

The Fostering Company

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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Setting address	Studio 1, Sinclair Court, Darrell Street, Brunswick Village, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, NE13 7DS
Telephone number	0191 236 6061
Email	jan@thefosteringcompanyne ltd.co.uk
Registered person	The Fostering Company North East Ltd
Registered manager	Camilla Hunter
Responsible individual	Janet Golden
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Fostering Company Ltd is a privately run independent fostering agency. At the time of the inspection the staffing of the agency comprised the Responsible Individual, Registered Manager and an administration manager. The agency employs independent social workers to carry out some of its assessments of prospective foster carers. At the time of the inspection the agency had five approved foster caring families and there were two children placed with the agency's foster carers.

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 small and relatively new fostering agency provides a good quality of service which is also leading to improved safety and outcomes for the children and young people placed with its foster carers.

The agency's recruitment and approval processes are robust and it provides carers with good training and very high levels of support. This means that it works with skilled carers who understand the young people they care for and are well able to meet their needs. The agency works effectively with young people's placing authorities and contributes well to young people's care plans; this helps them make good progress. The agency and its carers have a strong focus on supporting young people to have their voice heard about matters that are important to them. The

agency provides strong support to help young people maintain and improve their relationships with their birth families and to involve birth families in the lives of their children where this is appropriate.

Management in the agency is effective. This means the agency's activities are well monitored and there is good strategic and operational planning for the agency's development.

The agency's process for approving foster carers who have moved from other fostering providers has not been fully effective. This has resulted in carers being approved by two agencies for a short time which is contrary to regulations. However, effective joint working with local authorities has meant that this situation has not had any negative impact on children's care. The agency's children's guide, while comprehensive, is not suitable for very young children or those with additional needs. Additionally, elements of the agency's record keeping are not always accurate or clear. Safeguarding practice to keep young people safe from exploitation and abuse online is effective. Improving the agency's procedure and guidance for foster carers would help further support the practice in this area.

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
27 (2011)	ensure that the agency does not approve a person who has been approved as a foster parent by another fostering service provider where that approval has not been terminated. (Regulation 27(1), The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011)	27/06/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that records are clearly expressed and are signed and dated. Specifically, that dates in assessments are accurately recorded and reflect the process correctly and that panel's discussion and recommendations are accurately recorded (NMS 26.5)
- improve further by developing the policy and guidance relating to online safety to cover the increasingly wide range of risks faced by young people (NMS 4.1)

- ensure that the children's guide is available in format that is accessible to the range of children placed by the agency. (NMS 16.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people fostered by the agency make good progress and achieve positive outcomes. They are provided with good information about their carers before they are placed. In emergency situations, where the move to the foster home can be very upsetting and difficult, young people are provided with high levels of support which helps them to settle in to their new placements quickly.

Young people's safety improves significantly, and sometimes rapidly, in their foster placements. Where young people have a history of going missing or of exhibiting risk taking behaviour this reduces as they engage with their foster carers.

Young people are well cared for and fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers. They are helped to develop secure attachments to their foster carers and to understand how these relationships 'fit' with the relationships they have with their own families. Young people are helped to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate and in line with their plan. Strong practical and emotional support is provided to the young person and their birth family. Young people benefit significantly from the agency's work to improve the quality of birth families involvement in their child's life.

Young people are helped to understand the local authority's plan for them as far as is possible and to have a say about the plan. Young people are helped to understand their backgrounds and the events that have happened to them.

Young people have access to a range of activities to increase their skills, self-confidence and self-esteem. Their health improves and they have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. Where young people are reluctant to attend for health appointments, foster carers and the agency provide support and encouragement which enable them to do so. Young people have access to educational opportunities appropriate to their age and situation. For example, where placements have been made with very short notice the agency and carers support young people to undertake school work and work with the placing authority to allow individual tutoring to take place until a new school can be arranged. This means that young people's education is disrupted as little as possible and they are able to continue with their learning.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Although the agency is relatively new it has recruited, assessed and approved a small number of foster cares with others currently undergoing the assessment process.

The preparation and assessment of prospective foster carers is thorough and careful. Suitability checks are rigorous and the preparation and training process is child focused. This means that carers who complete the assessment process and are approved are suitably competent and understand the needs of children and young people living away from home. The assessment process is carried out in a timely manner with most assessments being completed within four or five months.

The agency's fostering panel is constituted of members with a wide range of appropriate backgrounds and skills. This means that panel is able to give careful consideration of the cases presented to it and make well-judged recommendations to the agency decision maker. Decisions are made promptly and applicants are informed of the outcome in a timely manner. The effectiveness and timeliness of the assessment and approval process means that potential foster carers are not unnecessarily deterred from applying to foster.

