

Footprints Foster Care Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Jennifer Reed
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Responsible individual	Vanda Leigh
Date of last inspection	16/03/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Footprints Foster Care Limited is a private company and is owner managed by the Responsible Individual and the Registered Manager. This independent agency was registered with Ofsted in March 2012.

This is the first inspection of this small fostering agency which was set up to provide a local fostering service. The agency has recruited four fostering households over the past year. The fostering agency currently has seven fostering households and five children in placement. The agency recruits and assesses its foster carers and provides standard emergency, short-term, long-term and permanent placements for children.

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**.

The 'hands on' and ethical leadership and management of the service is evident throughout all aspects of the agency's operation. Leaders demonstrate a clear vision and focus on the steady development of a small, accessible, high quality fostering service for local children. The fostering agency's two registered persons have established robust working partnerships with their local authority, neighbouring authorities and other local services to promote positive outcomes for the children placed within their service.

The service has made a strong start in providing standard foster placements which meet the diverse needs of individual children. Thorough and exacting matching processes result in stable placements for children where they thrive and make very good progress. Only one fostering household has experienced a disruption and there have been no de-registrations of foster carers. Statistics for the year ending 31 March 2013 show that 50% of the agency's foster placements were filled. This is a slightly lower proportion than the comparator group of all independent fostering agencies which was 56%; however, this percentage is not unexceptional for the first year of a new service.

The recruitment, preparation, training and supervision of foster carers is efficiently and rigorously carried out. The fostering panel provides robust challenge and quality assurance feedback to the service. These effective processes result in the provision of skilled foster carers who provide an outstanding quality of care to the children placed with the service. Children are kept safe and their health and wellbeing are well promoted. They are doing well at school and are making positive changes in their lives. These good outcomes are secured by the agency's meticulous management oversight and vigilant supervision of placements. Moreover, the agency champions the full involvement of their foster carers in looking after their foster children and they are an integral part of the professional team supporting children's development.

The service is underpinned by sound policies and practice which meet regulatory requirements. Practice standards would be enhanced by further development within the service to ensure that: records kept of missing episodes contain more detail; local Runaways and Missing from Care and Home (RMFCH) protocols are available to inform the individual care of children; and arrangements are secured for the professional supervision of the Registered Manager.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- obtain the local Runaways and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol and a copy of each placing authority's RMFHC protocols to ensure these protocols are followed should children go missing (NMS 5.7)
- ensure written records kept by the fostering service where a child goes missing, detail any reasons given by the child for running away from the foster home and any action taken in the light of those reasons (NMS 5.10)
- finalise the proposals in place to provide suitable arrangements for the professional supervision of the agency's Registered Manager. (NMS 24.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children are well looked after by their foster carers in accordance with their individual care plans and on-going decision-making processes for their future permanent arrangements. The good introductory procedures facilitated by their foster carers that children experience, helps to reduce their level of distress and supports them to move successfully to live with their adoptive parents, or to other permanent placements. Alternatively, the well-managed introductory processes for planned placements within the agency and the good information provided to children about the service helps them to feel comfortable and safe when coming into their fostering placement. They settle quickly into the fostering household. One child said, 'I came to visit twice before I came to live here so I knew what it was like'.

Children in placement, particularly those children where a return home to their family may be an option, benefit from the fundamental ethos of the fostering service; to provide local children with a local fostering service. Children continue to live in or near to their own communities and this facilitates easy access for regular contact with their family and friends and the maintenance of their networks. Children can often continue to attend the same school, sustain their interests and friendships and benefit from receiving continuity in health care provision. One teacher said, 'the child's reading has really improved, helped by their daily reading with their foster carer and they have gone up a level in a short time. Their maths has improved significantly and their vocabulary and social skills have increased since they have been with this carer'.

Babies and children thrive in their foster placements and some have exceeded their expected developmental milestones. Children feel included in their fostering families and they enjoy the family activities and daily life within their home. A teacher said, 'the child talks very enthusiastically about the leisure time they spend with their foster family and they are making very good progress.'

