

Fostercare Associates North West

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is part of a large national company who recruit, assess, approve, train and support foster carers. They also supervise a number of family and friends carers on behalf of local authorities.

This particular registered provision offers a wide range of placements throughout the North West of England. Currently they have 307 approved foster carers to meet the diverse needs of 392 looked after children and young people.

All the main functions operate from the head office in Warrington. There are three other offices in Liverpool, Ashton and Carnforth.

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.**

This agency demonstrates a strong commitment to developing children and young people's individual potential.

Many children and young people benefit from long term, stable placements with their siblings. They are an integral part of the fostering family and have formed strong, trusting attachments. Consequently, they are happy, safe and secure and their experiences, outcomes and progress are very good.

Children and young people's wishes and feelings are central to care planning, but there are limited opportunities for them to influence strategic planning and service development. This is acknowledged by the service and imminent plans are in place to address this. Children and young people contribute to carers annual reviews, but there is no system in place to capture their views as a fundamental part of staff appraisals.

The ongoing analysis of customer needs and targeted recruitment by a dedicated team ensures a diverse range of experienced carers to meet the unique needs and personal preferences of the children and young people needing foster placements. However, a significant number of carers have not completed the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval.

This service ensures all carers are well supported and supervised to meet the assessed needs of the children and young people they care for. Carers are also clearly valued as a fundamental part of the professional team working with each child and are actively involved in ongoing service development. Effective partnership working with relevant agencies is firmly established to safeguard and protect the children and young people living in foster placements. However, carers are not always equipped with all the information about the children and young people to ensure they are providing appropriate care at all times in line with up-to-date care plans. This means there is also a lack of clarity about delegated responsibilities and behaviour management.

The registered manager is suitably qualified and very experienced and is supported by strong middle managers who are accessible and approachable to all staff and carers. Together they have responsibility for a particularly large region. However, the monitoring systems in place are not sufficiently robust to support all their legal responsibilities and to ensure all records are well maintained. Consequently, there are a number of regulatory shortfalls arising from this inspection. Panel timescales and decision making processes are not clearly evidenced and the quality of assessments are distinctly variable. Missing from home and restraint records and recruitment files are not all sufficiently detailed to demonstrate consistently good practice.

While shortfalls are identified these are not widespread and have not, to date, had a significant negative impact upon the welfare of children and young people.

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
17 (2011)	ensure, in relation to every child placed with a foster carer, the carer is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable them to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each carer is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan (Regulation 17(3))	31/08/2014
17 (2011)	take all reasonable steps to ensure that carers are familiar with, and act in accordance with the company's policies, with particular regard to behaviour management and missing from home (Regulation 17 (2))	31/08/2014
35 (2011)	maintain an effective system for monitoring all the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. The system must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents and their placing authority (Regulation 35 (1)(a) and (3))	31/07/2014
20 (2011)	ensure all recruitment files for persons seeking to carry on, manage or work for the purposes of the fostering service include all the particulars specified in Schedule 1. (Regulations 5, 6, 20)	15/08/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all approved foster carers attain the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure all carers understand what is in the child's current placement plan and have clarity about the authority delegated to them (NMS 7.3)
- demonstrate an effective system for the monitoring of all panel timescales (NMS 14)
- demonstrate that the agency decision maker in reaching a decision lists the material taken into account; identifies key arguments; is satisfied that the panel has fully addressed the arguments; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.40)
- ensure that the manager regularly monitors the quality of all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with policies and to identify patterns and trends, with particular reference to health and safety audits, missing from home and restraints and that all decisions and reasons for them are clearly recorded (NMS 26.2 and 26.5)
- ensure that staff appraisals include the views of children and young people they are working with. (NMS 24.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are very happy and settled in their current placements. They benefit from highly individualised care which bests meets their unique needs and personal preferences. This enables them to reach their full potential. Their wishes and feelings directly influence their day-to-day care. They know how to complain should the need arise and a few have exercised this right. They were taken seriously and positive action taken. This reinforces the fact that their opinions matter and are valued, which in turn increases their self-esteem and confidence. For example, one young person moved from a children's home to live in a foster family. This was a positive move especially as she was supported to see the close friend she had made at the children's home. Now they are thrilled to both be living together with the same carers.

