

# Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The head office of Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Limited is in Sittingbourne, Kent. This privately owned independent fostering agency also operates sub-offices in South London, Hertfordshire and Essex. At the point of this inspection 56 fostering households were approved, with 73 children and young people in placement. The service provides foster placements for assessment, support, respite and rehabilitation, as well as emergency, short, medium and long-term care for children. The service also provides parent and child placements.

### 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: **good**.

This independent fostering agency has demonstrated significant improvement since the previous inspection in 2012. Leaders and managers are described by foster carers and young people as accessible. They use consultation and effective monitoring systems to identify areas where the service needs to improve. As a result, positive change is promoted. For example, the percentage of unplanned endings in the year to April 2012 was slightly higher than the comparator for all independent fostering agencies. Detailed analysis led to specific action to address this, and a reduction in the percentage was achieved during the subsequent year. Current figures indicate that this trend is continuing.

Foster carers are recruited from a range of backgrounds to provide choice when considering the most appropriate match for young people needing placements. Over the last three years the number of foster places registered by the agency has remained relatively stable, varying by just three places over this period. This is despite a slightly higher turnover rate, compared with agencies nationally. The proportion of filled foster places has increased during the last year to be more in line with national comparators. During the year to April 2013 the proportion of filled placements was 59%. This followed two years at 52% compared to 63% and 61% for all independent fostering agencies.

The competency of potential foster carers is rigorously assessed. Detailed reports are presented to a panel made up from a central list of members who bring valuable perspective from their different personal and professional experiences. Clear and timely decisions are made following clear recommendations from the panel.

The quality of training, development and support available is highly valued by foster carers who respond positively and enthusiastically. This helps to ensure that young people benefit from living with foster carers who are able to meet their diverse needs. Young people are positive about their experiences of being looked after and say that they feel part of the foster carers' families. The agency continues to provide placements for young people with complex needs who present challenging behaviours. Foster carers effectively contribute to planning for young people in their care and recognise the valuable contribution they make.

No breaches of regulation are identified, but some minor shortfalls against national minimum standards result in recommendations for improvement. These relate to: securing receipt of standard documents from placing authorities; clearly recording reasons for recommendations in panel minutes; evidencing that all approved foster carers attain the relevant Training, Support and Development Standards; and ensuring that first aid qualifications of foster carers are obtained and kept up to date. The direct impact of these shortfalls upon young people is limited.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- work with the responsible authority to ensure effective integration of information held in the agency's case files and those of the responsible authority (NMS 26.8)
- ensure written minutes of panel meetings record the reasons for the panel's recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure all foster carers, including all members of a household who are approved foster carers, are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care (NMS 20.2)

- ensure foster carers receive sufficient training on first aid. (NMS 6.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Good initial matching of young people and their carers helps to ensure that their individual needs are promptly identified and met, in particular their cultural, linguistic and diversity needs. Some young asylum seekers have been encouraged and enabled to integrate well into the community and to access appropriate education and training. As a consequence, they are able to understand and assimilate the cultures of their country of origin and those of the United Kingdom.

Young people benefit from information being made available to them in different formats before moving to their carers. Carers produce family profiles including photographs that are shared alongside a well-designed children's guide. This helps young people to have a better understanding of what to expect. Some young people say that they exchange text messages with their carers before moving in. This empowers young people, providing them with opportunities to pass on information to their new carers that they would want to share. These actions help young people settle into their placements.

Young people build good, trusting relationships with their foster carers; some say, 'It's as if they are my family.' Young people express clearly that they like their carers and want to live with them. They acknowledge that even where they have differences, they know that their foster carers are acting in their best interests.

The agency works well to ensure that young people are provided with opportunities and supported to do their best. Young people are enabled to make good educational progress, in relation to their starting points and abilities, although not all make full use of the opportunities afforded. Strong multi-agency support between schools, the service and placing authorities enables realistic planning with each young person to tailor educational opportunities to meet their individual needs. When school placements are not made available, foster carers and staff from the agency diligently advocate on behalf of young people, persevering until appropriate placements are identified. Carers have high expectations for young people to succeed and actively work with them to help them to learn and to maximise their potential.

