

Brighter Futures Fostercare

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Christy Wannop
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Brighter Futures Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Upshire, Waltham Abbey in Essex, covering Hampshire, Brighton, Essex, Dulwich, Hastings, East Sussex and Kent. This is a large fostering agency, the only one operated by a private company. The agency was originally established in October, 2007. It was registered afresh under a new company number in February 2014. There is no change to the people who make up the registered provider.

The service has 118 approved foster carers, in 67 households offering 147 approved foster places. There are approximately 77 young people living in 46 fostering households. The agency provides short, long term, respite and emergency placements. The volume of recruitment has been fairly steady at around six households in the last 12 months, though the capacity of the service has decreased because of foster carer turnover.

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.**

Ofsted has made three visits to this service since the last full inspection in February 2013, when the service achieved good overall. The agency has previously established good practice and outcomes in all areas. However, recently the agency experienced a period of instability, with staff turnover, loss of senior managers and a decrease in

effectiveness. Ofsted has had concerns about: the quality of information held about children; promotion of children's health; management of risk and decisions about foster carer suitability. This inspection finds these issues resolved and there are now no concerns about the safety or welfare of children.

However, there are a number of regulatory breaches that indicate the agency requires improvement to be good. Recruitment of contracted independent assessors is not robust. Not enough staff or independent assessors have a relevant qualification or training in assessing foster carers: not enough foster carers undertake the training they need. The quality of assessments and decision making processes are not good enough and some records need to improve. The directors have begun to take action to tackle the dip in the agency's effectiveness; however the recent strengthening of governance is not yet embedded through a full cycle of quality review. Managerial review systems currently do not analyse and evaluate indicators such as placement stability and suitability of educational arrangements, where the agency has recently performed less well compared with national trends.

Permanent, skilled management under the new manager is likely to have a significant impact on the quality of service going forward. Children are making good progress and are wholly positive about the care they receive. Placing authorities recognise recent change; they report no concerns and are extremely complementary about the quality of the work done by foster carers with some very challenging children. Foster carers appreciate the registered person's active commitment to the experience of children and are enthusiastic for further developments. They say it is a 'brilliant agency.' The agency demonstrates its capacity for further improvement in the positive response to strengthen the service to foster carers and children.

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)	do not approve X as a foster parent unless they have completed their assessment of X's suitability (regulation 27 (2))	31/10/2014
27 (2011)	ensure Foster Care Agreements record the terms of the foster parent's approval (Schedule 5, regulation 27(5)(b))	31/10/2014
20 (2011)	ensure full and satisfactory information is available about all people working for the agency: specifically, ensure two written references, including one from the person's most recent employer (Schedule 1, regulation 20)	31/10/2014
21 (2011)	ensure all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal (regulation 21 (4))	31/10/2014

22 (2011)	ensure a record in the form of a register showing in respect of each child placed with foster parents- the child's address prior to the placement and the child's address on leaving the placement. (Schedule 2, regulation 22)	31/10/2014
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Recommendations

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

- ensure foster carers are supported to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily. Specifically, the agency should be aware of the local authorities' written policy on delegated authority and challenge local authorities when individual children and young people are disadvantaged if that authority is not delegated appropriately in line with DfE July 2013 guidance - Volume 2 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (NMS 7.4)
- ensure children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information, including where appropriate photographic information) they need or reasonably request about a placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible (NMS 11.3)
- ensure the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and the decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports should be countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager (NMS 13.7)
- ensure the fostering panel and decision maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations/decisions in line with the overriding objective to promote the welfare of children in foster care (NMS 14)
- ensure reviews take account of the views of any child and their local authority placed during the previous year (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.60)
- ensure foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. Evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure staff involved in assessing the suitability of persons to be foster carers are trained in assessment, or carry out assessment under the supervision of an appropriately experienced social worker, who takes responsibility for the assessment (NMS 23.6)
- ensure the board members or management committee members receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every three months, that meet all elements of NMS 25.7. (NMS 25.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children say that they feel part of their foster families. They describe feeling welcomed to the foster home and being part of the decision to stay, even when they had little choice. One young person remembered how he felt when he saw the foster carer's guitars in the house, 'I'm living here! It's home.'