Carers provide children and young people with a personalised profile of their foster family prior to admission. This helps children and young people prepare for their move as they are able to develop an understanding of their future placement. Consequently, they settle quickly.

Children and young people live in clean, spacious and well maintained homes where their physical, emotional and social wellbeing is actively promoted. They benefit from regular health checks and any required treatment, nutritious homemade meals, lots of outdoor activities and regular physical exercise to keep them fit and well. Comments from children and young people which capture numerous views include, 'My carers are nice and they really care. They treat me like their real daughter. I couldn't ask for better foster carers', 'My foster carer is brilliant. She is the best' and, 'It's good here. We get nice food, clothes, a comfy bed, lots of toys and our friends can visit. I am doing really well in English.'

100 per cent of the children and young people accessing this service are receiving appropriate education that best meets their assessed needs. Consequently, they are making good progress from their individual starting points. Their increased confidence and self-esteem has also resulted in some young people who were previously disengaged, actively studying hard to achieve their future career choices. A few young adults are now employed by the service while others have joined the fostering family businesses. This significantly strengthens their feelings of self worth and belonging.

Previously frequent incidents of going missing and offending have ceased in their current placements and significant challenging behaviours, mobility, verbal communication and toileting have demonstrably improved. Many children and young people have successfully returned home or had the security of a special guardianship order or been adopted. Others have gained the confidence and skills necessary to move into their own accommodation and/or go to University knowing they will receive ongoing support from their carers. Others have made a positive decision to remain in placement beyond their 18th birthday until they feel ready to move on.

Children and young people really enjoy taking part in a wide range of meaningful activities and trips organised by the service and strong, positive friendships have been made as a direct result. They are also fully involved in all of the fostering family events and holidays. This strengthens their sense of belonging. Comments from children and young people include, 'Taking part in the choir competition was the best day of my life', and, 'The last big event was brilliant. The lunch was very good. The poetry man was very funny. I really enjoyed the dance classes.'

Children and young people have a genuine choice about contact arrangements with their birth families which is actively promoted and facilitated by their foster carers. This helps children and young people to understand their backgrounds and maintain their sense of identity.

All the children and young people benefit from opportunities to develop age and ability appropriate life skills to prepare them for successful future independent living. This includes, for example, taking more responsibility for their own good health and well-being. Many have improved their social skills and gained the confidence to embrace community activities. They are also actively encouraged to be sensitive to others needs by taking part in charitable events and voluntary work. One young person said, 'I am going on two residentials with my mates over the summer. We will do lots of activities like swinging from trees and caving. We will then do different projects to help the local community. I will get a certificate from the prime minister which I can treasure.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

This service benefits from a separate recruitment team dedicated to ensure that there is always a sufficient number and diversity of carers to meet the unique needs of the children and young people requiring foster placements. The service has a good understanding of the needs of 23 local authorities they serve and targets their recruitment accordingly, both in terms of specific needs and geographical location.

This service has many very experienced carers who are strong and effective advocates for the children and young people. This has resulted, for example, in them moving to schools of their choice, having timely educational and health diagnoses and therefore specialist interventions. Some carers have sensitively supported young people with extremely complex health needs. Moreover, young people have developed the confidence to express their wishes and feelings about their care during their frequent hospital visits.

Feedback from social workers on the quality of care provided by individual carers is extremely positive. One wrote, 'My first impressions was the warm, calm and friendly atmosphere which helped this mother and baby to settle in. The carers are open and honest and I am very impressed with the vast amounts of support and never ending patience. The judge stated that in all of his years of experience he has never seen such detailed and extensive records provided by a carer which demonstrated the

progress made. All professionals concerned felt that they could not have had a better placement.'