The health needs of young people are promoted and well met through close communication and collaboration between health services, carers and agency staff. Health needs of young people are promptly identified and young people are provided with suitable information to make informed choices. Risk-taking behaviours that add to the vulnerability of young people are addressed together with other professionals. When necessary, appropriate referrals are made to external agencies, including child and adolescent mental health services. This ensures young people's needs are effectively assessed, enabling them to receive the right support.

Young people are actively involved in day-to-day decisions affecting their lives. Foster carers and supervising social workers are readily available to provide help, advice and guidance which the young people value and say helps them to reach informed choices. The agency employs youth participation workers who have begun to work directly with young people, obtaining their views and supporting them to influence how the agency is run and managed.

Young people benefit from being placed together with their siblings whenever this is possible, maintaining a sense of family and continuity for them. In circumstances when this is not appropriate, foster carers and agency staff pro-actively support contact in the best interests of each young person.

This inspection and the service's own audits highlighted that in some cases neither the agency nor individual foster carers had received minutes or notes from placing authorities following key meetings. While the agency had written to ask for these documents they had not escalated their requests effectively when timely responses were not received. Consequently, it is not always possible for the service to demonstrate that the support it provides is consistent with the plans of other agencies involved with each young person.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people form strong attachments to their foster carers and supervising social workers. In many cases, long and stable relationships are established over time. Relationships between foster carers and the service are positive and professional, with clear expectations and requirements understood by both. Foster carers stress that a particular strength of the agency is the maintenance of a family feel, despite expansion into different geographical areas. This ensures foster carers feel well supported. They are visited regularly by committed and enthusiastic supervising social workers, who are consistently and readily available to be contacted. This provides foster carers with direct support or a forum to discuss and promptly address any emerging issues. Structured unannounced visits take place at least once each year, providing additional checks upon the quality of care provided to young people.

Young people who are looked after, foster carers and birth children of fostering families, all benefit from additional internal support services delivered by the agency. This is over and above assistance provided by supervising social workers. A dedicated children's services team ensures continuity through allocation of specific staff. Carers also value the availability and accessibility of senior managers in the organisation.

Carers are actively involved in developing and delivering care plans. They regularly attend reviews and meetings for the young people and prepare detailed written assessments of the young person which overall are clear and incisive. Carers understand their delegated authority and ensure that tasks assigned to them within plans are carried through appropriately. Overall, foster carers' and young people's

files are sufficiently up to date. They contain relevant background information to assist in planning, management oversight and to enable young people to understand their history if they wish to access their case records.

Training provided equips carers well to undertake their roles. This enables them to understand and respond to the range of diverse needs, behaviours and challenges that arise when caring for young people. Carers directly benefit from specific training on subjects they have no previous knowledge or experience of. This enables them to make sense of and respond appropriately to issues, such as child sexual exploitation and children going missing. The agency consistently promotes the learning and development of all approved foster carers. All carers have attained or are working towards attaining the appropriate Training, Support and Development Standards for foster care. However, there is currently some inconsistency in how the agency demonstrates the individual attainment of each carer. As a result, carers are not always given credit for work completed on their own. Some carers receive individual certificates, while others have their attainment recognised as a couple.

The recruitment, selection and preparation of foster carers link effectively to organisational priorities and have a strong emphasis upon identifying how carers will meet the complex and challenging needs of young people. As a result, the agency has a range of carers from different backgrounds, which contributes to the options for effective matching. Sound assessments provide clear information to an established panel. The panel is efficiently chaired by an experienced practitioner. Minutes of panel meetings are good, containing contributions of panel members and detail of discussions. However, in some cases, the reasons panel make specific recommendations are not always set out or summarised clearly. Shortfalls identified are not serious and have limited direct impact upon young people.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people state that they feel safe in their placements and that they are supported to take age-appropriate risks. Some young people who have been engaged in risk-taking behaviour such as criminal activity and going missing acknowledge that their carers have persisted in maintaining support to them and advising them of the potential risk and consequences. Carers, the organisation and safeguarding agencies work well together to put in place safeguarding measures to minimise the risks to those children and young people. In particular, carers work well with the police, placing authorities and the service to safeguard the small number of young people who go missing. Carers are aware of and appropriately follow local missing children protocols and those of placing authorities where this is different.

