

Blue Sky Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Blue Sky Fostering is an independent fostering agency based in Romsey, Hampshire. It was established in 2005. It now offers placements across a large geographical area in the south of England from Devon in the west to Kent in the east. Short and long-term placements are provided for 166 children and young people by 249 approved foster carers in 135 households. The service achieved a net increase in 25 households in 2012-13. The service also provides a number of specialist placements including those for mothers and babies and children and young people requiring therapeutic support. The agency provides foster placements to a number of local authorities.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service has continued to grow and develop and has almost doubled its capacity since the last inspection. It now operates across a wider geographic area and provides a wider selection of placement options. The senior management team have managed this expansion extremely well. The appointment of area directors has ensured that new staff and foster carers entering the service have had access to the support of local managers. A robust recruitment process ensures that only those with the appropriate personal attributes and subscribe to the services child centred approach are recruited. A comprehensive induction and training programme for both

staff and foster carers ensures that they become conversant with the services policies, procedures and working practices. This approach, coupled with an effective quality assurance system, has enabled the expansion to take place without compromising the quality of the service that has remained exceptionally good.

The service has an extremely effective matching process. Placement stability is exceptional and unplanned endings are almost half the national average. Foster carers receive regular support and specialist therapeutic guidance is available to address specific difficulties that a child or young person might experience. The safety and stability young people experience in their placements leads to positive outcomes. The educational progress young people make over time is significant and exam results exceed national comparisons. Foster carers are also successful in helping young people address behavioural issues that can put them at risk. The frequency of young people going missing is significantly lower than the national average. Children and young people are living full and active lives and are participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities. Such participation increases their self-confidence and extends their social horizons.

The service is inclusive and major development decisions are informed by key interested parties including staff, foster carers and children and young people. The service's culture of training and professional development encourages staff and foster carers to continually examine their practice and consider new and innovative ways to improve the experiences of young people.

There are no recommendations or requirements arising from this inspection.

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people, many of whom enter the service as emergency placements, respond extremely positively to the care that they receive. A robust matching and placement process ensures young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their often complex social and emotional needs. Children and young people are involved in the placement process and receive child friendly profiles of their prospective carers in advance of any placement. Introductory visits are arranged, when possible. As part of the placement process foster carers consult with social workers, previous carers and in some instances parents to ascertain key information that will help them settle in. Placement stability is a key performance indicator for the service and monthly monitoring reports are produced for senior management and the fostering panel. Unplanned endings are unusual and the service's disruption rate is under half the national average and is continuing to fall annually.

The service is aspirational for the children and young people in its care and at the start of all placements individual plans are developed that identify achievable short and long-term goals. The progress of each child and young person is measured against their goals and is reflected in detailed monthly reports. Poor progress results

in the development of a support plan and action to address the areas of concern. Additional therapeutic support and guidance is available from psychotherapists, play therapists a behaviour consultant, a youth offending mentor and the director of education. This approach results in positive outcomes for children and young people that, in many instances, include a decrease in anti-social and self-destructive behaviours. The development of trusting relationships with foster carers and the reinforcement of positive behaviour leads to an increase in individual's self-confidence. Over time this is reflected in, amongst other things, improved school attendance and better exam results.

By attending reviews, producing regular progress reports and advocating for the young people in their care service staff and foster carers contribute to future planning. The service provides regular participation groups in which children and young people learn about their rights and how to influence decisions about their care.

If a child or young person is settled and does not feel it is in their best interest to move, the service will help them access an independent advocacy service. The service aims to ensure that all moves are planned, that young people are well prepared for their transition and disruption is minimised. Successful life-story work enables children and young people to understand the particular events and circumstances that brought them into care. Foster carers help children and young people to maintain contact with their families and have been successful in helping a number re-establish meaningful relationships that has enabled them to return home. Although many children and young people are initially placed on a short-term basis they often settle so well that their placements become long-term and permanent. An increasing number of young people are now staying beyond 18 under a successful 'staying put' scheme. By completing a 'What's Next' independence programme foster carers help young people acquire a range of knowledge and skills that help them to successfully prepare for moving on to independent or semi-independent living.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service is characterised by its commitment to continuous improvement and its desire to respond effectively to the increasingly complex needs of the young people being referred. It has developed a holistic approach to the delivery of care that incorporates the views of children and young people, foster carers, social workers and therapeutic staff. The service has high expectations of its foster carers and only recruits those who are committed to continually develop their knowledge and skills. Consideration is always given to the whole fostering family and the context in which care will be offered. Although the service has been successful in recruiting same sex couples and single carers it has experienced difficulties in recruiting from ethnic minority communities and is in the process of developing a number of new strategies.

