

Cornerways Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	Alpha B, Smallmead House, Smallmead, Horley, Surrey, RH6 9LW
Telephone number	01293 826830
Email	fostering@cornerways.org
Registered person	Cornerways Fostering Services Ltd
Registered manager	Fiona Gail Darlington-Black
Responsible individual	Vivianne Joan Spence
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Cornerways Fostering Services Limited is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Horley, Surrey. The service is part of a larger organisation in the area consisting of two children's homes, specialising in the therapeutic care of young women and a separately registered school. The independent fostering agency aims to provide short term, long term, emergency, respite and parent and child foster placements.

At the time of this inspection 27 children and young people were living in approved foster placements with one of 30 fostering households. This represented an occupancy level of 42% of the total number of 65 approved placements. During the twelve months immediately prior to this inspection the number of fostering households remained static with two new households had been approved and two ceasing to be registered. One of these families left the agency to become permanent foster carers with a local authority to promote consistency and continuity for a sibling group placed with them. During this inspection commissioners for the authority praised the professional way the agency managed this transfer that focused upon the needs of the children concerned.

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**.

Children and young people with complex needs flourish in stable placements. Unplanned endings of placements are rare, with the latest figures indicating this is lower than 10% of all placements. Over a quarter of all children and young people have been in their placements for more than three years and this proportion is growing. Excellent work is undertaken to prepare other children for adoptive placements when this is the agreed plan. This is becoming a key strength within the agency. Children and young people clearly and confidently express that they feel safe and valued by those caring for them. As a direct result some change their behaviours in ways that reduce their vulnerability, further promoting their safety and well-being.

A diverse group of foster carers offer a range of placement options to meet the needs of placing authorities. They demonstrate loyalty to the agency, some over many years. Foster carers feel strongly that they are part of the team working for the best interests of the children and young people in their care. They recognise the value they bring and commend the quality of support they receive from supervising social workers. The assistance provided by these committed professionals is enhanced by a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the children, young people and the fostering households.

A knowledgeable, conscientious and accessible leadership team manage the service effectively. Respectful and resilient working relationships are formed and maintained with commissioners leading to a clear focus on the needs of children and young people. An attitude of openness and transparency leads to proactive consideration of how the service can be improved for children and young people.

No shortfalls against the Fostering Service (England) Regulations are identified. While recommendations are made to improve performance against national minimum standards, these shortfalls have limited direct impact upon children and young people. While many are enthusiastic about the training programme provided, some foster carers do not fully engage with the learning and development opportunities offered to them. A limited number do not attain recognised standard of training and development within expected timescales. However these carers are used sparingly by the agency.

While the quality of the supervision they receive from managers is praised by staff, the regularity of meetings is not consistent for all staff.

Leaders and managers acknowledge that they have not yet been able to contact each authority that places children with the agency to ascertain any differences in the protocols to be followed if children or young people go missing. As a result any variation in expectations has not yet been clearly communicated to foster carers.

The quality of some records maintained by foster carers lacks consistency. This includes descriptions of progress made by children and young people, records of a small number of restraints and specific details around the administration of medication. As a result the description of some significant elements of care, key events or experiences of children and young people are not always clear.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- follow the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol and comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child's care plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care (NMS 5.7)
- evidence that foster carers attain the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience (NMS 20.5)
- ensure that staff are provided with regular supervision by appropriately qualified and experienced staff (NMS 24.4)
- ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people benefit from secure and stable placements. They develop strong attachments to their foster carers and respond accordingly to the consistency and continuity they experience. Comments from children and young people emphasise this. They include, 'My foster family is the best family I have ever had' and 'This is a very lovely and caring family. I am privileged to live with this family.' Positive use of delegated authority augments the experiences of children and young people, especially those in long term placements. Through attending local schools, involvement in groups, clubs and activities they build and sustain close friendships. When appropriate, foster carers take responsibility for making decisions that allow overnight stays and other activities with friends in the community.

Some young people stay on through different arrangements after reaching adulthood, underlining a sense of belonging that for some, continues long after moving out to live independently. All foster carers consulted as part of this inspection spoke about people they used to foster with whom they are still in touch. Children and young people see themselves as full members of their fostering families. They make the clear distinction that this is different to being made to feel like part of a family.

Plans for care are clearly understood by children and young people. They contribute

to their individual plans through encouragement and support to express their opinions. When specific requests are not agreed young people are provided with clear explanations for this. This enables them to feel that their views have been heard while being helped to understand decisions made about them. In addition, they feel empowered to express their views and influence their day-to-day care. They confirm that they are comfortable and confident about talking to someone if they are worried or concerned.

