissioners would like more placements available.

The fostering service is consistent, thorough and timely in its approach to the assessment of prospective foster carers. The assessment process, from initial home visit through to presentation to panel is managed by a discrete team within the fostering service. An assessment manager oversees the work of the independent assessors, all of whom receive specific training from Core Assets. The preparation material has been reviewed and updated and includes video contributions from young people previously fostered through the agency. Foster carers also value the participation of currently approved foster carers in the preparation training. Foster carers report that they found the panel process 'a relaxed and positive experience, with diversity well managed.' The well-established panel actively comments in a timely manner on the quality of assessments. The central list of panel members, which includes an approved foster carer from another agency and someone who has been fostered, is limited in number and diversity of culture. One of the members previously acted as panel advisor and there is some confusion about the current role, particularly as this member also has line management responsibility for the panel chair.

The agency achieves good stability for children and young people placed with their foster carers. Foster carers are very positive about the matching process. They describe feeling part of the team when they are approached about potential placements, entering into discussion with supervising social workers about the fit with their family. One said, 'I can't fault the matching process.' Another commented, 'They listen to the family and do not pressure us into taking placement.' A placing social worker said, 'I couldn't have asked for better foster carers.' The records do not reflect the full range of matching considerations outlined in discussion and do not in each case specify the measures to be put in place to meet the identified shortfalls. Foster carers are confident that the agency shares all the information they are given by the placing authorities at the time of referral, but express reservations that the placing authorities are equally transparent.

Foster carers benefit from robust supervision and support systems that enable them to meet the needs of the children and young people placed with them. Foster carers are effusive in their praise for the support they receive. Comments include, 'I have nothing but praise for my supervising social worker,' 'The support is just excellent' and 'I can't praise my supervising social worker enough.' Records of supervision vary in the level of detail recorded, so that it is not possible to effectively case track some issues. Foster carers describe the out of hours support team as 'Brilliant; sensible, calm and reassuring in a crisis,' 'Happy to answer any question' and 'They give you as much time as you want.' Foster carers are offered support in a number of ways for example through regular phone calls in between supervision meetings and structured support groups. The agency also promotes peer support through the use of delegated foster carer representatives and mentors. There is a good framework of

support for the whole fostering family, including regular social events and opportunities for one-to-one with supervising social worker for all family members. The team parenting approach provides foster carers supporting recognised complex placements with direct, focused access to therapy, education and activity support. Foster carers are recognised as part of the professional team working with the child and their input is instrumental in ensuring that the child's needs are identified, strategies developed, achievements celebrated and all aspects regularly reviewed.

Foster carers are provided with professional development opportunities to underpin their work with children and young people. There has been a significant increase in the number completing the training standards for foster carers and targeted work to assist those few yet to complete. Foster carers undertake a range of mandatory courses that are refreshed regularly. The agency is listening to foster carers and looking at how this can be updated for established foster carers. In addition foster carers identify and attend courses that address specific needs, for example autism awareness and adoption preparation. The ten week attachment course run by the agency therapist is particularly valued by foster carers. Foster carers also appreciate the behaviour management training where there is a strong emphasis on de-escalation techniques. Foster carers understand the agency policy of no physical intervention. However some have found that occasionally in order to safeguard children they have had to hold them, and would welcome training in this area to do this as safely as possible. The number of such incidents outlined by foster carers did not fully cross reference with the data held by the agency.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children and young people say that they are safe and feel safe in their foster placements. They know how to complain and are confident that any concerns would be dealt with either by their foster carers or by the agency. In addition to the formal avenues young people may access a closed page on a social media site run by a care experienced consultant employed by the national organisation. Complaints are taken seriously and responded to promptly. Although it can take some time to achieve a desired outcome it is pursued to a positive conclusion. In talking about the agency young people say, 'They are friendly', 'You can trust them' and 'A hundred times better, they actually care and you can see it.' The agency provides children and young people with unambiguous information about bullying and who they can talk to. Young people say they are not bullied. Foster carers support young people to understand how their behaviour could be interpreted as bullying and make the necessary changes. There are very few instances of children going missing. Foster carers know what to do should such an instance occur and how to work with young people to prevent a recurrence.