Children's personal and social development is improving since moving to their foster homes. For example, siblings placed together are communicating more ably with each other and are forming positive relationships. Children feel secure enough to try out new things, for example, learning how to swim, and they are learning to trust adults enough to tell them about their worries. A social worker commented about two siblings, 'the younger child attached to the foster carer within a week and the older child has been able to share that he needed help with school issues; this is huge progress'. Children are proud of their achievements and emerging skills. They enjoy the praise and recognition of their success given by their foster carers and this helps to improve their confidence and self-esteem.

Children are helped by the service to reduce their risk taking and unacceptable behaviours and to improve their independence and self-care skills. A teacher reported, 'the carer was brilliant and the young person did not want to leave them. The carer helped the young person to improve their self-presentation and self-care and it helped them to fit in better at school'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Ofsted has received very positive feedback from parents, foster carers and professionals about the quality and operation of this fostering service, with evidence of very good outcomes for individual children. One social worker described the foster carers as 'amazing'. They said, 'from the start the foster placement offered excellent levels of support. The children have made massive improvements and their development has gone through the roof. Communication is good and the agency's regular written summaries provide excellent information to inform court reports'.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is rigorously carried out by the registered persons. They demonstrate an excellent understanding of current fostering and social care guidance and research within their activities. The high quality of these processes, contributes to the agency's ability to provide foster carers who have a good understanding of their role. Foster carers demonstrate strong skills and warmth in supporting foster children to feel part of their family. They make adaptations in their family life to include the wishes, interests and needs of their foster children. A particular strength of the agency is the excellent standard of matching children with foster carers who have the capacity to meet their needs. This contributes to good placement stability. Children enjoy living in their foster homes and they have fun. Their carers encourage them to widen their horizons and they feel secure enough to try out new things.

Foster carers understand the individual needs and attachment issues of the children they look after and they show commitment to securing the best outcomes they can for the children. Foster carers work collaboratively with children's social workers, other professionals and with parents and relatives. They effectively implement children's care plans and take appropriate action to meet their assessed and emerging needs. A teacher said, 'I could not fault the foster carer; they are one of the best carers we have ever worked with and communication between home and school was good'.

Children's safety, health and welfare are given high priority in the care they provide. Foster carers demonstrate their ability to manage challenging contact arrangements and recognise the meaning of children's behaviour and the level of support children may need during, or following such difficult meetings. They advocate for them and contribute to ensuring that appropriate and well-paced introductions take place when they move on to permanent placements.

The agency provides its foster carers with an outstanding level of support which is acknowledged and commended by them. The local geography of the service enables a rapid response by supervising social workers to foster homes, should their physical presence be required to support a foster carer in looking after a child. One foster carer said, 'you can always get someone at any time, who will never mind you calling about anything, big or small.'

The contracting officer reports that the contract is being delivered and there are no concerns about the quality of care provided by the service. They note the prudent decision taken by the agency as a recently established service, to commence by providing standard foster placements. However, the officer also noted that the service had met the challenges of two placements where there had been a higher level of problematic behaviour presented by children.

The fostering panel is strongly led by the panel chair and vice-chair; both are well qualified and have substantial experience to undertake these roles. Panel members have a diverse range of qualifications and experience. Their combined knowledge and participation results in a robust panel that is able to make effective decisions and recommendations in relation to assessments and reviews of the suitability of carers. Moreover, the panel provides appropriate challenge to the agency and a quality assurance function, contributing to safeguarding children in placement and supporting the agency in improvement. Annual reviews are undertaken by an independent reviewer. This is good practice as it strengthens objectivity about the quality of care provided by carers within a small agency setting.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Safeguarding is the central theme in all aspects of the service's operation. The recruitment of foster carers and panel members is rigorous and the required vetting checks are vigilantly undertaken by the service. Throughout the assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers, the consideration of safeguarding matters is pivotal.

The fostering service promotes children's safety and welfare in all foster placements by providing carers with sufficient referral information, up-to-date placement plans and individual risk assessments for each child. Children know how they can raise any concerns they have and the service promptly looks into any complaints made. Any allegation or suspicions of harm are effectively dealt with by the service, in line with Local Safeguarding Children Board guidance. These processes provide protection and support for all involved.

