

# Excel Fostering Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	27/05/2010

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Excel is an independent fostering agency responsible for the recruitment, assessment, training and support of foster carers. The agency was registered in October 2009. It provides a range of foster placements for children and young people, from birth to 18 years who are unable to live with their families of origin. At the time of this inspection 59 approved fostering households are providing placements for 99 children and young people.

### 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 fostering agency is effective. Children and young people make good progress when placed with the agency's carers. Placements often allow children and young people to remain with their siblings. Outcomes for children placed with the agency's carers are good. Many achieve well educationally, as well as making significant progress across all aspects of their development. Children and young people are safe and thriving in their placements.

Foster carers receive a high level of support from a dedicated team of social workers. Opportunities for post-approval training are good and the agency promotes carers attendance. They are also keen to identify training on current issues so that foster carers are confident in how to approach these issues with young people should the situation arise. Foster carers speak very highly about the agency, 'I could really not wish for a greater level of support. Excel have been great, I have no complaints.'

Matching is undertaken carefully. Both foster carers and young people support this. Young people say that they feel part of their foster family. However, generally they do not receive information about their proposed families prior to placement. The stability of placements is good and some short-term placements have successfully resulted in permanence for young people.

Two requirements arise from this inspection; these relate to following policy and

procedure in relation to staff recruitment and in relation to the assessment of foster carers. Additionally, a number of recommendations relate to the functions and procedures of the fostering panel, clear decision making, and the monitoring of records.

## 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.

<b>Reg.</b>	<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Due date</b>
20 (2011)	ensure the fostering service provider does not employ a person for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so and full and satisfactory information is available in respect of the matters specified in Schedule 1; specifically telephone verification of references; approach to the last employer; and the outcome of CRB/DBS checks (Regulation 20(1)(3)(c))	31/07/2013
26 (2011)	ensure that when carrying out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent; that assessments are carried out in accordance with this regulation; ensuring consultation with the local authority in whose area the applicant lives and that the written report includes all the information required by Schedule 3. (Regulation 26(1)(2)(C)(4)(a))	31/07/2013

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure that the manager regularly 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. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are clearly expressed and distinguish between fact, opinion and third part information and

are signed and dated; specifically that the decision making process is clear and evident on client records (NMS 26.5)

- ensure that prior to appointing any panel member or including them on the central list, the fostering service informs them in writing of their performance objectives. Panel members should sign an acceptance form to record their agreement to these objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance para 5.14)
- ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance para 5.15)
- ensure, in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, that determination, that the agency decision maker lists the material taken into account in reaching the decision; identifies the key arguments; is satisfied that the panel has properly addressed the arguments; is clear if they have had sight of any additional information; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.40)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children and young people feel that they are consulted about their care. They provide feedback that informs the annual review of their foster carers' and they routinely participate in their own reviews. Supervising social workers regularly speak with young people when they visit the foster home. Some young people report that the agency's social workers are more accessible for support than their own social workers. The agency has recently hosted a consultation group for young people. It has plans to expand this consultation to inform the future development of the service, to meet the needs of young people.

Children and young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster families. Young people say that they feel treated as part of the family. One young person commented, 'I love living with my foster family. My foster carers are really cool. They always listen to me but they also set really clear boundaries.'

Children and young people are placed with foster carers who are best able to meet their needs. Foster carers have confidence in their social workers to make appropriate placements but also feel empowered to decline a potential placement themselves if they feel that the young person is not a good match with their family at that time. The relatively small size of the agency currently ensures that social workers are familiar with the skills of their foster carers and appropriate placements are made. A matching tool has also been designed to help with this process. Some children and young people who were originally placed on a short-term basis are now enjoying permanent placements with their families. The agency has worked in partnership with the placing authority to achieve these positive outcomes, which in some instances has included legal permanence for the children and young people placed.

Children and young people are placed with and live alongside their siblings whenever this is possible and appropriate. They are also helped to maintain contact with their birth family members when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so. Such contact is supported by the agency and its foster carers. Delegated authority is also in place for most young people so that they and their foster carers are clear about the permissions required. This has enabled some young people to experience the usual activities experienced by teenagers such as a 'sleep over' at a friend's home.