One teacher was extremely pleased with the 'fantastic' progress one young person has made since moving to her foster placement and having additional support from the company's dedicated education team. She wrote, 'It has been a privilege to see this pupil grow in confidence, assertiveness and maturity. She now works extremely hard, behaves impeccably, wants to do well and shows great concern for others.'

Experienced carers are actively involved in recruiting, training and supporting new carers. They also have a range of opportunities to influence current research and the ongoing development of the service both at a local and national level. These are strong motivators. However, there are only limited opportunities for children and young people to do likewise. In acknowledgement, a consultation residential is planned for the summer with the overarching aim of establishing a children and young people's forum. Their planned first task is to review the current children's guides and provide a wider range of formats to meet children and young people's particular needs.

A positive new development, as a direct result of carer feedback, is experienced carers providing a mentoring role. This starts from the initial point of interest from prospective applicants and throughout the assessment, training and panel processes to try to allay any anxieties. They then introduce them to a local support group.

Carers are highly valued as an integral part of the professional team working with the child and are actively involved in care planning. However, they are not always provided with the information required to ensure they are providing appropriate care including delegated responsibilities. 70 out of the 392 children and young people in placements do not have a care plan.

Carers receive good support and appropriate challenge to ensure good quality care. This includes: monthly supervisory visits from qualified social workers; access to specialist therapeutic support to enable them to respond to the behaviours of young people appropriately; and, a dedicated education team who are especially successfully in supporting smooth transitions to new schools. Comments from carers include, 'We chose this service because there are good support systems in place to share the load', 'Our young person now has positive ambitions to go to a prestigious university due to the encouragement of the education team here', 'I am part of six carers who meet every Monday with the company's therapist which is invaluable in maintaining placements' and, 'As foster carers, we meet many challenges due to the chaotic and sometimes aggressive behaviour of the children we look after and supervising social workers, support workers, therapists and other foster carers are wonderfully supportive during such times'.

However, 38 out of the 307 carers working for this agency have not completed the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval.

There is a good skills mix within the current panel membership, but it is only recently

reconstituted. The agency is still actively recruiting to their central list. The panel is well chaired by an independent person ensuring all members contribute. He reflected, 'It's in it's infancy still, but has good potential. We are not shy of making difficult decisions', and the registered manager said, 'It's a great opportunity to refresh and improve practice.'

All assessments are undertaken by independent assessors, but the quality is variable. Indeed, the panel have described some as 'Poor.' This suggests they are not being thoroughly scrutinised prior to panel from the central service. In contrast, there is good evidence that the panel are exercising their quality assurance functions, but this has inevitably resulted in some deferments. This ultimately means carers are not always approved in a timely manner to provide placements for children and young people waiting for a foster family.

There is no documentary evidence that all panel timescales are being closely monitored. Moreover, there is no detailed record of: the information the agency decision maker has scrutinised before reaching a decision; confirmation that the panel has fully addressed the arguments; and, detailing the agency decision makers own reasons for the decision.

This agency provides a wide range of stimulating and challenging activities for all the children and young people over the summer holidays which they thoroughly enjoy and carers find to be really helpful. Examples include canoeing, rock climbing and caving. A recent event open to all foster families offered poetry, circus skills, golf, dance, cheerleading and a children's entertainer.

Individual interests and talents are actively encouraged and supported which serves to further increase children and young people's competencies and confidence. Examples include a wide range of musical genres, art in a variety of forms, fishing and swimming. One group of carers have set up and run a monthly youth group for the children and young people to increase their social interactions. Another team have set up weekly professional football practice to better prepare the children and young people for the company's national competition which they are very excited about.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Children and young people say that they feel safe in their foster homes and in the wider community. Many are enjoying the safety and security of long term, stable placements with their siblings. One young person feels so much part of the fostering family that he has formally requested that his name is changed.