Foster carers draw up a safer caring plan for each child placed. This plan takes account of the child's known history and assessed needs and it outlines how the fostering household will safely care for the child. Due consideration is given by the carers about the likely impact of any past abuse or neglect the children may have suffered. Foster carers undertake training in safeguarding, safer caring, first aid and attachment theory. These training opportunities contribute to their good understanding of how they can safeguard the children they look after.

Foster carers enable children to take age appropriate risks to support their development and they give them good advice about how they can keep themselves safe from harm. Children are helped to understand the dangers of risk taking

behaviours and engaging in inappropriate relationships. When children go missing, from the home, school or while in the community, the fostering service works collaboratively with the placing authority and local services to take action to return them swiftly and safely to their foster home. The incidences of children going missing are monitored and analysed by the Registered Manager to identify patterns and themes to inform future practice to help keep these children safe. Only a very small minority of children have gone missing from placement and on their return, they have been interviewed by their responsible authority's social worker. This has resulted in the service not always knowing the reasons why children have gone missing and the service's ability to take appropriate action to minimise future risk is reduced. Furthermore, although practice in place is robust in relation to finding and dealing with children who go missing, the service has not obtained local RMFHC protocols to ensure that placement plans and action taken reflect the child's responsible authority's protocols and guidance.

Supervising social workers provide at least monthly supervision to each fostering household and closely monitor the implementation of children's plans and progress. Unannounced visits to carers' homes takes place every year, and more frequently if required. Annual health and safety checks of the foster home are undertaken to check the continuing suitability of the premises. These activities all contribute to the protection of children and ensures their welfare and development is promoted.

The on-call service is delivered by qualified social workers and it is effective in ensuring the robust safeguarding of children in placement. Foster carers appreciate the accessibility of this service and the excellent advice and response they receive at any time of the night or day. This good management oversight and the provision of additional support in challenging circumstances, helps to protect children and supports foster carers in the provision of safe care.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's two registered persons are the directors and owners of the company. They have substantial relevant experience of fostering and both are registered social workers. They also work as the agency's supervising social workers and the agency decision-maker. However, sufficient regard has been given to the management of their diverse roles to ensure there are no conflicts of interests in any part of the service's operation. Quality, objectivity and professionalism within the service and the meeting of regulatory requirements are not compromised by these well-considered working arrangements. However, the arrangements for the professional supervision of the Registered Manager are yet to be finalised.

The fostering agency's two registered persons provide strong leadership of the fostering service. Their 'hands on' approach and ethical leadership and management of the service are evident throughout all aspects of the agency's operation. The service is financially viable. Leaders demonstrate a clear vision and focus on the steady development of a local, high quality fostering service for local children. They

have established robust working partnerships with their local authority, neighbouring authorities and other local services to promote positive outcomes for the children and young people placed within their service.

The Registered Manager meets regularly with the local contracting officer to monitor the delivery of the fostering contract. Strengths of the service are its small size and its management arrangements. These factors ensure that the two registered persons are kept fully informed of children's experiences. This enables them to act promptly to ensure children receive the support they need to be kept safe and sustain good progress. Nevertheless, the Registered Manager completes monthly records of the progress and outcomes of children in placement and the operation of the service. The data is analysed effectively to identify themes and patterns to inform improvement in practice. Monitoring children's outcomes, collecting feedback from relevant persons and panel members and reviews of staff performance underpin the continuous improvement within the service.

The service provides a children's guide and a statement of purpose which clearly informs children, parents, families and stakeholders about the operation of the fostering service. The agency's website provides accessible information about the service. The agency has adopted the Foster Carers' Charter.

The registered persons show competency in their organisation of recruitment, assessment, development and support of foster carers. The excellent level of supervision and support provided to carers is recognised by them and they have confidence in the agency. They receive regular and relevant training to help them develop their skills and enhance their care of children. Panel members are appropriately qualified and experienced and their performance is reviewed. Training is accessible to them on at least an annual basis.

The service is efficiently managed and operates in accordance with regulatory requirements. Annual quality and performance data forms are completed and submitted to Ofsted. All notifiable events are promptly dealt with and appropriate follow-up action is taken to secure children's welfare.

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.