

# Quality Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Christy Wannop
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	31/01/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Quality Fostering Ltd is a small, independent fostering agency based in Kenilworth, Warwickshire that has operated since 2006. The agency recruits, assesses, approves and supervises foster carers to provide a range of mainstream placement options including, emergency; short-term; bridging; long-term placements; asylum placements, and for parents and babies during external parenting capacity assessments. It currently provides care for 23 children and young people from around the Midlands, in 17 foster homes. There are 25 approved foster homes, and the agency has approved five new foster carer families since April 2012.

### 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: **requires improvement.**

The agency requires improvement to be a good. The last inspection judged the agency as adequate and while there have been improvements to meet the regulations, this has not been consistent across all its functions.

Aspects that require improvement are: matching of children to foster families and child-focused decision making processes for the review and change of approval category. Leadership and management are not yet sufficiently rigorous in their evaluation of patterns and trends in the agency to drive consistent good quality.

Systems to monitor the operation of the agency are getting stronger, but there has not been a full review of the quality of care that delivers improvement. The training and appraisal of managers, fostering social work staff and foster carers is an aspect that is not good enough for example; there is no specific focus on safeguarding or child protection training. Processes for learning lessons and improving practice after children leave unexpectedly and after crises are not well developed. Consultation with stakeholders is not yet part of the quality assurance process. The agency has not supplied reliable data about the agency; so it is not possible to compare performance with the national picture.

Foster carers appreciate the size and familiarity of the agency staff, with their families and the children they care for. Fostering social work staff support foster carers well and are keenly interested in the young people. Some children and young people have done very well since moving to stable foster families. They have developed healthier lives, are emotionally much more secure, and have made good educational progress. Outcomes for them are good.

The agency has smooth processes for recruiting, assessing foster carers and prepares them well for the task of fostering. Panel processes, approval and reviews are timely. Foster families generally have insight into the needs of children who are looked after and have worked well with parents. Relationships between the agency and its foster carers, between children and their foster families and between the agency and the placement authorities are generally positive. Foster families provide safe foster homes and placing authorities think well of the stability that they provide.

## 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
3 (2011)	provide a copy of the statement of purpose to the Chief Inspector, place a copy on their website, and make copies available on request (Regulation 3(2))	31/12/2013
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. Specifically, that terms of approval, matching decisions and pre placement planning are led by the needs of children (Regulation 11)	31/12/2013
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them, for example, medication administration and safeguarding (Regulation 17(1))	28/02/2014
21	ensure all persons employed by them receive appropriate	28/02/2014

(2011)	training, supervision and appraisal. For example, that staff, panel and foster carers are trained in safeguarding and child protection, and that staff and panel members have an annual appraisal (Regulation 21(4))	
28 (2011)	review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. Give written notice to the foster parent that they propose to terminate, or revise the foster parent's approval (a "qualifying determination") together with their reasons and a copy of any recommendation made by the fostering panel (Regulation 28(7)(a))	28/02/2014
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring Schedule 6 matters, improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency; provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review and, on request, to any local authority. The system must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster placements and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (1) (2) (3))	28/02/2014

## Recommendations

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

- ensure foster carers know and implement what the fostering service and the responsible authority's policy is in relation to children going missing (NMS 5.2)
- ensure consent to a placement is given by the fostering service provider and any other responsible authority with a child already placed with the foster carer (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 3.2)
- discuss and agree arrangements for delegated authority to the foster carers, as part of the care planning process, particularly at placement planning meetings, and agreements should be recorded in the placement plan. This with specific reference to agreement about the use of children's benefits to support their placement and clear medical authority (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 3.13)
- ensure a copy of the summary of the allegations (containing all elements of this NMS) is provided to the person working for the fostering service (NMS 22.7)
- ensure, as soon as possible after an investigation into a foster care is concluded, their approval as suitable to foster is reviewed. Ensure a clear policy framework outlines the circumstances in which a foster carer should be terminated as one of the fostering service provider's approved foster carers (NMS 22.8)
- ensure staff are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children. For example, that they have support and advice about child protection and reporting of concerns about safe guarding during professional supervision (NMS 24)

