

# New Routes Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Setting address</b>	St George's House, Gerard Way, Coleshill, North Warwickshire, B46 3FG
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**Telephone number**

**Email**

**Registered person**

**Registered manager**

**Responsible individual**

**Date of last inspection**

Father Hudson's Society

Anna Louise Rooney

Timothy Bradford

01/07/2011

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

New Routes is a small, voluntary fostering project operated, since 1992, by Father Hudson's Society and based in Coleshill. Father Hudson's Society is the social care agency of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham and is a registered charity. The fostering project recruits carers within a 30 mile radius of the Coleshill office and in Birmingham city centre.

The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval, support and training of foster carers who provide fostering placements for children and young people placed by a number of local authorities. A range of placement types are provided including short and long term placements, placement for permanence and parent and child placements.

Currently 20 fostering households provide placements for 29 young people.

### 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: **outstanding**.

At the previous inspection, in July 2011, New Routes was judged outstanding. No requirements or recommendations were made. The agency retains its outstanding judgement and again there are no regulatory shortfalls and no identified areas for improvement.

Preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers are all areas of real strength and reflect an admirable focus on prioritising how the individual needs of children and young people placed will be met.

A real dedication and commitment to child-centred practice and transparency of operation permeate through all the activities of this agency. Young people are placed with carers who have the skills to meet their individual needs and a determination to ensure that they are safe, happy and very well cared for. Those carers are provided with excellent support, by dedicated, professional social work staff who view the children and young people as the central focus of their work.

The manager provides extremely effective oversight and leadership, which motivates both staff and carers to be creative in meeting young people's needs and to be ambitious for those young people with regard to education, social and emotional development and personal growth.

The manager monitors all areas of practice diligently and rigorously, and utilises this monitoring effectively, to promote the continuous development of the service. Staff, carers and young people feel highly valued and feel fully involved in the development of the service. Effective working relationships with partner agencies ensure that young people, and their carers, are able to access the services they need in a timely way. This greatly enhances the potential for young people to achieve consistently and to progress positively into adult life.

An independent professional sums up the strengths of this agency well: 'This agency has a very open, honest approach. They are wholly transparent and this allows for constant reflection and growth. Workers are a close knit team and carers are very much part of the team. Management is strong. Leadership allows all members of the organisation to feel confident in their own practice and to contribute to the agency's growth. The child is central to all practice'.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

A number of the young people, placed with this agency, are in placements, which have been confirmed as their permanent placements or are currently being given consideration as such. This helps them to feel safe, stable and settled. They make exceptional progress. The motivation of foster carers, and their dedication to helping young people to really feel part of the family, is demonstrated by the significant numbers of young people who remain in their foster homes post eighteen, or maintain regular contact with their carers after they have moved on. This means that many young people continue to receive guidance and support from their foster carers well into adulthood. There have been unplanned endings to placements but the placement disruption rate is significantly below the national average. Where unplanned endings have occurred they have been well managed and were wholly prompted by safety and welfare concerns.

Young people are provided with comprehensive, age appropriate information about what being fostered with this agency means. Wherever possible they also receive good information about their potential foster carers before they are placed and are able to make introductory visits. Young people's views about their placements, and about what the agency provides, are sought through questionnaires, opportunities to talk with their carer's supervising social worker and, more informally through regularly staged workshops and social activities. Young people have influenced the content of workshops and the choice of venues for activities. They feel that their views are valued because they receive feedback via regular newsletters and also, at a more personal level, carefully individualised, written responses from the manager. Their individual achievements are recognised and celebrated both in the newsletters and through the issue of personal certificates of achievement.

Young people are provided with good opportunities to engage in a range of activities, to join local youth clubs and scout groups, and to travel and so to broaden their life experiences. Young people value and enjoy these opportunities and they additionally support the young people to develop better social interaction with their peers. Young people say: 'I love my foster carer. She does loads of stuff with me. I am part of the family and she takes me everywhere'; 'I get on well with my carer, she's funny and friendly'; 'I'm more self-reliant, I can make decisions'; 'I love the activity days. I've done cake pops, zoolabs, oh loads of things. I Like St Johns too and the boys and girls brigade. I've got friends there and I help out now with younger ones'. This helps young people to develop self-confidence and strong feelings of self-worth.

Young people are robustly supported to attend education and to achieve well. Placing social workers recognise and value the improvements young people have made educationally: 'I completely trust the carers judgement re education. They are excellent. It's always their priority. They are really helping him to both enjoy his education and to achieve to his full ability'. Some young people, who previously had very erratic school attendance, have gained excellent results in GCSE exams. Some young people are currently preparing to begin courses of university study, whilst others have their sights set on apprenticeships. All the young people spoken to reflect clear ambitions for their futures and are being robustly supported to achieve these. Where young people's behaviour, skill limitations or emotional instabilities have the potential to disrupt their education, or restrict their achievements, their carers provide consistent support. Carers also push hard to make sure that the young people receive the additional professional input and support they need to help them to achieve their full potential. Some young people receive extra tuition or additional support in school whilst some are accessing counselling and therapeutic input to help them to deal with emotional issues. A foster carer says: 'This agency really supports the children. They see beyond the behaviour to the person underneath and help us to do the same'.