All prospective carers have to successfully complete eight additional training

modules, as well as a skills to foster programme, before being presented to panel. There is an effective panel system that promotes high quality and rigorous assessments. The panel list contains members with expertise in key areas including, safeguarding, education and health. Panel members are expected to access training opportunities. They are updated quarterly on developments within the service. Effective mechanisms exist for the panel and decision maker to discuss issues and resolve differences. Once approved, foster carers have to regularly access training in specialist areas such as sexually harmful behaviour, trauma, attachment, internet safety, domestic violence, de-escalation and resilience. The majority of training is provided by external trainers with specialist expertise. Foster carers spoke in positive terms about the recruitment process and their initial training programme. All felt they were well prepared for their first placements. The achievements of carers are acknowledged and celebrated.

Foster carers feel that they receive excellent support and guidance from the service. As one carer stated, 'no matter whatever the time of day or night there is always someone available to help'. An effective monitoring system, based on a traffic light system, ensures that any difficulties arising within a placement are identified early and additional support provided. Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads that allow them to undertake regular supervisory visits and to provide an extremely high level of support. Additional support is also provided by the service's therapeutic consultants. Foster carers indicated that the support they receive helps them to meet the physical, emotional and psychological needs of the children and young in their care more effectively.

During their placements children and young people are expected to live full and active lives and there is an expectation that all will participate in at least two out of school activities per week. A recent survey indicated that the vast majority of under 15 year olds are regularly engaged in social and recreational activities within their local communities. The service employs a number of staff who engage with children and young people on an individual and group basis. Recent initiatives have included fitness training, a film club, water sports and a DJ workshop. Children and young people are also regularly consulted on the development of the service and contribute to the recruitment of staff, the development of young people's guides. They have recently produced an introductory film on what it is like to enter care. The participation by children and young people in such activities widens their social horizons, boosts their self-confidence and provides opportunities to have fun.

All foster carers are made aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to delegated authority. The service encourages foster carers to become 'pushy parent's in an effort to secure access to the resources and services that will provide better educational outcomes for those in their care. The director of education provides advice and guidance on securing school placements that best meet the needs of each individual. In spite of poor educational histories, the majority of young people make significant progress in their education once they are settled. The exam results for young people continue to improve and are above the national average for looked after children. Exclusions are low. The service provides additional support to help young people catch up with their peers and the recent work of a literacy consultant

has helped to improve the reading age of a number of children by as much as two years. A letterbox club has been established to provide regular reading material and on-line tutoring service is now available for those in the older age groups.

There are well established systems that ensure the health needs of children and young people are identified and plans developed to ensure they are addressed. The service is pro-active in addressing health issues and for example, a fitness instructor is working with a number of young people to address problems of weight gain. The service's own therapeutic staff are available to address issues relating to individual's psychological and emotional development and are extremely effective in liaising with allied professionals in other services such as child and adolescent mental health services.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the children and young people with whom they are working and are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours they can exhibit. The service draws upon research and professional expertise to inform its working practices. All foster carers and staff receive training, from practitioners and trainers with expertise on trauma, attachment, child protection, safe caring, internet safety and online grooming. Foster carers are also provided with a number of user friendly 'cue cards' that detail the likely behaviours to be presented by children and young people who have been affected by: attachment disorder, domestic violence, foetal alcohol syndrome and sexual exploitation. The service has successfully developed two new specialist 'Step' programmes to address the needs of children and young people with complex needs. Foster carers offering specialist placements work closely with the services therapeutic staff.

As part of their initial assessment process staff consider the risks associated with each individual. Detailed risk assessments are carried out in respect of children and young people with known histories of sexual exploitation, self-harming, absconding and fire setting behaviour. The composition and needs of individual family members are always considered as part of the matching process. Foster carer's homes are subject to regular health and safety checks which ensure environments remain safe. Detailed placement plans provide guidance for foster carers on how the risks associated with each young person's behaviours should be managed. All plans are subject to regular review and are updated in response to significant incident's and changing circumstances. Carers are successful in breaking patterns of absconding and anti-social behaviour.

Although safeguarding underpins all aspects of the service's policies, procedures and working practices it is not risk averse and all children and young people are encouraged to participate in a wide range of age-appropriate activities. Children and young people are helped to acquire a good understanding of risk and to acquire a range of skills to keep themselves safe. Foster carers and staff are aware of their

individual responsibilities in regard to reporting any safeguarding issues or concerns to the relevant authorities. All staff and carers undertake mandatory training on allegations. The service has a history of reporting significant events. All events are registered, the nature of them described, the action taken and the outcomes noted. No child protection investigations have been initiated in the last two years. The service provides support and advice that can be accessed at all hours. The service's comprehensive assessment process helps to ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers with the necessary knowledge and skills to keep them safe.