- monitor 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. Take immediate action to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)
- implement a written policy that clarifies the format of information on case files relating to foster carers. Specifically, that there is clarity and consistency of wording in all documents and registers about terms of approval, particularly for numbers of children. (NMS 26.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people live in foster families where they generally feel secure and part of the family. Many get information about the foster family, where they live and their interests, before they move in; some visit, and some have a choice of foster carer. Children do not always have an exact ethnic, cultural or religious match in their foster family, but the agency respects, and foster families will try to meet, their need for specific worship, or personal care items.

Children get constructive help to make sense of their family history and understand their identity, because foster families have sympathetic conversations with them about their journey into care. Some foster families really help children and young people to repair, or maintain positive relationships with their birth family. They welcome parents into their home for contact visits and keep in touch, even after the child has gone home. Other children and young people have put down roots because they get help with any conflict of loyalties about leaving their family of origin and feeling safer in a foster family. One parent described her relief that foster carers, 'respect me instead of judging. Couldn't be happier.'

Children and young people have stability wherever possible. Several children have moved into permanency from being fostered to being adopted within the same foster family. Similarly, those who turn 18 while in foster care, are able to stay put and move into independence at their own pace and with the support of a familiar foster family. Children and young people find supporters in agency social workers who have argued their best interests in staying in the same foster family, living with brothers and sisters. Foster carers gather information about children's life events and achievements in individual 'WoW' files. This gives children a good sense of their personal development and progress.

Some children do experience placement disruption, but this is usually beyond the influence of the agency, who have advocated for children to reduce unnecessary moves. However, in some cases, the agency has not thought carefully about the match of a new foster child or mother and baby in the context of the whole foster family and this may increase likelihood of breakdown.

There are good arrangements to work with children and young people to keep

themselves safe, and to manage their angry feelings and behaviour. Only two young people, over compulsory school age, are not in education training or employment, but they are actively seeking college or a school placement. Younger children are doing well at school and know that foster carers will talk with their teachers, come to 'parents' evenings', help with homework and support them when they run into difficulty at school.

Children and young people's health improves in the care of their foster families. One mother said, 'they keep on top of all his health needs. Couldn't have gone with better carers.' Children eat well, go swimming, take up sports and hobbies and feel proud of their achievements at school and in the local community. For example, some fund raise for local charities. If they are bullied at school, foster carers stand up for them and help with strategies to challenge the prejudice of their peers. Children and young people get good opportunities to speak alone with fostering social workers and are able to tell them how they feel about life in the foster home. They also contribute to the foster carers' review. This means that they know that adults, foster carers and social workers respect their views.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The recruitment, assessment, supervision, training and support of foster carers is generally well managed. Assessments are thorough and are carried out by well-trained, qualified social workers. Timely assessments run alongside three days of preparation to foster training before approval. This is followed by a range of creative post-approval training, including good training about attachment, de-escalating challenging behaviour, physical intervention and caring for mothers with babies. However, there is no specific safeguarding or medication training. This means that foster carers may lack these skills or be unconfident when they need to use this knowledge in meeting the needs of children and young people. There have been delays in the number of foster carers who achieve the required government approved standards within one year of approval. However, this is an improving picture with 66% of all foster carers have now achieved this and more are on track to complete shortly.

Many foster carers bring their life experience to their role, others actively seek further training to help them understand and respond to their foster children's needs. For example, one foster carer is pursuing advanced training in attachment theory and sharing this with other foster carers at group meetings. Another foster carer is really enjoying the challenge and rewards of gaining new knowledge and skills to help him with his foster child, who has autism. Foster carers make comprehensive reports to children's social workers each month to keep them in touch with the children's lives. They gather and retain important life information about children, recording their achievements and disappointments. They help children learn the skills to deal with life challenges, victimisation or inequalities because they are 'in care' and help them feel pride in their identity.