All young people are well supported to keep in contact with their families, where this is appropriate. There is good carer recognition of the value for young people of retaining positive contact with families but carers are also supporting young people well when family contact is inconsistent and not always positive. Many young people

are living with their brothers and sisters in their placements with this agency and this enables them to support each other and retain important birth family ties as they grow up.

There is a real 'team around the child' ethos in the way this agency works with its foster carers and a commendable emphasis on consistently promoting young people's positive progress and development in all areas of their lives. This ensures that socially, emotionally and educationally young people placed with this agency's carers experience a period of significant achievement in their lives and, as a result, move more positively towards adulthood.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This is a relatively small agency with no intention for excessive growth. Since the fostering project was established, in 1992, it has maintained a steady recruitment of carers with a declared intention not to exceed 30 fostering households. Around 30% of the current carers have been with the agency for more than ten years. Current recruitment reflects recognition that some of these carers currently have long term, stable placements and may not become available for further placements. The staff team, the fostering panel and the carer population reflect diversity in terms of age, gender and ethnic origin and in terms of experience and skills.

Young people's very individual needs are clearly recognised, well documented and demonstrably met in their placements with this agency. The agency and its carers work well with placing authorities to ensure that that authority's care plan for each young person is fully implemented. Over and above this the agency develops its own placement plan, in negotiation with the foster carer and the placing social worker, at the point of each young person's admission. This is regularly reviewed to demonstrate the progress young people make whilst placed with foster carers. Extreme care is taken to ensure careful matching when placement referrals are received. Carers are demonstrably able to meet young people's varying needs, including managing challenging behaviour and providing robust support to those who have had damaging previous experiences. This agency is particularly pro-active in promoting the placement of brothers and sisters together and many of its carers demonstrate real commitment to this.

Where young people are placed in households, which are not a cultural match, some excellent specialist work is being undertaken to ensure that both the carers and the young people themselves are developing a real understanding of their country of origin, language and traditions. A worker involved in facilitating this work comments: 'Work with the children has focused on the fact that although they were born in the UK they need awareness of their own culture, background and religion. It is even more impressive that the carers have really recognised this and seen that for them to support the children they too need an awareness of their background, cultural history and traditions'.

Preparation and assessment, carer support and training are all areas of real strength and there is an admirable focus on the individual needs of children and young people placed within all of these areas. Foster carers receive an excellent level of advice and support to complete the training, support and development standards in a timely way. This means that all carers, apart from those recently approved, have achieved these. Carers value the additional, very relevant training opportunities offered to them and say: 'Father Hudson's are always available for advice and support and all the staff there know the placements you have and know the carers strengths and weaknesses so are able to structure training to suit the individual'; 'Father Hudson's have gone to the trouble of sourcing specialist training for specific placements for us which has helped maintain a difficult placement to adulthood and we believe this level of training commitment would be difficult to find within another agency'.

Foster carers see themselves as professionals, feel highly valued by the agency and provide high standards of care to young people. They value the 'family feel' of a small agency and the fact that staff know them, and all of the young people placed, extremely well. One carer says: 'We enjoy working for them which is why we have stayed so long, we like the family feel, we like the tailored individual support'. Foster carers feel central to the team around the child, communicate effectively with other professionals and so have significant influence on young people's progress. Where necessary both the carers and agency staff are strong advocates for young people's rights, ensuring that they have appropriate access to independent advocates and to understand how to raise any concerns or complaints effectively. Where young people require additional therapeutic or specialist support to help to sustain their foster placement, and to help them to grow and develop as individuals, this is well recognised and robustly promoted. In some instances foster carers are receiving therapeutic support to enable them to more effectively manage young people's challenging behaviour and so minimise the potential impact of their behaviour on their life experiences. Two staff members have recently completed the 'Fostering Changes' programme and propose to deliver this to carers to better equip them in managing more complex placements. The support, encouragement and advice they receive from the agency supports carers well in helping young people to generally achieve exceptionally positive outcomes.

The fostering panel features individuals with a very varied range of experience and expertise. The panel exercises a robust and rigorous quality assurance function. It retains independence whilst having a very thorough understanding of how the agency functions. The panel minutes provide good clarity regarding the reasons for members' recommendations with regard to foster carer approvals. The minutes reflect very thorough consideration, which leads to well informed agency decision making.

Delegated authority has had a high profile in this agency because of the commitment to viewing young people as integral members of the foster family. Foster carers are therefore very clear about their capacity to make day to day decisions for young people and this ensures that those young people do not feel different from their friends.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Young people feel safe in their placements.