A particular strength of the agency is the positive work undertaken with children moving on to adoption placements. Experienced and knowledgeable supervising social workers dynamically support committed foster carers to secure positive outcomes for children in this regard. This is a developing area of expertise that some placing authorities are now actively seeking to utilise.

Children and young people give positive examples of how their lives have changed as a result of living with their foster carers. Those who previously made themselves vulnerable by putting themselves in high-risk situations say they have grown up and learnt to trust their foster carers. They recognise that their foster parents care about them and proudly state that they no longer go missing, use drugs or alcohol. Placing authorities confirm these positive changes.

Education is given a high priority and placements are found for children and young people that meet their individual needs. Some young people identify that their behaviour and concentration at school has improved. They demonstrate their commitment to education and say that they now 'make more of an effort'. Older young people attain formal vocational qualifications before progressing to the next level to prepare them for future employment. Following difficult past experiences they now look positively to the future recognising that these courses will help them learn the things they want to do.

At the point of placement, children and young people receive good quality information about their new foster carers and the agency through thoughtfully produced guides tailored to meet their needs. At the outset of the inspection it was highlighted that contact details for Ofsted contained in these guides were out of date. However, prompt and efficient action was taken to correct this during the inspection

While positive outcomes and good progress were clearly evidenced throughout this inspection, documents designed to capture this information are not consistently completed. As a result the agency does not always fully capture or track the positive changes in children and young people's lives over time. By holding information anecdotally children and young people have less opportunity to see and understand how they grow and develop as a result of their experiences.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

A diverse group of passionate and enthusiastic foster carers demonstrate their commitment to the children and young people in their care and to the agency, sometimes over many years. Foster carers work well with outside agencies and are clearly part of the team around the children in their care. Their contribution is valued and this is corroborated through feedback from placing authorities. Placing authorities confirm that at times care is provided to children and young people who have complex needs and who demonstrate extremely challenging behaviours. Commissioners express praise for the quality of service delivered by foster carers and the level of support provided by the agency. They identify an overarching focus upon the individual needs of children and young people as a clear strength. This promotes positive changes in the lives of children and young people that directly ensue from their personal experiences of growth and development. Comments from placing authorities include, 'We really rate them as a provider', 'They have intimate knowledge of their carers and have done some fantastic work' and 'We have been really impressed by their commitment and creativity; the level of support has been brilliant.'

Close working relationships with placing authorities result in clearly evidenced positive outcomes for children and young people. While children and young people are supported to feel part of their foster families, they maintain positive links with their birth families when this is appropriate. For others staff and foster carers undertake excellent work to prepare and support children to move onto permanent families. For others their fostering arrangements become long term enabling consistency and stability in their lives, when this may have been lacking in the past.

In the rare circumstances when placements do break down managers and staff work closely with foster carers and placing authorities to identify reasons behind this. When concerns are identified they are addressed promptly and effectively using reflective processes that enable future learning.

High quality selection, vetting, preparation and assessment of carers helps to prepare prospective carers for the fostering task. This leads to a clearly child centred approach. Experienced independent professionals share the responsibility for chairing the well-established fostering panel. In addition to the chair and vice-chair, people with a range of backgrounds and skills make up the central list of panel members. This diversity of knowledge and background enhances the quality assurance function of the panel and supports the steps taken by leaders and managers to recruit and approve good foster carers to deliver a high quality service to children and young people.

Foster carers demonstrate a clear understanding of the expectations placed upon them. They additionally receive excellent supervision and support from committed and passionate supervising social workers who champion the needs of children placed within the agency. Feedback from surveys confirms the positive views foster carers have of the agency and the backing they receive. This enables carers to cope with the challenges and demands fostering brings and remain motivated to persevere in providing children and young people with positive experiences of family life. 'I cannot praise Cornerways fostering service enough... I feel part of an extremely

professional company and we are well supported at all times.' 'They care about the young people in our care; they care about us and are interested in the wellbeing of our grown-up children and grandchildren.' 'Our social worker is extremely professional and goes way beyond what I expected from them.'

