

Diverse Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This privately-owned independent fostering agency provides a full range of fostering services including parent and baby placements. The agency has 36 approved fostering households and currently provides fostering placements to 50 children and young people. It recruited and approved 11 fostering households in the last 12 months. There has been a change in the ownership, leadership and management of the agency in the last 12 months.

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**.

Innovative, competent and resourceful leadership has been effective at significantly improving the overall quality of this fostering service in a relatively short period of time.

The overall effectiveness of the agency, which in the past, was judged as satisfactory, has now become consistently good across different aspects of the service. In addition, a number of creative initiatives with hallmarks of outstanding practice have taken place or are being developed to spearhead further improvement.

Visionary, inspirational and confident leadership has secured commitment to change and improvement from staff, foster carers and children. They are fully on-board with

changes and are joyful participants in the process.

Thorough, robust and child-focused recruitment, approval, preparation and reviews of foster carers ensure that they have good parenting skills, authentic warmth, emotional resilience and tenacity to meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

Through good quality training, supervision and support, the agency has empowered and enabled foster carers to provide safe and consistently positive family environment to those entrusted with their care. This includes children and young people with the most complex needs and those with multiple placement breakdowns.

Foster carers are valued as crucial members of the team working around the child. They play active part in the care planning and decision making processes. The agency ensures that relationships with the placing authorities and other partner agencies are professional, positive, transparent and challenging when it is in the best interest of the child.

Supported by genuinely caring and highly skilled foster carers, children and young people make overall good progress across different aspects of their welfare and development. Some children and young people have made exceptional levels of personal progress.

The agency is building on the evidence of sustained good fostering practice and of the national minimum standards being exceeded more consistently. The leaders are in a good position to execute their ambitious development plan. This plan is based on a realistic self-appraisal, sound financial platform, competent management, pioneering spirit and tangible passion to continue to improve lives of children and young people.

This report in particular supports the agency's further review of the efficiency of the data management that underpins, supports and evidences the effectiveness of the risk management process.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- further improve the record-keeping systems, so that they more efficiently evidence and support sharper focus on the risk management and protective practice. (NMS 4.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Commissioners from different placing authorities gave very positive feedback in relation to how quickly children and young people have settled in their foster families. This included some children and young people with multiple placement breakdowns in the past and those who were described as 'hard to place' due to the complexity of their needs. For example, one child had eight care placements prior to being placed with the foster family from this agency in 2006. The child's independent reviewing officer described the progress this child has made in recent years as wonderful.

Children and young people have a positive experience of being fostered through this agency. A 15 year- old mother said to the inspector: 'I did not know anything about fostering before coming here. It is really good. The carer really helped me. It is a very nice, caring family. I am happy now that my baby and I will be going back to live with my own family.'

Children and young people remain with their foster families for as long as they need the care and support provided. The agency is effective at promoting stability of placements in line with their placement plans. It is also effective at promoting young people's independence skills.

Another young mother who recently left the foster family to live independently with her children wrote to her foster carer, 'thank you for giving us a place to call home and a family we can trust.'

Out of three parent and child placements whose progress was tracked at this inspection, the outcome was positive for all three mothers. Their parenting assessments concluded that they were able to look after their own children.

The agency is successful at nurturing secure attachments between foster carers and foster children. Foster carers provide a positive relationship model to parents who are placed together with their babies or children. For example, one of the young mothers wrote to the foster carer, 'you became the mother I always wanted, but never had'.

Children and young people are fully included in the foster family life. They feel free to express their wishes, feelings and views. They make choices, follow their interests and enjoy a wide range of recreational and development opportunities.

Their educational engagement, attendance and attainment are good, taking into account their needs and starting points. For example, a child who was out of education for a long time now has 100% school attendance.

Through life-story work and the emotional support, children and young people have gained better understanding of the reasons for being in care and how their early experiences have shaped their lives. They are increasingly more able to make positive choices for themselves. For example, some young people are proactively and consciously working on improving their social skills through membership in various

youth clubs.

Children and young people have their needs met. They also receive support from specialist services, such as psychotherapeutic support, when they need it.

Children and young people have good opportunities to spend time with their birth families. They also, have overnight stays with friends, when this has been assessed as safe.

