

Fitzgerald Fostering & Consultancy

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	Orchard Lea, Drift Road; Winkfield Lane, Winkfield, WINDSOR, Berkshire, SL4 4RU
Telephone number	01753 550031
Email	lesleyfitzgerald@btconnect.com
Registered person	Fitzgerald Fostering & Consultancy Limited
Registered manager	Lesley Ann Fitzgerald
Responsible individual	James Steven Townend
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fitzgerald Fostering and Consultancy Limited is owned and managed by the Responsible Individual (RI) and the Registered Manager (RM), and operates from a serviced office complex in Winkfield, Berkshire.

The agency provides a range of foster placements on an emergency, short break, short term or longer-term basis, for children and young people 0-18 years.

At the time of this visit there were 20 fostering households with 22 children in placement.

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 agency is very effectively led by the Registered Manager and the Responsible Individual. All staff and foster carers are proud of the agency and the collaborative work they do in the best interests of the children and young people placed. As a result children and young people are safe in their foster homes and make good progress in all aspects of their lives. Inclusion is a tenet for all those who work for agency. This leads to children and young people feeling part of the family, with a good awareness of the role that the foster family is playing, either as a forever family or as a family helping them to return to their birth family.

The thorough assessments, robust processes and a strong panel help ensure that only suitably skilled people are approved as foster carers. A social worker described foster carers as 'the most flexible committed carers I've ever worked with, they have invested in the children'. Another said 'the foster carers are fine tuned to the specific needs of the children. They have a good awareness of these needs and how to work with them'. Placing authorities see foster carers as 'very much part of the professional team caring for the child' and 'with a voice in the decision making'. This is underpinned by the high standard of training, which foster carers are very keen to attend, and support to foster carers provided by the agency.

The management actively seek the views of foster carers and children and take these into account in developing the agency. They have planned the development to be slow and steady to ensure that the agency retains strong sense of group identity, working to the ethos 'It's all about the child'.

There is one requirement and one recommendation arising from this inspection. Both relate to records and neither has a detrimental impact on outcomes for children or on the recruitment of foster carers.

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
35 (2011)	evidence monitoring of all measures of control in respect of children accommodated in a foster home. (Regulation 35 (1) Schedule 6 (8))	31/12/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure written risk assessments are updated to reflect changes. (NMS 4.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people benefit from placements that enable them to make good

progress and achieve positive outcomes in accordance with their care plans. Children and young people are well cared for and say, 'it feels like home' and 'I'm part of the family'. They feel safe and at ease in their foster families, some within a short space of time. The good relationships made with foster carers enables children and young people to rebuild connections with their birth families (where appropriate) and develop friendships in the local community. In several cases children have remained with families through adoption arrangements.

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of opportunities and experiences which they talk about enthusiastically. These include canoeing, horse-riding, going to the seaside and regular attendance at clubs. Children benefit from very well supported contact, effectively enabling transition home where this is the plan. Similarly the involvement of siblings in the fostering household has been well promoted, for example, going on holiday together.

Young people know about the records foster carers keep and in some cases read them and add their comments. This supports children and young people in feeling that they have a voice and influence their day-to-day care. Children report that foster carers, 'listen to what we have to say'. Children and young people have positive relationships with foster carers that enables them to raise any worries or concerns they may have. They also have accessible information about how to contact other adults should the need arise.

Generally children and young people are learning to take more responsibility for their behaviour. Effective interventions are giving them an understanding of why they may react as they do alongside strategies to manage and control their behaviour. This has also enabled young people to keep themselves safer. For example, there has been a reduction in incidents of self harm, going missing and exposure to violence in relationships, which featured in their lives before moving in with their foster carers.

Children and young people know the components of healthy lifestyle and diet and generally adopt this. Their medical needs are sensitively and well met, as are their emotional needs. Specialist needs are also identified and appropriately met, either by equipping foster carers or obtaining professional help. Most aspects of young people's health have improved since being in their foster placements. Examples include a child getting glasses, where impaired vision had not been identified before placement, significantly improved dental health, a child no longer requiring medication to manage behaviour and weight loss as a result of increased physical activity.

All children and young people are engaged in education, a major improvement for some. They thrive with the support and encouragement they receive from foster carers and enjoy the celebration of achievements great and small, all of which are significant. Children and young people gain age appropriate skills in independence. For example babies learn to feed themselves, children spend their pocket money and teenagers use public transport all within a strong support network that builds their confidence and resilience.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The underpinning ethos of the agency, effectively promoted by the RI and the RM and embedded in foster carers' practice, is that the safety and well-being of children and young people is central to all aspects of the work. A commissioner commented, 'they always put the child at the forefront, they will stick with our young people'. Foster carers report that this is made clear from the initial visit and is integral to the effective recruitment, preparation and assessment process and ongoing support. The steady growth of the agency has provided families that are well placed to meet a range of children's needs, including more complex needs and challenging behaviour. Foster carers have a very sound understanding of their role and those of the agency and the local authority in meeting children and young people's needs.

Foster carers demonstrate an excellent understanding of the needs of the children and young people placed, gained through meaningful and targeted training. The vast majority of foster carers speak very positively of the training and support provided by the agency; both described as 'fantastic'. The broad training programme is well planned, responsive to emerging issues, and flexibly scheduled. It effectively supports foster carers in achieving the training and development standards within good timescales. Foster carers say that all agency staff recognise that, 'foster carers work 24/7 and that they are prepared to do the same, which they do'. Foster carers are confident to call at any time and know that whoever answers their call will know them and their children and believe that, 'there's no such thing as a silly question'. The monthly practice development support groups, facilitated by a registered therapist, are highly valued by the foster carers. These are seen as an opportunity to share and reflect on experiences and learn with professional guidance. For example foster carers report how helpful this has been in understanding the child and exploring behaviour management techniques. A social worker observed, 'the agency have delivered excellent support and guidance to foster carers that supports their professional delivery of children's care'.