Where the agency has approved foster carers already approved by another agency, this has not been done correctly. Consequently, foster carers have been approved by two agencies for a while during their notice period to their previous agency. This is contrary to the regulations. However, this technical issue has not impacted on the wellbeing of any young person in placement as they experienced no disruption during the transfer process.

Foster carers receive good training and very good supervision and support. Agency workers maintain close involvement with young people in placement and work closely with foster carers and placing authorities to ensure young people's needs are being met. A carer said, 'They really do put the effort in to get things right for the child and they are happy to do this. Nothing is a bother to them.'

The agency ensures that full information is gained about children when placements are made, even in very short notice situations. This is shared with foster carers so that they are able to a full part of the team working with the young person. The agency and its carers communicate effectively with young people's social workers keeping them fully informed of young people's progress. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and the agency ensures that carers are aware of these arrangements. This helps ensure that young people receive the care they require.

The agency and its foster carers demonstrate a very positive regard for birth parents. The agency provides them with information about fostering, and how they will work with their children. It also provides parents with information about how to get support and how they can best support their fostered child. Foster carers work well with birth parents and families keeping them well informed about, and engaged in, the care of their children wherever this is appropriate.

The agency provides excellent support to the children of its foster carers. They are consulted about and fully involved in their parents' assessment process. They meet regularly and undertake a range of activities. The group have helped produce some

of the information for children used by the agency and their views are sought about the way the agency runs. The agency also provides fostering young people with very good support if they experience any difficulties or have any concerns. A young person said, 'I like that there is always someone that you can talk to'. This strong support helps the whole fostering family to provide good support to any young people placed.

The agency keeps good records about its foster carers and the young people they foster and ensures that full information is shared with placing authorities. However, the detail of some records are not always fully accurate or clear. For example, in some cases the dates and signatures on foster carer assessments did not clearly demonstrate that the process of applicants agreeing the accuracy of their assessment had happened correctly. In another situation the record of a panel's deliberations did not reflect the actual recommendation they made.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency and its foster carers work well to keep young people safe. The agency ensures that foster carers are provided with comprehensive information about young people when they are placed and clear risk assessments are developed. Good working relationships with placing authorities ensure that information is updated and the level of risk is kept under review. Foster carers understand the risks faced by the young people they foster and take the necessary action to protect young people as well as to allow them to take appropriate age related risks.

Young people have clear information about how they can make a complaint or express any concerns they may have. Agency workers spend time establishing relationships with fostered young people in order to seek their views and to help them learn to keep themselves safe.

Where young people are known to be at risk from going missing or from other behaviour which is harmful to them, the agency and its carers address this positively with the young person concerned. This approach is effective in reducing risk taking behaviour and improving young people's safety. No young person has gone missing from their foster placement since the agency was registered.

The agency has appropriate policies and procedures in place to ensure that young people are safeguarded. The agency works with local authorities to ensure they comply with local missing from home and care protocols. Foster carers have guidance about dealing with safeguarding matters including online safety and practice in this area is effective. To improve further in this area, the agency's procedure and guidance relating to online safety would benefit from development to cover the wide range of applications and equipment which allow young people to get on line and the consequent risks they may face.

Recruitment process in the agency, for foster carers and staff and panel members,

are rigorous and thoroughly check on the background and suitability of applicants to work with vulnerable young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's statement of purpose is comprehensive and up to date. It clearly describes the agency's operation and is provided to interested parties as well as being available on the agency's website. The agency provides good information for young people about how to complain and how to keep themselves safe as well as the children's guide to fostering. The children's guide itself is comprehensive and helpful although its style, content and presentation mean that it is not easily accessible to younger children or those with reading difficulties or additional needs. The agency is working with its group of young people from fostering families to address this.

The agency's Registered Manager and Responsible Individual have developed good working relationships with placing authorities and social workers. This helps ensure that young people receive the services and support they need.

The agency provides its foster carers with high levels of support and supervision. This means that the agency can monitor its carers' work with young people to ensure it delivers positive outcomes for them. Information about young people and their progress gained in supervision is used to feed into the manager's processes for monitoring the work of the agency.

The agency provides reports on a three-monthly basis to its directors and an annual review takes place. This monitoring ensures that the agency's practice in terms of recruitment, assessment, approval and placement of children is monitored and that practice is amended or improved as required. The agency's policies and procedures are updated as necessary.

Staff and panel members are appropriately qualified, supervised and supported. Training is provided with and learning is shared. For example, panel members share their expertise in matters such as health and legal matters with staff, other panel members and foster carers. The agency seeks the views of young people both those who are fostered and the children of its foster carers. It uses these to inform its monitoring and planning process to improve the effectiveness of the agency's work.

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.