Supervising social workers demonstrate clear awareness of current research and thinking. Attempts are made to share this and other core knowledge with all foster carers to deliver the best service possible for children and young people. While most foster carers respond positively to the training programme available to them, some fail to engage fully with the extensive learning opportunities that are provided. This minority of carers are not sufficiently challenged to ensure their knowledge and practice is kept up to date. Almost all fostering households have achieved the recognised training, support and development standards. However, those who have not done so have already significantly exceeded the timescales set out in national minimum standards. The actual impact of this shortfall is restricted as a result of limited fostering activity by the foster carers concerned.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Managers, staff and foster carers place safeguarding children and young people effectively at the centre of their work. This is reflected in feedback from children and young people who consistently say that they feel safe. They emphasise that they feel listened to and respected within their homes when this may not have been their experience previously. Children and young people respond positively to the genuine sensitivity and awareness of carers. Some highlight their view that foster parents care about them, something they see as different to being cared for. They begin to realise the affect their behaviours have upon others and as a consequence they take fewer risks as they learn to take more responsibility for themselves. For example, excellent interagency working helps to reduce the incidence of children and young people going missing. The inspector found clear examples where this positive work resulted in significant reduction in the vulnerability of children and young people. As a direct result the health, safety and well-being of children and young people is improved through the positive choices they make.

Supervising social workers have excellent levels of contact with foster carers, and the individual children and young people placed with them. Foster carers and supervising social workers demonstrate extensive knowledge and understanding of plans for the care of children and young people. This informs the production of clear risk assessments that are in place for all children and young people. These documents highlight potential hazards or areas of concern and realistically set out steps to be taken to minimise the likelihood or reduce the impact of these occurring.

All recruitment and vetting of staff and panel members is robust and well evidenced. This helps to protect children and young people. Unannounced visits take place at least once each year and increase when necessary if concerns are raised. An open culture within the organisation leads to honest debate and discussion amongst the

staff team and ensures there is a willingness to challenge at all levels. Allegations against foster carers are taken very seriously and addressed promptly and efficiently. Transparent investigation procedures help to keep children and young people safe while ensuring that foster carers are effectively supported.

Leaders, managers and staff develop and sustain good working relationships with local authorities that place children in addition to authorities where foster carers live. Policies and procedures relating to children and young people who go missing or are absent from their placements are clear and unambiguous. This ensures that foster carers know what the agency expects them to do. The policy document has been shared with and agreed by police where the agency is located. However, work is yet to be completed that will ensure that any differences in the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocols for all local authorities are known, understood and shared with foster carers.

The inspector found that close working relationships with placing authorities extend to raising concerns about the need to restrain or hold some children to keep them safe. Leaders and managers liaise with placing authorities to agree plans to promote the welfare of the small number of children and young people concerned. The quality of records relating to restraints is not consistent. While some provide clear and detailed accounts, limited examples use emotive language or do not provide sufficient information to confirm the necessity for restraint.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Clear and concise information is set out in an accessible statement of purpose. This helps parents and placing authorities have clarity about the services provided and the aims and objectives of the agency. Commissioners within placing authorities speak highly of the service and the quality of the positive working relationships established with the agency. These relationships enable leaders and managers to work closely with those purchasing services to identify and respond to need. This is done using a careful and considered approach. Leaders and managers demonstrate strength and are not cajoled or pressured into making decisions they are not comfortable with. Consequently, services are only offered when there is confidence of positive outcomes. If it is felt the agency cannot help, this is made clear to placing authorities. This leads to a mutual respect that reinforces the positive views held about the service.

Comments from social workers and independent reviewing officers from placing authorities include, 'The agency is proactive. They work in partnership. They think things through and consult with us.' 'I would recommend Cornerways Fostering Services for future placements.' 'The inter-agency communication is brilliant', and 'Excellent team work and sharing information with the network ensures the child's needs are met.'

Regular and effective monitoring of the service results in clear understanding about

the strengths and an openness and honesty about areas where improvements are required. Plans for implementing changes are incorporated into an accessible development plan that sets clear and attainable targets for completion. Sound oversight by senior managers maintains the financial viability of the agency, enabling the continued stability of placements. Notification practice is good and helps external agencies, including Ofsted, to monitor the service.

The strong and established management team recruit and lead a suitably qualified, skilled and competent team of supervising social workers. They instil confidence in the staff team who are encouraged to use their knowledge and expertise creatively to directly benefit children, young people and carers. Supervising social workers speak highly about the opportunities provided to extend their professional development. Similarly they praise the quality of their supervision, emphasising the child-focused nature of this support as a key strength. However, supervision records identify gaps in frequency of meetings for some staff. This goes against agreements made with individual staff.

Positive and prompt action was taken to address recommendations made following the last inspection of the service. Amendments to recording following supervision visits to foster carer's homes now incorporate details of any impact or effects resulting from contact visits. This promotes positive communication with placing authorities and maintains focus on the needs of children and young people. Foster carers now consistently store medication safely and are reminded of their responsibility to do so. However, this inspection highlighted that not all carers reliably record the administration of medication effectively in line with the agency's own guidance. This inconsistency impacts upon the ability of leaders and managers to monitor this element of service delivery.

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.