They understand how to complain and are able to do so. They receive clear and well-reasoned explanations for the decisions that have not been made in line with their wishes. They talk freely if they are unhappy about anything, including if they feel intimidated or bullied. They know that it is their right to be and feel safe and that adults are there to help them to achieve that.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's fostering panel is effective at promoting good quality foster care through robust processes for approval and review of foster carers. These processes have a clear focus on the needs of the child and on the provision of safe, secure and nurturing family environment. Foster carers are skilled in their roles. Within the multi-agency framework of working, they make crucial positive contribution to the stability and the effectiveness of the placements.

Commissioners talk highly about the quality and the range of the skills that the foster carers who work for this agency have. One commissioner highlighted how extensive their search was to find a placement for a sibling group with complex needs, before they placed with this agency. Those children are well-settled and making good progress.

The resilience of foster carers and their excellent parenting skills mean that they can effectively foster children with a wide range of complex needs and behaviours. Foster carers have a true commitment to helping children achieve positive outcomes. A number of professionals commented positively about the foster carers' resolve not to give up on children and young people when they persistently challenge and undermine the placement. In those situations, in partnership with other professionals, the foster carers have continued to fine-tune their support to find a way to help children and young people to improve their behaviour, damaging self-beliefs and engagement. One young person wrote to the foster carer, 'you had faith in me when nobody else did, and stood by me. Helped me through the bad and celebrated with me in the good.'

The agency's policy on 'respite' promotes stability of placements and a healthy family life. The agency has a clear focus on the needs of the whole family unit with the foster child seen as an integral part in it. Regular group supervision, training and workshops have facilitated the development of highly supportive relationships

amongst foster carers themselves.

One foster carer described their fostering as, 'really trying to work from heart' and 'looking after foster children, as if they were their birth children'. Young people described their carers as lovely, helpful, kind and compassionate.

An independent reviewing officer highlighted the strong contribution that the foster parents have made to the excellent outcome for the child. He said, 'they are working on an almost undefinable level to form the bond with the foster child and love the child as their own'.

Foster carers have a clear understanding of their role and those of the placing authority and the fostering agency. The agency sees foster carers as professionals with invaluable impact on the lives of children placed with them. They are part of the team working together around the child to consistently implement the care plan and promote positive outcomes. The agency provides foster carers with good level of support, supervision, guidance and training that enable them to execute their roles with clarity, confidence and competence. Through well-defined delegated authority, foster carers are empowered to make decisions that are in the best interest of the children placed with them.

Foster carers and the agency staff work effectively with the child's social worker and independent reviewing officers to share their experience, knowledge and information about the individual children. The agency evidences clearly that, when the information they needed in order to make considered choices was not forthcoming from the other parties, they actively pursued it and consistently made decisions in the child's best interest. In situations when the communication between the agency staff and the child's social workers needed improving, the agency approached this in a proactive, transparent and positive manner.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The management promotes an open culture in which children and adults are encouraged to share any concerns they have. The agency also welcomes any ideas how the service can better promote children's welfare and positive outcomes.

Foster carers receive comprehensive training that enables them to identify any risks and to promote children's welfare effectively. The most recent training included sessions on safer caring, on-line safety and managing risks of child sexual exploitation. Foster carers recognise the impact of any abuse or neglect that children and young people experienced in the past, on their behaviour and feelings. They also know how these experiences make children and young people more vulnerable to risks of not achieving their full potential and of further abuse.

The agency has embarked on a project with one of the placing authorities to develop a computer programme that automatically predicts the level of risks of sexual

exploitation for a particular child. The prediction is based on word-recognition software being applied to the written logs that foster carers complete on a daily basis. This innovative project aims to bring more precision and objectivity to the early identification of the risks, so that the appropriate preventative support is put in place at the right time.

Foster carers are effective at supporting children and young people to understand the risks and develop safer behaviours. There have been significantly fewer incidents that required to be notified to Ofsted in this calendar year: 10 notifications in 2013 up to date of this report, compared with 25 in the previous year. Children and young people are learning to take more responsibility for their behaviour and behave in a more constructive manner. For example, there have been 11 serious incidents necessitating calling the police to the fostering household in 2012, but only two of these incidents so far in 2013. The episodes of young people missing from the placement have also significantly reduced, from seven in 2012 to one in 2013.