Young people confidently say that they are able to speak to trusted people if they have any concerns. In particular they cite their foster carers and supervising social workers from the agency as people they would turn to. Access to additional internal and external advocacy and support services are effectively communicated to young people. Young people also say they are able to access senior staff and managers

within the organisation to discuss any issues that affect them. As a result, young people feel that they are listened to and their views count.

Risk assessments are appropriately undertaken and are regularly updated. Documents focusing upon safer care of young people are completed for every fostering household. Additional documents are produced which highlight and address specific safety issues for each individual young person.

Practices and processes relating to safe recruitment have been reviewed and strengthened since the last inspection in 2012. They are now more robust and fundamentally contribute to ensuring that those having access to young people or their personal information do not pose risks to them. The agency maintains the same high standards for foster carers, staff and panel members.

This inspection identified some gaps in the first aid training of foster carers. Systems maintained by the agency do not effectively record when refresher training is due. Consequently the emergency first aid qualifications of some foster carers have lapsed. In some fostering households only one of two carers holds a current qualification. A small number of newly approved carers have not yet completed the course. Some of these already have placements. Leaders and managers acknowledged this shortfall and took immediate action to obtain full and accurate information and commission appropriate training. However, a recommendation is made to ensure the relevant national minimum standard is met.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The current Registered Manager has been in post for one year. Together with the responsible individual and directors of the agency they have established a strong leadership team which has driven change. Individual roles are well defined, ensuring that managers and staff are clear about their roles within the organisation. As a result, significant improvements have been developed and established since the last inspection.

Requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed and met successfully. Young people are protected through the strengthening of recruitment practices which are now implemented consistently. The welfare of children is effectively safeguarded and protected through improved relationships with external safeguarding agencies. Foster carers also demonstrate sound understanding of what action to take if they are made aware of safeguarding concerns. Records, including those relating to the administration of medication, are now effectively monitored, further promoting the safety of young people. A guide for children and young people placed with the agency has been reviewed and fundamentally changed, incorporating the views of young people themselves. This comprehensive guide now includes details of how young people can contact key individuals if they have any concerns, including their independent reviewing officer.



Systematic and effective monitoring of the service leads to a clear understanding of the agency's strengths and areas where it still needs to improve. Leaders and managers consult with a range of stakeholders to obtain feedback on the quality of service. As a result, young people, foster carers, and the sons and daughters of foster carers all feel their views are valued. Plans for delivering improvements are clear, realistic and targeted. Staff and foster carers express confidence in the current management arrangements while describing leaders as accessible.

The progress of young people is now more effectively monitored through the development of systems to track outcomes in specific areas of their lives. Independent analysis of information helps the agency to establish a picture of each individual young person's situation and an overview of patterns and trends within the organisation. This information is used to influence individual and organisational planning. For example, leaders and managers had identified a higher than average rate of unplanned endings in the agency. Detailed analysis of individual cases was undertaken and the results used to influence the stability of placements and reduce the frequency of unplanned endings over time.

Leaders and managers demonstrate that they are responsive. For example, during this inspection it was highlighted that the link to the agency's Statement of Purpose on their website was broken. Immediate and effective action was taken to restore this. The Statement of Purpose is clear, simply and realistically setting out the aims and objectives of the organisation in a way that is accessible to placing authorities and parents alike.

Staff receive regular supervision and are supported to develop their professional practice through appropriate training. When necessary, poor performance is addressed and plans put in place promote the development of identified members of staff. The Registered Manager maintains strong links with professional bodies that influence practice relating to foster care. The agency has adopted the Foster Carers' Charter following consultation with foster carers about its implementation. Notifiable events are swiftly and efficiently forwarded to relevant agencies including Ofsted. This supports effective monitoring of the agency.

## 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.