The views of children and young people are regularly sought and all are encouraged to raise worries or concerns. Children and young people designed their own complaints form. Children spoken with said they regularly saw service staff at home visits and social events and felt confident that they would listen and respond to any concerns they raised. No children or young people reported that they were experiencing any form of bullying. Service staff are pro-active in supporting individuals with concerns and will advocate on their behalf with their placing authorities. The service's magazine, Lil' Peeps, provides advice for young people if they are unhappy and wish to seek advice and guidance.

The senior management team subscribe to the view that no one has a 'right to foster'. A rigorous assessment system has been developed that ensures that only those individuals with the right attributes are recruited and trained as foster carers. The selection of staff is equally robust and focuses on individual's who subscribe to the services 'child centred' philosophy. The service's comprehensive vetting systems reduce the likelihood of unsuitable individuals gaining access to the vulnerable young people in their care. The performance of foster cares is monitored on an on going basis by their support workers. If any standards of care issues are identified they are immediately addressed.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The creation of a new management structure, with the appointment of three regional directors, has further strengthened the service's leadership. Members of the senior management team all have extensive knowledge and experience of fostering and play active roles in the daily operation of the agency. The co-ordination and communication between staff in different area teams is good. Managers set high standards and there is an expectation that members of the well-motivated staff team will provide consistent and effective support to foster carers that will enable them to produce positive outcomes for the children and young people in their care. The views of children and young people, foster carers and work colleagues contribute to each individual staff members annual appraisal. Staff spoke in positive terms about the support they receive from their managers and confirmed that they are provided with regular opportunities to reflect on their practice. Staff feel their views are regularly sought and they can make a significant contribution to the development of the service. The service has secured a second consecutive Investors in People award.

An extremely effective quality assurance system permeates all aspects of the service and contributes to continuing improvement. Specific monitoring systems ensure that managers are regularly provided with information on the well-being of individual children and young people. The progress each individual is making in their educational and social activities is discussed with supervising social workers and support workers during supervision. Computer based surveys, that consistently receive high response rates, are deployed at regular intervals to ascertain the views of children and young people, foster carers, placing authority social workers and independent reviewing officers about the service's performance. The information obtained is used to identify any concerns and inform developments that will further improve outcomes for children and young people.

The service places a great emphasis on the development of its staff and foster carers and there is an expectation that all will continually update their knowledge and skills in order to respond appropriately to the changing needs of the young people being referred. Internal training courses are offered on a range of subjects. Recent training has included courses on sexual exploitation and developments in neuroscience. A number of managers have recently completed a neuro-linguistic programming course at Bournemouth University. Specialist therapeutic training is now available through a degree programme that has been developed in conjunction with the University of the west of England. The service is currently participating in a research project that is assessing outcomes from therapeutic treatments. Developments within the service's working practices are informed by research and recommendations arising out of serious case reviews.

Foster carers spoke in extremely positive terms about management staff who were assessed as being highly visible, approachable and supportive. Foster carers appreciate the service's 24 hours a day, seven days a week support system. Such support helps foster carers during times of difficulty and contributes to placement stability. Foster carers feel that they are valued and a forum provides opportunities for their representatives to raise issues and comment on proposed developments. The service has responded to recent proposals by increasing the frequency of social events and increasing events for the older age group. The service has been extremely good at harnessing technology to improve communication with foster carers. Recent initiatives have included a foster carer blog and the a 'web forum' that allows individuals to communicate more effectively with each other over issues of common concern such as holiday arrangements.

The service has established effective working relationships with placing authorities and senior managers meet regularly. Any concerns raised are acknowledged, investigated and responded to within appropriate timescales. Monthly progress reports on each young person are produced for placing social workers and independent reviewing officers. Commissioners commented positively on the consistent performance of the agency. Special mention was made of their ability to match appropriately and provide stability for children and young people, many of whom have experienced multiple placement breakdowns. The agency has achieved Tier 1 status with all local authorities with whom it works. The education director has

established good relationships with local authority education departments and this has helped to secure suitable placements for children and young people who have had to move into a new area.

The one recommendation arising from the last inspection has been addressed and foster carers now monitor and record the behaviour of children and young people both before and after contact visits with their families. Any concerns are shared with placing authority social workers to ensure children and young people's well being is not being compromised.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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.