Children get support from the agency social workers to stay within their foster families on a long term basis, including through Special Guardianship and 'Staying Put', if this is their plan. Young people have continued to receive practical and emotional support from their foster carers after they have moved into independence. Not all children's placements have worked out and this means that some children have had more placements in care than necessary. However, some children have enjoyed security in long lasting, committed families. One child said, 'the people and the dogs are the perfect family.' Another said, 'love it here.' Many family groups are placed together. Some brothers and sisters have moved unavoidably to other foster carers within the agency. This means they have been able to maintain ease of communication and visits because familiar foster carers have held their family history and provided an important sense of stability. Children describe, 'firm but fair' foster carers, who, 'taught me right from wrong.'

Children get good help from foster carers who have a sensitive grasp of their complex family backgrounds, loyalties and relationships. They live with foster carers who understand the strong feelings of rejection and attachment and support their positive sense of self. For example, children with visual disabilities have foster carers who think creatively about their needs, making sure that-shirts have embossed or raised textures so that children can recognise, choose their own clothing and take every opportunity to make their own decisions. Children who speak languages other than English, or who need supplementary forms of communication, have information in formats they can understand. Foster carers use pictures, sign-supported English and children come in leaps and bounds when they realise they are understood. Their cultures, religion and family identities are respected and supported. Foster carers also lay down rich pictorial memory archives to share with children's birth families and any future substitute parents. One foster child said that she didn't need to talk to any therapists apart from her foster parents; they were, a 'great family.'

Opportunities for children to achieve and overcome disadvantages from their early lives is good. They do well in exams and complete 'A' levels and some go on to university. All children have book tokens from the agency to encourage creative reading habits. A very small minority of children and young people have had disrupted education. In almost all cases, they have been subsequently helped to secure full- time school or college placements and are doing well. Children go on holiday with their foster families, and in some instances have exciting adventures, like volunteering trips to South Africa to help disadvantaged children there. From this they develop a sense of ethics and a richer, worldwide community of young people; this made possible with extra funding from the fostering agency. Young people with risky behaviour, such as drug taking and going missing, get support to reduce this.

They have good health care from foster carers who are trained and knowledgeable about their care needs. One young person said, 'there are ups and downs but X (foster parent) is like my reals.'

The agency has recently reactivated children's group gatherings and has begun to consult about issues that affect them. Their views are not yet incorporated into the agency's quality review so it is not yet possible to see the impact or outcome of this. Children and young people say they enjoy meeting with other friends who are looked after by the agency. They like the support staff who do activities with them and they have a lot to say about how the government should treat children in foster care. They say they do not want to feel different. Children are overwhelmingly positive in their view of the agency. They enjoy the 'amazing' days out.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Foster carers are drawn from a range of geographical areas around the south of England and the agency's recruitment strategy is based on fulfilling placing authorities' requirements. One set of foster carers who transferred some years ago from a local authority service chose the agency carefully and are very pleased, saying; 'it ticks all our boxes,' and, ' couldn't have asked for a better agency.' There have been fewer assessments than previously within the last twelve months. The agency is strengthening its processes for recruitment of foster carers, with the recruitment of qualified, experienced social work staff. Almost all assessments are carried out by independent social worker and are delivered to the fostering panel within timescales. The fostering panel is properly constituted and consists of a full range of members, with relevant experience and skills, including care experience. However, there are shortfalls in the way the agency recommends, makes decisions and approves foster carers. This is confusing and has the potential for risk. It has, however, not impacted on children's experience currently.

Panel does not always have completed checks or a finished assessment on which to base their consideration of suitability to foster and they make provisional recommendations based on incomplete information. There has not been robust quality control of assessment reports. The agency decision maker has been insufficiently independent of the assessment process, assumes responsibility for completion of checks and has based conditional approval decisions on partial information. Foster care agreements do not specify the terms of the foster carers' approval. The process for foster carer annual reviews of foster carers is satisfactory and certainly information about safeguarding issues is now always referred to in any review report. However, the quality of review reports is an area for improvement to ensure that information about all children who have been in placement with a family is explicit in the report, so that their experience of foster carer respite arrangements can be considered.