Children and young people benefit from the very clear agency focus on inclusion. Foster carers are skilled at building relationships with children, applying their learning and reflective practice. Children and young people feel part of the family they are living with. Foster carers have established informal support networks that provide opportunities for foster carers, children who foster and children placed to interact socially. Foster carers effectively promote contact and facilitate successful transitions in accordance with care plans. Respite happens only where it is in the best interests of the child and effectively supports the placement: for example, where child has complex and challenging needs. Foster carers are very effective at promoting a positive identity for children and young people. For example foster carers support children to choose DVDs and comics in their first language and select familiar foods from specialist shops.

A real strength of the agency is how all staff and foster carers see themselves as part of a team responsible for the children and young people placed. They work

inclusively and collaboratively with placing authorities and their views are valued. The focus is on working together to meet the needs of the children and young people.

Panel is chaired by a highly experienced and knowledgeable chair. Panel membership is diverse, with a range of relevant skills, knowledge and experience which informs their decision making process. This is seen in the clear minutes which reflect panel considerations. The agency decision maker works to appropriate timescales and details the basis for the decision. The panel is appropriately trained, and all are routinely appraised. It is robust in its approach, providing effective quality assurance of assessments and first reviews in particular.

Assessments are thorough and provide an accurate picture of the foster carers skills and strengths. The agency is robust in its endeavours to gather as much information as possible about children and young people before making placements. The agency uses this information to achieve good matches between children and young people and foster carers. A number of children and young people are now in legally permanent or long term placements as a consequence of good matching.

The best interests of children and young people are central to everything the agency strives for and this is understood and welcomed by placing authorities. Delegated authority is well understood by foster carers and is embedded in practice in accordance with the plans for young people placed. Some placing authorities have responded to the challenge set by foster carers and now ensure that children have a passport so that they can go on holiday with the foster family.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safeguarding of children and young people is a central tenet in the work of the agency. Foster carers say that active consideration of safeguarding and child protection is given in all their interactions with the agency. This begins at the initial visit and is threaded through the preparation groups, the assessment, supervision visits and support groups and reinforced in training. As a result foster carers have a very good knowledge of what to do should they have concerns and an excellent understanding of the impact abuse may have. Foster carers are sensitive to children and young people's communication and respond appropriately, thus ensuring children and young people feel safe. Foster carers benefit from support groups that provide a safe arena for them to acknowledge and explore their own feelings. One foster carer said, 'asking us how we feel about that is immensely valuable, if we are emotionally healthy we are better placed to look after the children'.

The agency is robust in its response to any allegations against foster carers, working alongside placing authorities to ensure the welfare of children is safeguarded. No allegations have been substantiated and the agency has learned how to better ensure independent support for foster carers through these difficult times.

Each child and young person has an individual safer care plan, with associated risk

assessments. Not all are routinely updated in the light of new information but it is clear that action is taken promptly when necessary. Children and young people are supported to take age appropriate risks, such as playing outside after school or using the internet. Foster carers do this alongside engaging with and educating children and young people about how to keep themselves safe. The agency underpins this through training for foster carers.

Unannounced visits to foster carers by the agency, regular meetings with children and young people, individually and as part of a group, ensures that they have opportunities to express any concerns they may have. Foster carers describe an open culture within the agency and understand their individual responsibility to keep children and young people safe, including by whistleblowing should they have concerns. All these aspects contribute towards keeping young people safe.

There are very few instances of young people going missing. When this does happen foster carers work hard to successfully secure a safe return and understand the reasons why. Young people with a history of going missing have settled well in placement, with no repetition of that behaviour.

Staff and panel member recruitment and vetting are thorough and meet statutory requirements. This helps keep young people safe from contact with unsuitable people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Commissioners and placing social workers are highly complimentary about the agency and describe working relationships as 'excellent'. One commissioner said, 'social workers ask if Fitzgerald Fostering have a placement first when looking for a foster placement. They are one of our top providers'.

Due to the small size of the agency the manager knows all the foster carers and children and young people well. In addition to formal monitoring of individual achievement and progress the manager also tracks through meeting children and young people face to face at social events with their foster families. The agency is planning how it will continue this as they expand. The agency has built in additional scrutiny by contracting an independent social worker to conduct foster carers' reviews and present their first reviews to panel.

As part of the culture of continual improvement the RI conducts quarterly monitoring and uses this to inform a thorough annual review. Foster carers and children say the things that have changed as a result of their input. Examples given include updating the children's guide and making changes to the foster carers' charter. Records show that minor behaviour management issues are monitored by supervising social workers, with follow up action if required. However the recording does not fully evidence robust management oversight of minor consequences.

The statement of purpose is clear, well written and accessible, as are the policies and procedures in the foster carers' handbook. Foster carers are knowledgeable about their charter and been involved in tailoring this for the service, using foster carers representatives. There has been one formal complaint since the last inspection, which was thoroughly addressed. Foster carers and children know the process but feel that the close working relationships ensures that issues are raised and addressed promptly as they arise.

The RM and the RI work very closely together to ensure that the high standards they have set themselves are maintained. Thus the agency is growing at a steady and measured pace, as outlined in the realistic business plan, and maintaining financial viability. The staff of the agency are very well qualified and undertake training, some alongside foster carers. The RI and the RM have external supervision, which provides another valuable level of scrutiny in a small agency.

At the last inspection in October 2010 one requirement and one recommendation were made. The agency has thoroughly addressed both. Notifiable incidents, of which there are very few, are reported with action taken where necessary.

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.