The agency has a clear and comprehensive safeguarding policy, which is regularly reviewed and is submitted to the Local Safeguarding Children Board for approval. Staff and carer training, covering all aspects of safeguarding and child protection, is excellent. This makes sure that they are fully aware of their reporting and recording responsibilities should young people engage in behaviour, which place them at risk, or should they make an allegation. The manager keeps fully up to date with current safeguarding practice and ensures that issues of specific current concern are quickly incorporated into discussions and training for staff and foster carers. An example of this has been a recent focus on child sexual exploitation and on female genital mutilation. Carers demonstrate very sound awareness of how negative and abusive experiences can impact on young people's attitudes, behaviour and capacity to trust adults and they talk confidently about the sensitivity needed to help young people move forward from such experiences. Where young people have made disclosures, to their carers of historical abuse within their family they have been sensitively and effectively supported by their foster carers and by the agency's robust reporting procedures.

Carers and staff demonstrate real awareness of the need to continuously review the potential risks to young people within the home, out in the community, associated with their activities or heightened by their presenting behaviour. One young person told the inspector that he had engaged in lots of activities such as paint balling, laser quest and rock climbing and his main ambition now was sky diving. His foster carer joked with him 'Crikey that will be some risk assessment'. Robust, effective strategies are rigorously employed to reduce young people's exposure to danger. Individualised safe care policies are developed when young people are placed with their foster carers, are regularly reviewed and updated, and are shared well should young people be cared for by back-up or respite carers. More importantly carers focus well on developing young people's own awareness of, and capacity to promote, their own personal safety.

The agency has wholly appropriate procedures for dealing with complaints. No complaints have been received since the previous inspection.

Recruitment procedures for both carers and staff are extremely thorough and robust and are firmly focused on ensuring that young people are not exposed to adults who could pose a threat to them.

Unannounced visits are undertaken, to each foster home, twice a year. One of these visits is undertaken by an agency social worker, other than the foster carer's supervising social worker, to provide an independent oversight of the safety of the placement. The manager is aware that the pro-forma for recording unannounced visits could better reflect an assessment of the overall quality of care and is already



preparing to implement a replacement form. Monthly supervising social worker visits, to all fostering households, incorporate regular health and safety checks and inspections of young people's bedroom, as well as discussions with young people to make sure that they are safe, happy and well cared for.

Young people rarely go missing from their foster homes, though there have been some instances of this happening and of unauthorised absence. These have particularly occurred where newly placed young people have struggled with separation from their birth families and have felt compelled to return home. When young people are absent or missing carers notify the agency immediately, maintain a record of the incident and inform all relevant professionals. Carers are very aware that, in these circumstances, their priority is to secure young people's safe return as quickly as possible.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency's statement of purpose provides good clarity regarding the ethos of the service and what it offers to the placing authorities who commission its services.

Management is visible, efficient and effective in this service. There are highly productive working relationships with local authority commissioners, placing social workers and associated professionals. Those relationships are very firmly focused on securing the best possible outcomes for every young person placed. Foster carers receive consistent and effective support from a dedicated, child-focused staff team.

An annual service development and evaluation day is held for the staff team, and one for foster carers, to ensure that everyone is fully aware of what the agency is achieving already and is able to contribute to planning for the future. Foster carers feel very much a part of decision making in this agency and say: 'Support and advice is always given in a non-patronising way, advice is given, opinions are never forced on you'; 'We are constantly involved and consulted of changes and regularly requested to make suggestions for service improvement'. Within the Father Hudson organisation generally there is very sound awareness, at senior management and trustee level, of the development objectives of the fostering service and this ensures continuing appropriate financial investment. A member of the staff team gives a very succinct summary of why the team approach in this agency helps young people to progress so well: 'Our carers enjoy the robust training programme and comment that despite being experienced carers that they continue to learn new things every time. We work closely with our neighbouring local authorities in order to ensure that together we can continue to improve on the progress for all of the children placed with us. Our trustees are committed and supportive of the work that we do and have a genuine desire and interest in how we progress. We continue to review practice in line with the relevant legislation and ensure that this is filtered through to all levels. The whole team put the looked after children's needs first. They are passionate'.

The Registered Manager has wide ranging experience in the field of fostering and

ensures that she maintains a very current knowledge of changes to legislation and practice. She evidences personal strength and strong leadership qualities. Staff describe her as a 'hands-on' manager who is 'accessible and approachable'. Clear lines of accountability and a strong management team rigorously promote innovative and reflective practice, which centres strongly on young people's experiences. Staff, at all levels, are dedicated professionals who feel very much part of a strong team. All of these factors promote the agency's continuous successful growth and development.

The manager has highly effective and efficient monitoring systems enabling the agency to have a good overview of the progress made by young people in all areas. Young people's attendance and educational achievement improves, challenging and potentially unsafe behaviours reduce and young people become progressively more confident and capable.

## 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.