Foster carer training remains an area for improvement, despite more flexibility in on-line training courses. Not enough foster carers have achieved the national induction

quality (TSD) standards within a year of approval, or the agency's expectation of basic core training. There are improvements in this but still fewer than 50% have completed TSD. The take-up of basic training in the positive care and control of children, including de-escalating problems and disputes is not good enough. Panel minutes show a lack of rigor or a child focus in their challenge to foster carers about their practice and about their training. The agency is working hard on this and has active plans to provide this. There is an improved focus on the seamless flow of people who apply to foster through the stages, within timescales, from assessment, to approval, ensuring that training at each stage is fulfilled.

Matching with foster carers has relied on good information from placing authorities; however, this has not always been in place. Matching processes do not always evidence the match with children currently in placement. The agency has had a higher rate than usual of disruptions in the last 12 months, but has not yet begun to evaluate and draw lessons from these unplanned endings. Managers suggest a recently improving picture, but this improvement is anecdotal at present. Children are generally well represented by approved foster carers from the same ethnic background, so there is a good response to requests for families to meet their individual needs. Placing authorities have been positive about the quality of matching: 'foster carer comes with a wealth of experience and knowledge and is aware of the need for structure, daily routine and boundaries. These are already in place in the foster home environment.' Another spoke highly of the agency's ethics in offering a match for children, 'they never take a placement unless they are sure it will work.'

Some, but not enough, children have information about foster families before they arrive or know where they are going to. Photos and child friendly information sent immediately to placing social workers helps children to put down roots before they even arrive. Children's welfare is better safeguarded promoted because the agency is dramatically more successful in securing the proper care and health planning information to support foster carers in their day-to-day care of children. Foster carers' specific responsibilities are set out in the plan for care, but the agency acknowledges that insufficient foster carers have proper delegated authority.

Foster carers report excellent support from the agency social workers, including out of hours support. One foster carer reflected on their journey from approval to now: 'we are completely different carers from the ones we were at the beginning: that's down to X.' (their fostering social worker) The agency is currently actively reconsidering and improving the framework of support offered to foster carers, including support groups and peer 'buddy systems'. Foster carers cite the office staff as 'the family in the middle' and a valuable source of reassurance for them. Another foster carer said: 'The level of support that I have personally received from the office team regarding some of my 'most difficult times' with my placements has been second to none. I have never felt undervalued, not appreciated or unable to express my opinions when asked.'

There are many excellent examples of how well children and young people are doing under the skilful care of their foster carers. One placing authority spoke of how

children's anxiety related health conditions, such as enuresis, resolved within months of settling in. Another set of foster parents manage their three foster children's behaviour and conflicting needs incredibly skilfully. They diffuse, look for triggers, and reduce conflict by taking the lead in positive child centred approaches. They set the rules for communication while ensuring that each child feels they have equal share of attention. Children say they, 'have to respect the family rules' and they, 'trust their foster family.' Placing social workers report good partnership working and in one instance describe how the quality of the direct therapeutic care by one foster carer has removed the need for clinical intervention. Foster carers also have a commitment to the agency and to promoting good practice. They speak of their desire to ensure their foster children's voices are heard and how, 'Things are on the up'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Safeguarding practice has improved. Children are now safeguarded through proper child protection policy, training and procedures and training for staff and foster carers. There have been allegations and upheld concerns about the quality of care in some fostering households. The agency takes action to protect children following any child protection concerns and liaises with local authority designated officers in several geographical regions. There is now consistent management follow through of any safeguarding issues to completion and timely review of foster carers' continuing suitability after any allegation or concern. Some carers have resigned because of these issues, though none have been referred to the Independent Safeguarding Authority. Staff consider risks as they occur, balancing ordinary childhood opportunities with vulnerabilities. They review and update risk assessments and safer care plans and check that any actions to reduce risk are implemented, including at unannounced visits to foster homes. Foster carers report a better shared picture about risks for individual children and say there is an improved consistency amongst foster carers about their assessments of safer care. A placing social worker described staff and foster carers as: 'on the ball, absolutely safe and proactive with it.'