The panel is generally well resourced and experienced, including a member with experience of being in care. The agency has advertised for new recruits, aware that it lacks a member with educational experience and expertise. They make timely decisions about foster carer suitability and minutes are a succinct reflection of the panel discussions and recommendations. However, the actual wording of the approval category, in terms of ages and numbers of children, numbers, combinations of individual children, siblings and mother and baby placements, is not consistent through panel minutes, to decision maker's note, approval letter and the foster carer agreement from approval to review. It is not always clear how the agency's decision making to increase the numbers of children that foster carers can take, prioritises the needs of all the children in the foster family, rather than foster carer's good intentions to offer care for more children. Sometimes the terms of approval process omits to consider the reality of sleeping arrangements in the house.

The chair gives feedback about the quality of reports informally, in discussions during and after panel. New panel members are now inducted and there is annual update training, however, panel appraisals have not yet happened, so panel members' effectiveness and knowledge of panel responsibilities is not assured.

The agency had a previous good record of minimal placement disruptions. This picture has changed this year and seven children have had placements that ended before they should. The majority of these were unavoidable and unforeseeable. Some foster carers, about whom there have been concerns, have not been properly reviewed at panel, nor has the ending of their fostering career been properly terminated by the decision maker, especially when foster carers resign before the conclusion. In a minority, the agency has not formally reviewed the ending of placements, or conducted an annual review of foster carers who elect to go, 'on hold' after a stressful placement. The agency has missed the opportunity to evaluate and improve its practice for placement planning.

Matching documents are limited and sometimes do not identify why the match is a good idea for the child. The views of the placing authority of any child already in-situ are not evident about subsequent placements. The agency does not fully, or formally, consider whether foster carers can manage the combined needs of all children in their home. For example, whether a foster carer can care for and supervise young people with challenging risky behaviour alongside young parents with their baby. Another foster carer reported being unable to physically get all the children she cared for to school, because distance was not part of the matching considerations. This makes foster placements vulnerable.

Foster carers generally have the information they need to care for children, though difficulties in getting placing authorities to delegate responsibility for making decisions to foster carers is very problematic. Local authorities' placement plans do not always make the responsibility for financial and health decision making clear and in one case, illegible documentation led to inexcusable delay in a child getting dental treatment. In another, it has led to disputes about use of young people's Disabled Living Allowance (DLA) to support foster placements. The agency has introduced its



own document to assist in clarity about these decisions, but has missed an opportunity to secure this agreement at the point of agreeing the placement plan or to call in an advocate on a child's behalf to represent their rights.

The agency supports foster carers well through regular planned and unannounced visits. Foster carers report full confidence in the staff of the agency responding quickly and with skill to any crisis with their foster children. They say that out of hours contact is easy and there is a direct line to a known agency social worker at all times of the day or night. Foster carers are unanimous in their appreciation of the individual fostering social workers who support them well. They all liked the size of the agency, that all staff knew them and their children, and they could talk to anyone. They said staff were friendly but able to challenge them too: 'they get on your back if you haven't done something.' They trust the agency to help them do the best for children.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency provides children and young people with safe foster carers in safe foster homes. Unannounced visits are routine now and foster carers understand their responsibilities in keeping vulnerable children and young people safe. Children and young people have good information about external agencies to help if they are troubled and they say they trust their foster carers. It is positive that all staff, panel members and foster carers are subject to rigorous checks to ensure they are suitable to work and have contact with children.

The agency generally does not accept placements of children and young people with risky behaviour. There have been no concerns about child sexual exploitation. Young people and foster carers contribute to the formal management of any risk in their behaviour, or about their vulnerability while using the internet. Where there have been aspects of risk, placing authorities report that foster carers deliver informed messages about drugs and sexual health. They said that, consequently, one young person, 'looks healthier and happier physically. He has built on his muscle and attends the gym regularly.'