Educational outcomes for children and young people placed with the agency are positive. Foster carers are good at supporting young people to attend school, although this may be some distance from their home. This provides continuity for young people. Some young people have made very good progress educationally, as a result of their stability and support, achieving excellent grades in national qualifications. Young people are supported to proceed onto higher education or skills based further education courses. This ensures that young people are able to fulfil their potential and have the opportunity to enter the work place with nationally recognised qualifications.

Young people are appropriately supported in their transition into adulthood. Young people are supported in their decision to remain living with their foster carers beyond the age of 18. This is as a result of pro-active work with placing authorities. Young people are also supported when they have wished to challenge the decision of their placing authority in relation to moving them on before they have felt ready for this transition.

### **Quality of service**

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

The fostering agency is in regular discussion with placing authorities about the needs of children and young people that they are looking to identify placements for. The agency in turn targets the recruitment of foster carers accordingly. The number of approved foster carers has continued to increase since the agency was established and the agency has increased their geographical area of recruitment to meet demand. The agency has a small number of carers who require an exemption to their usual fostering limit. These placements are mainly to accommodate a sibling group of children and all have been agreed by the local authority in the area the foster carers live.

Careful matching, leads to stable and settled placements for children and young people. The fostering agency is proactive in the pursuit of full and accurate information from placing authorities. Placement meetings take place to assist with the sharing of information. However, children and young people do not routinely receive information in an age-appropriate format about their prospective carers prior to placement.

The preparation and training of potential foster carers is good. Initially, potential

applicants receive a clear and informative pack containing detailed information about the task of fostering and the process of assessment. All initial home visits to potential foster carers are undertaken by the senior managers within the agency. This ensures that they are confident in the appropriateness of enquiries that proceed to application. The agency utilise the 'skills to foster' training programme for foster carers and have also developed a 'mini skills to foster' programme for children and young people who are already part of the family. This helps to ensure that all members of the foster family are fully committed to fostering and are appropriately prepared for the task.

Assessments are completed within required timescales. Generally, reports prepared are of a good standard, although some inadequacies have been noted in the assessment process. On occasion, the agency has proceeded to take completed assessments to the fostering panel prior to the receipt of a satisfactory local authority and Criminal Record check. However, the safety of children and young people has not been compromised, as the agency has not proceeded to place until these checks have been received. Furthermore, completed assessments have not always contained the full medical advice prepared by the medical advisor. Hence, the fostering panel has not been provided with all the information that they require to reach a fully informed recommendation on approval.

The fostering panel is correctly constituted and includes individuals with a personal connection to fostering. The panel Chair is independent to the agency and suitably qualified and experienced. However, currently panel members are not asked to agree their performance objectives when taking up their position. It is also unclear if members have received an annual performance review as a record of discussion is not maintained. The agency decision is made within timescales but only on receipt of the draft set of minutes. Additionally, it is not clear what documents the agency decision maker has considered, whether she is assured that the panel has addressed all the relevant issues, or what her own reasons are for reaching the decision made.

Foster carers receive a high level of support and supervision following approval. This helps ensure that children and young people receive a good standard of care. Supervisory visits to foster carers are child focused and visit records are maintained. However, these records are not always evident on the carers' case record. These omissions have not been identified by management monitoring, as identified in the leadership and management part of this report.

Foster carers have access to 24-hour support, as an out of hours duty system is in place. Foster carers spoken to were very appreciative of this saying, 'There is always someone who you can turn to for advice and nothing is too much trouble for them.' Regular support groups are also facilitated. These are geographically based so that foster carers have less distance to travel; the agency have also enabled foster carers to develop their own support networks locally. The agency also produces regular newsletters for the foster family. These may include a report on a recent family event, a reminder about training being facilitated in the near future, as well as requests for young people to be involved in activities with the agency.

The fostering agency provides a wide range of post-approval training. Regular core training programmes are delivered on topics such as attachment, safeguarding, moving children on and managing difficult behaviour. Training is well attended by both carers for those in a partnership. This is largely enabled by the agency providing a crèche facility at the training venue. Foster carers were impressed with the level of training that they receive and a number have also received funding to attend a course that they have identified themselves, for example, neuro-linguistic programming. The agency expects all foster carers to have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council standards in foster care within their first year of approval.