When it has been identified that the child or young person is at risk, the agency has worked in close partnership with the child's social worker, child protection practitioners and other professionals to ensure that comprehensive protective strategies have been agreed and have been consistently implemented. The safeguarding practice is strong, sound and effective at protecting children and young people and promoting their welfare.

The records that evidence this are kept in a plethora of different types of documents, thus increasing the risk of inconsistency and of lack of clarity. These records include the following: the carer's daily logs, the agency's logs of telephone conversations with other professionals and foster carers, minutes of the strategy meetings, records of the agency's supervising visits, safe care plans and the agency's log of significant events. While different records cover only different aspects of the protective actions taken, when read together, they give a good picture of the safeguarding intervention and evidence its effectiveness. The agency has started to explore how its data management can be reorganised to more efficiently support a sharper focus and more fluid approach to risk management planning.

Robust recruitment procedures ensure that foster carers, the agency staff and the members of the fostering panel have been thoroughly vetted and are suitable to work with children and young people.

The agency shares information appropriately and cooperates fully with the child protection services, when any allegations or suspicions of harm come to light. The foster carers who have been subject to investigations report fully understanding the process and feeling supported within the clear context in which ensuring protection of children is everybody's priority.

The agency's annual unannounced visits and exceptionally thorough health and safety checks, advice and support, contribute to the provision of safe family environment to children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

In 2010, Ofsted judged the overall effectiveness of this agency to be satisfactory. Under the new leadership and management, the agency has swiftly made excellent progress in all aspects of the service provision. Both requirements and 11 recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed and fully resolved. The service is now run in full compliance with the fostering regulations and standards.

The new leaders and the new registered manager are visionary, ambitious, innovative, inspirational and firmly child-focused. Many foster carers described how they felt disillusioned and dissatisfied last year. They considered leaving the agency or even fostering altogether, before the change in leadership and management took place. The foster carers have quickly developed trust and confidence in the new leadership and management and renewed their commitment to fostering and the agency. They report now being well-supported to provide the best possible care to children and young people. They are motivated to learn and to continue with their professional and personal development, as foster carers.

The agency is buzzing with the new energy, excitement, ambition and commitment to improvement, with the child remaining firmly anchored at the centre of it. Some commissioners fed back that although they do not usually consider making placements with the services that are rated by Ofsted as satisfactory, they were so impressed by the leadership and management of this agency that made an exception. As the placements proved to be highly effective, the working relationships between the agency and the placing authorities have continued to grow.

Various professionals external to the agency used the following words to describe the quality of this fostering agency: unique, special, creative, impressive, wonderful, competent, much improved, safe and good with some outstanding features. Some experienced social care practitioners talked about the agency's fostering social work practice maturing in the most recent time, through robust questioning and reflective and distilling approach to professional care.

The agency is involved in some cutting-edge projects, such as piloting an electronic data system that uses 'intelligent' software. Staff are also working on developing more precise ways to objectify, measure and track the child's progress, as well as to identify trends and factors with the significant impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

The newly developed guides to this fostering service for children and young people fully embody the agency's creativity, thoughtfulness, competence, insight into childhood, authenticity and genuine passion to make a meaningful difference in the lives of children and young people. Children and young people have contributed to those documents and love them. Many professionals commented that these guides are the best and the most creative that they have ever seen.

The agency is working very hard to build on the evidence to demonstrate sustained good fostering practice and that the national minimum standards are being exceeded more consistently. The high commitment to children, strong monitoring, and a strong drive for improvement are underpinned and supported by a very much improved financial situation. The now sound financial platform secures continuation and further development of the service.

The agency is well staffed and resourced to execute its ambitious development plan. A small team of qualified social workers is supported well by the staff with different roles, such as a children's development coordinator, referrals/matching staff, creative and media officer, administrators and an ICT specialist. A system for constructive appraisal of the individual performance of staff is in place and there is a comprehensive training programme for staff and foster carers. New foster carers are being recruited effectively.

Leaders and managers ensure that children and young people and their foster families, as well as the agency staff have good opportunities to spend time together, delight in the company of each other and have fun in the community. Outings are arranged on a regular basis. They have been very well attended and enjoyed by everybody.

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.