There are good quality additional risk assessments for behaviour, or high risk activities or for individual vulnerabilities. However, some safe care plans take no account of other young people in placement and, occasionally, there is no safe care plan at all. This jeopardises safe and secure placements. Very rarely and in circumstances beyond the control of the agency, the irresponsible actions of foster carers have placed children at risk.

Very few young people go missing, and foster carers have generally acted properly to protect them, despite the agency's out of date procedures for runaway children missing from home and care. On one occasion, however, foster carers did not act as responsible substitute parents and did not follow good practice or their instructions when a young person ran off. The agency has not taken action following this to

improve their procedural guidance to foster carers.

The agency does not routinely share the conclusion of any allegation or concern with foster carers and does not present any formal report to panel, for a view of foster carers' continuing suitability to foster, particularly when foster carers resign before conclusion. However, the agency has worked well alongside statutory authorities during child protection investigations; they have referred, when necessary, to the Independent Safeguarding Authority.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

A new manager was appointed early in 2013 and took formal responsibility as Registered Manager in August 2013. The management has been strengthened with the appointment of a deputy. Both are completing managerial qualifications to add these skills to their experience as fostering social workers.

The manager has taken action to meet six of the eight previous regulatory shortfalls from the last inspection in January 2013. Children's guides have better information, so they know how to contact Ofsted for guidance if they need to. Foster carers' induction and training and achievement of nationally recognised standards of competence, is much improved. There is now a proper policy and training about behaviour management and restraint, so foster carers have clear and helpful techniques to de-escalate challenging situations and help children regain control of themselves. Every foster carer now has a systematic annual review of their performance. Their case records now contain all the required information about the children who have been placed with them over time. The agency has prioritised recruitment to the fostering panel and is looking to further strengthen the diversity and skill base within the central list.

There are still some aspects for improvement: the agency has not signed up to the 'Foster Carer's Charter'; foster carer training still lacks some elements. Information about the agency in the Statement of Purpose and the two children's guides is good, but it is not sent to Ofsted, or widely published on their website, as required.

Systems for management tracking and monitoring are developing but the formal review of the quality of care is not yet established and does not evaluate issues such as placement stability or whether, when children move on, the aims of foster placements have been met. There is good day-to-day consultation and respect for stakeholder and children and young people's views, but there is no formal mechanism to incorporate this into the development of the agency and plans for the future. Foster carers have suggestions for improvement, from better resourcing for children who develop additional needs, to an increase in their fees. Similarly, the agency has not contributed essential data to Ofsted, nor enabled stakeholders to complete Ofsted's annual survey in April 2013.

Managers do not evaluate trends, strengths and weaknesses in service performance. For example, while the agency responds promptly to allegations or complaints, there has been no full review of processes following such concerns. Thus the agency has missed opportunities to improve the extent to which children are the focus of the fostering task. Panel, social work staff and managers have acceptable training. However, there is no specific, focused training about child protection. Staff have regular professional supervision, but safeguarding is not routinely and formally discussed in supervision, even after a specific incident.

The staff team at the agency is building in size and experience. Staff have the skills and the time to do a good job in supporting foster carers. This is borne out by the very positive views that foster carers have of the agency. One said the agency staff are, 'consistently good', and another, that the agency is, 'exceptionally supportive.' The agency has expanded in recent years and has formal agreements with several local authorities to provide placements for children with general needs. The agency has positive relationships with these placing authorities.

Agency staff think creatively and advocate to secure resources and services for children and young people. Foster carers are very satisfied with the care and attention they have and the responsiveness of the fostering social workers to their needs. A foster carer said they 'wouldn't change anything about the way Quality Fostering operate. They are a small quality outfit.'

## 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.