### **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 feel safe living in their foster placements. The fostering agency staff and foster carers receive regular updated training on safeguarding. In addition, the agency has sourced specific training on issues such as internet safety and child sexual exploitation. This ensures that foster carers are aware of current issues, know the procedures to follow if they are concerned, and are able to help young people protect themselves.

All foster carers complete a safe caring policy. These receive regular updates, are specific to each young person and are agreed by the placing authority on placement. This ensures that appropriate safeguards are in place and that carers do not place themselves in unnecessarily vulnerable situations. Foster carers are also aware of the actions to take should young people go missing from home.

The agency ensures that a minimum of one unannounced visit per year is undertaken to each foster placement. However, these are undertaken more frequently if the agency is concerned about how the family is coping. Routine supervisory visits are also undertaken at different times of day, to ensure that the family is seen together on a regular basis. This also enables discussion to take place with foster carers' birth children as well as foster children. The agency's supervising social workers are familiar young people. These measures ensure that all children in the foster family have the opportunity to express any concerns or complaints.

Children and young people receive information about how to make a complaint in their children's guide to fostering that they receive on placement. This includes information about how to access an advocate and the Children's Rights Director. Young people have been supported by the agency to access these services.

The recruitment of staff working for the agency and panel members is generally thorough. However, in some instances it is not evident that telephone verifications have been made to referees, or a reference sought from the most recent employer. While CRB checks are always undertaken and regularly updated, the outcome of these checks is not always evident on staff records.



Any allegations and disclosures are handled appropriately. The agency works well with other agencies when incidents do occur and support is provided to those affected. Incidents are addressed quickly so that those involved do not experience unnecessary uncertainty.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The strategic development of the agency is strong. Senior managers keep abreast of developments nationally and locally. They are appropriately qualified and experienced and provide clear leadership for the agency. The agency has a clear development plan in place, being keen to sustain improvement and provide a service that meets the demands of placing authorities.

Commissioners speak highly of the agency and feel that they have worked well in partnership with them. They feel that the agency is responsive to their needs and to those of young people. The agency has also been pro-active in challenging poor social work practice when they feel it is affecting outcomes for young people. Such approaches have been handled sensitively and placing authorities have responded appropriately. This has been appreciated by those young people and foster carers involved.

The agency has been pro-active in pursuing the issue of completion of delegated authority. Managers in the agency believe this is important for foster carers and young people. They have provided information briefings on this issue for local authorities in order to increase their awareness.

Foster carers and staff both feel that managers in the agency are keen to involve them in its development. One member of staff commented, 'I would say that the views of staff are always listened to in terms of the way we strive to continually improve our practice.' Foster carers too feel involved, reporting that fostering for the agency, 'We feel like a close knit family that are working well together for young people.'

Staff receive regular supervision which is clearly recorded. One social worker commented, 'My supervision takes place regularly. It enables me to reflect on my practice and on my case management.' However, although decision making is evident within these records it is not evident on the case records kept by the agency, making this difficult to track and identify. Staff receive an annual performance appraisal where their future development is discussed. The provision of training for staff is good and the agency has supported staff to complete additional professional courses for their career development. For example, staff have been able to complete a formal management qualification and a play therapy diploma. Social work caseloads are manageable and the vast majority of assessments are completed by permanent staff.

The fostering agency has a Statement of Purpose that meets regulatory

requirements and that is accessible on the agency's website. Two children's guides to fostering are in place that are attractively presented and aimed at different age groups of children and young people. The agency has addressed the majority of the recommendations made at the last inspection, with the exception of the verification of references as highlighted above. Hence, this issue has been raised as a requirement at this inspection.

Regular quality monitoring reports are prepared on the work of the agency that highlights developments and challenges for the agency. However, the day-to-day monitoring of records and compliance with agency policy and procedures could be more effective. Weaknesses in this area have resulted in foster carers' records not containing a clear chronology of events; missing documentation; and including third party information on some records.

## 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.