Safeguarding is effectively promoted throughout the agency and organisation. All those working for the agency have a sound understanding of their responsibility to promote the well-being of children placed and how to implement this in practice. Foster carers say that safeguarding discussions feature throughout all their

interactions with agency, from the very beginning. Examples given by foster carers include providing a safe environment, devising safer caring agreements which are updated to reflect changes and how to respond to child protection concerns or allegations. Foster carers have a good understanding of the impact that child protection issues may have on children and young people and outline how this understanding informs their practice, for example the child specific safer caring agreements. Foster carers confirm that unannounced visits by supervising social workers take place, at least annually and for many twice a year in accordance with company policy.

There are some gaps in the information required for staff and panel members. For example there is not in every cases a satisfactory written explanation of all gaps in employment, neither is there verification of why employment that involved work with children ended.

Leadership and management

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

The leadership team are effective communicators and convey their high aspirations for the children and young people placed with the agency to all those working for the agency. Their joint aim is to promote positive outcomes for children. Staff comment; 'We take pride in what we do.' Foster carers say; 'The agency is caring, they know all the children' and 'They put the kids first.'

There are robust systems for monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the work undertaken by the agency so as to continually improve the service. These systems include monthly leadership team meetings during which a wide range of issues are monitored and evaluated, including those that are required by regulation. Between them, managers have a good knowledge of all the children in placement and how their needs are being met. The Registered Manager writes a detailed monthly report to the national leadership team that identifies the strengths of the service alongside the areas for development. There is a comprehensive electronic data system in place used by staff and foster carers. The company has identified that the current system does not fully support robust data monitoring and work on an update to this is underway in consultation with staff.

The fostering service actively seeks and values the opinions of children and young people. Young people say that their opinions about the agency are asked for in different ways. One young person said, 'There are lots of trips and events and there is always a bulletin board so we can choose what to do and have our say, we are also asked to fill in forms.' There is a 14 plus girls group which is used to gain views and opinions and a boys group is due to start after Easter 2013. Girls feel that their opinions are heard and acted upon.

Foster carers are and feel valued by the agency. Foster carers can give examples of how they are listened to and action taken as a result. These include varying the venue and timing for support groups and training and supporting foster carers'

initiatives such as smaller groups for training and coffee mornings. Foster carers can also provide clear examples how their intervention has had a significant impact in planning for children. One foster carer challenged the professional view that there was no attachment between two siblings. As a direct result an external assessment was undertaken which concluded that the siblings did have a significant attachment and so should be placed together long term rather than separated, as was the original plan. Foster carers recording is of a good standard and the use of the web based Key Development Assessment tool is a valuable means of keeping a detailed account of each child's journey. Foster carers observe that the tool would benefit from being tailored for different age groups and those children in long-term placements. The introduction of an application that enables them to access the tool using a smart phone and upload photos and videos of experiences and achievements as they happen is highly welcomed by foster carers who use it.

Commissioners report good relationships with the agency, and describe communication as responsive and effective. They believe that the local authority gets 'good outcomes for children placed'. A commissioner said, 'They provide a quality service and if it's not right they put it right.' There are robust systems for responding to complaints and highlighting and implementing learning points from these.

The agency retains an experienced core stable staff team and this provides a strong support framework for newly appointed social workers, as does access to the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment programme. Supervising social workers are very well supported in their role through regular formal supervision, informal support and training. Social workers and foster carers are enthusiastic about their access to the Rees Centre for Research in Fostering and Education, collaboration between the University of Oxford Department of Education and the Core Assets group, which aims to make a difference to children and young people through research and its application. Staff of the service appreciate the opportunities to be creative in their work and the availability of resources that enables them to ensure that children and foster carers get what they need to achieve positive outcomes. A recent example is the use of some land that staff, foster carers and children are using to plant trees and vegetables, build dens and create sculptures. Additional staff resources include therapists, an administrative support team, a children's support team and an education specialist. Staff appraisals take place annually and in some cases the views of children and foster carers are included, but this is not fully embedded in the process yet. Foster carers say, 'There is a togetherness about the staff team' and comment on the positive impact made by individual team members.

The four recommendations made in the last report have been addressed through the implementation of robust monitoring systems. The agency demonstrates a strong culture of evaluation to maintain standards and drive continuous improvement so as to secure the best outcomes possible for children placed.

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.