Consequently, there are relatively few incidents of children and young people going missing and effective protocols are in place with the local police to protect the few who do. However, some records do not provide a full account of the incident, the response and details of the child or young person's return. This demonstrates that

the monitoring of records is not sufficiently robust.

Foster carers fully understand their role in securing young people's safety and protection. They also enable them to take age-appropriate risks as part of the natural development into adulthood.

All persons working for the agency are regularly trained in safeguarding to ensure an appropriate response to any allegations of abuse. Young people have also benefitted from targeted individual and group work with dedicated support workers to raise their awareness of risks and to explore appropriate strategies to keep themselves safe when enjoying independence in the community.

All foster carers complete a safer caring policy specific to each child or young person in placement. This ensures that appropriate safeguards are in place to address any presenting behaviours by young people and that both foster carers and young people do not place themselves in vulnerable situations. The use of restraint is rare. However, there is a marked lack of clarity about the company's restraint policy and recording expectations.

Placing authorities confirm good collaborative working to safeguard and promote the children and young people's welfare. One social worker said, 'I am really pleased with the service provided. It is a good team approach and we have regular meetings. The carers provide a very nurturing placement and much needed security and stability.'

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The registered manager is suitably qualified and very experienced and is an active member of a provider forum which openly shares good practice and challenges. The manager is well supported by strong middle managers responsible for the three distinct areas. Together they have established effective working relationships with 23 local authorities.

However, the extremely large geographical size of this agency and the particularly high numbers of carers and children and young people in placements means they do not realistically have a thorough knowledge of them all. Moreover, the current IT systems are cumbersome and inefficient which negatively affects the ability to robustly monitor and clearly evidence when and by whom key decisions are made. This has been fully recognised by the company and a major upgrade is imminent.

The monitoring and auditing systems in place do not demonstrate robust attention to detail which has resulted in regulatory shortfalls. For example, up to date legal documentation is missing on a number of files, including care plans, review minutes and personal education plans. Moreover, the quality of recordings is variable in respect to assessments, health and safety audits, missing from home and restraint records. The current formats used by this agency do not demonstrate close scrutiny

of all the required information to be monitored. This includes, all accidents, illnesses and injuries and any first aid and medication administered to children and young people. Highly relevant information is not always uploaded onto the IT system in a timely manner which means the central out of hours service who do not know the children, young people and carers cannot make informed decisions.

Two out of the three specific recommendations made at the last full inspection on 12 July 2010 have been fully addressed. In response, separate records are now maintained for complaints and allegations. Carers are also clear about the allowances and expenses payable which is dependent on children and young people's needs. However, some panel and staff members files still do not include all the required documentation to evidence a safe and competent workforce.

The statement of purpose accurately describes the aims and services provided by this agency. In full consultation they have established a charter for foster carers and one for children and young people so responsibilities and expectations are clear.

Notifiable events are forwarded to Ofsted in a timely manner. The details of these have improved recently to demonstrate that appropriate action has been taken to safeguard and protect the welfare of children and young people in full collaboration with other relevant agencies.

An appropriate development plan is in place to drive continuous improvements and it clearly sets out the future direction of the agency with children and young people at the centre of strategic planning. It is also recognised that a number of positive and significant developments are in their infancy and so the impact cannot as yet be determined.

This service benefits from qualified, experienced and very enthusiastic staff with an excellent diversity of backgrounds. Supervising social workers and support workers confirm high satisfaction with the range and quality of the training provided to continue to develop their skills and competencies. One worker said, 'The service is very good at identifying and meeting specific training needs.'

Staff also confirm regular, good quality supervision and ongoing support and confirm that senior managers are very accessible and approachable. Their performance is reviewed annually, but there is currently no system in place to capture children and young people's views as part of this process.

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.