The agency manages risks when children go missing well and reduces this behaviour. Staff and foster carers work in conjunction with interagency protocols and meetings to share information and strategies to combat risk of sexual exploitation. The agency goes over and above to support individual children: in reducing risk through incentive schemes to keep them safe and improve self-esteem. Children are confident that they have adults they can trust and who can help if they are unhappy or confused; they know routes of complaint and have information about external safeguarding services in their children's guide. They say they feel safe and the agency's improved recognition of safeguarding issues means that they are safer.

However, this general improving picture of safeguarding practice is compromised by recruitment processes that are not robust. The employment of independent assessors is not rigorous. Second references and references from employers are not consistently obtained. This means that the agency has not had full information about

which to assess an employee's suitability to work with children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency has had a period of declined effectiveness within the last year. Ofsted intervened and carried out the most recent monitoring inspection visit in March 2014 to establish the quality of provision for aspects of children's care. We found serious shortfalls. There has been significant movement and a strengthening of the agency since then. The directors resumed active managerial control in late spring after the departure of the previous manager in February 2014.

There were eight regulatory breaches at the last inspection. Action has been taken in the vast majority of these. The agency has appointed a manager, who Ofsted recommends for registration. Action to protect children following allegations and information systems for management of risk are vastly improved. The agency now promotes the health of children. There has been a significant improvement in the provision of up-to-date placing authority care plans to foster parents. Agency social workers now see the centrality of the child's care plan in their focus with foster carers. Annual reviews now take account of any safeguarding concerns. The agency has completed the annual dataset return to Ofsted to fulfil Regulation 35. There are now active plans and signs of improvement in the quality of care with a strengthened senior management team and a newly constituted board. These improvements result in stronger child-focused procedures that now safeguard and promote children and young people's welfare.

Clear systems of governance now enable accountability through proper reporting, though this is not routinely established. The agency recognises that further improvement is still needed. For example: the senior management team want to gather and interrogate data about events in children and foster carer's lives to review the context and draw meaning from patterns and trends. They have the capacity within the current information systems to do this, but have not been in a position to use their information systems to do this largely because of a lack of technical expertise. The register of children placed with foster parents on the electronic system does not show pre-or-post placement information. Managers can talk extensively about individual children's progress, but recognise they need to analyse educational outcomes, placement stability, safeguarding issues and complaints in a more systematic way, to identify lesson learnt. They have employed social work staff with the necessary skills and plan to include evaluations about outcomes for children in the review of the quality of care and the planned quarterly reporting to the new board. This evaluation has yet to include the outcomes of recent consultations across all stakeholders.

There are shortfalls in the training, retention and support to social work staff. Social workers working on assessments and sessional workers have not been supervised by an appropriately experienced social worker, or properly and consistently managed or accountable through professional supervision. Few social work staff, including the

independent assessors, have formal training in assessing the suitability of foster carers. Annual appraisal of staff is not routine. These omissions mean that the agency cannot be sure of the quality of the work or the skills of those it has employed to work with vulnerable children. It also means that their training and developmental needs are not identified and supported by the agency. There has been a significant turnover of staff and this has destabilised the agency and had an impact on the quality of some of the assessment and approval decisions and on the consistency of support to foster carers. The panel also recognise this as an important factor in stability for the organisation. The senior management team acknowledge this and are actively filling gaps with strong, experienced social work staff.

Some foster carers and some placing authorities had lost confidence in the agency during this period of instability. However, there is a sense of renewed engagement with foster carers: their concerns about the direction of the agency previously have been taken on board. The senior management team have been actively talking to children, agency staff, foster carers and local authorities, who are now reassured. One placing authority said, 'Don't feel I have a better example of how an IFA should be.' Foster carers now have confidence in the senior leadership and want strong leaders. Some foster carers have talked of how they value the feeling of a family work environment and ethos. The directors, new manager and chief executive officer have clearly worked very hard to improve the situation at the agency and have demonstrated their continuing fitness to operate the agency and their capacity to lead improvement.

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.