

Freedom Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Suzanne Young
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Registered person	Freedom Fostering Limited
Registered manager	Darren Johnson
Responsible individual	Maureen Johnson
Date of last inspection	20/10/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is an independent fostering agency operated by a private company. It has an office in Wolverhampton. It offers a number of different types of placements for children and young people; emergency, respite, short-term, long-term, unaccompanied minors, sibling group and mother and baby placements. They currently have 25 approved foster families with 39 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**.

Children and young people are having their individual needs well met and are positive about the care they receive. Placement stability is very good. This is because they are living in placements where they are able to develop safe and secure relationships. As a result, they are making good progress with their foster families.

The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers to meet the needs of the children and young people. Timely assessments of prospective foster carers are child focused, comprehensive, and analytical. Foster carers feel supported and well informed. They receive a high level of training underpinned by theoretical research. One foster carer stated, 'Freedom Fostering really have been fantastic.'

The agency focuses strongly on the needs and welfare of children and young people.

They invest heavily in children and young people by supporting care leavers and community projects. Foster carers are very positive about the agency. One commented, 'I feel that Freedom Fostering have developed their service over the years and are going from strength to strength.'

Annual unannounced visits, safer caring plans, and risk assessments help to embed safeguarding firmly within the fostering agency. Children and young people feel safe and do not engage in risk taking behaviours.

Managers and staff are child focused, creative and demonstrate a clear vision for improving the outcomes of the children and young people placed with them. Weakness in management systems has led to shortfalls which have resulted in three regulatory breaches. These relate to the numbers of children in the foster home, timeliness of foster carer reviews and foster carers' records. Two recommendations are made to improve the clarity of panel minutes and provide medication training for 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
1989	ensure foster carers only exceed the usual fostering limit when they are exempted from it by the local authority within whose area they live (Schedule 7 (4)(1), Children Act 1989)	31/03/2015
28 (2011)	ensure foster carer reviews take place not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28(2))	31/03/2015
30 (2011)	maintain a record of each placement with the foster parent, including the name, age and sex of each child placed, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstances of the termination. (Regulation 30(3)(a))	31/03/2015

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 trained in the management and administration of medication (NMS 6.10)

- ensure written minutes are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendations. (NMS 14.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people make good progress with their foster families. They feel safe and secure in stable placements, and are able to develop confidence and self-esteem. Very few placements end in an unplanned way. One young person stated, 'would love to stay here long term.' The agency promotes the placement of brothers and sisters together and has many foster families who can accommodate more than one child. As a result, the agency has a high level of sibling placements.

Children lead healthy lives. Those who have poor health when first placed with foster carers, receive appropriate care and treatment. There are clear examples of children coming into placement suffering from eczema and asthma and their health significantly improving within a short period. One placing social worker commented, 'Children have thrived and the difficulties that they initially presented have dissipated.' Foster carers promote a healthy environment for children and young people who engage in a wide range of physical activities and eat healthily.

The agency gives education a high priority. The vast majority of children and young people are receiving full-time education and have 100% attendance. Where they are not attending school full time, the agency actively supports them by delivering direct work on an individual basis. The agency has a specifically developed education room with computers for children and young people to use. Support workers actively chase placing social workers to ensure children and young people's personal education meetings take place and monitor educational attainment. As a result, they do well at school. For some there has been excellent progress, with two young people attending university.

Children and young people express their wishes and feelings and have their voices heard. Supervising social workers work individually with children and young people to gain their views about their care and conduct life story work. As a result, children and young people are able to influence the day-to-day care they receive. They attend activity days organised by the agency during school holidays. This encourages participation and gives staff the opportunity to gain their views and ideas regarding the running of the agency.

The agency supports young people as they approach independence and after they leave care, through 'staying put' arrangements. One young person who had been cared for by the agency stated, 'They (foster carers) nourished me and taught me. They did everything anyone could do for a child... they are my family.' Another young person stated, 'my foster carers helped me build my confidence...I am finally where I want to be.'

Young people reach their potential and achieve economic well-being. The agency provides a mentor for young people post 18. They also fund a student house to support young people to obtain independent living skills and to pursue further education.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds to meet the needs of the children and young people. The quality of assessments is good. Written assessment reports are analytical and comprehensive.

Foster carers receive a high degree of support from the agency. They receive regular visits from supervising social workers and attend the organisation's weekly coffee mornings. Support workers help with children who are not in education and during school holiday time if required. One foster carer stated, 'I receive 100% support... Support never stops.'

Training for foster carers and staff takes place on a monthly basis during the evening and at the weekend to ensure all are able to attend. Feedback from foster carers regarding the support and level of training they receive has been consistently positive. The range of training is diverse, although does not include the administration of medication. As a result, foster carers may not be fully aware how to safely administer medication. Foster carers learn about current developments and issues relevant to their foster children, in quarterly newsletters. This helps them meet the specific needs of the children and young people they care for. Foster Carers have clear ongoing professional development opportunities. The majority complete the training, development and support standard (TDS) in a timely fashion. Where they do not achieve this within 12 months, this is not due to any shortfall from the agency.

Foster carers work well with social workers and others to ensure placements are well planned and meet the needs of the children. Foster carers provide a profile to local authorities and children and young people to help inform placements. Children and young people are encouraged to visit prior to any planned placement. Foster carers have an appropriate level of information at the start of placements to care safely for children and young people, including those placements made in an emergency.

The fostering panel has a high degree of independence and panel members are diverse. The fostering panel carries out its quality assurance function to a good standard. Decisions following panel are made in a timely fashion. The agency has struggled over recent years to obtain a high level of expertise on its fostering panel. Panel minutes are timely but not comprehensive. They do not clearly reflect the judgements and recommendations made.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has a strong focus on safeguarding. All working within the agency receive regular training in various safeguarding areas. Staff and foster carers are aware and have access to information about how to respond to disclosures or safeguarding concerns. Managers have developed effective relationships with other agencies including local authorities to protect children and young people. They attend local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) training and cascade this to the rest of the team. As a result, all have a clear understanding of the impact of abuse on children and young people and their role in safeguarding children.

Children and young people are safe living in their foster placements and do not engage in risk taking behaviours. Supervising social workers regularly conduct health and safety checks and unannounced visits. Safer caring plans and risk assessments effectively support and protect children in foster families.

Children and young people have a range of adults with whom they feel able to raise any concerns or issues. They have good relationships with their foster carers' supervising social workers, who see them alone at least once a month and develop meaningful relationships. Children and young people also regularly see their own social workers and have access to independent visitors. Although children and young people and their foster carers are aware and have access to the agency's complaints procedure, there have been no complaints or safeguarding concerns made to the agency in the last 12 months. There have been three complaints against foster carers since the last inspection in 2011. The agency has appropriately referred all to safeguarding professionals for proper investigation and conclusion.

Children and young people very rarely go missing from their foster placements. In the last two years, there have only been two occasions where one young person went missing. Foster carers are aware of the procedure to follow and report that they feel confident in following them in the event of any children or young people going missing.

The agency has thorough recruitment and vetting procedures in place for staff, foster carers, and panel members. This ensures, as far as possible, that unsuitable people do not have access to vulnerable children, young people, or their foster carers.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement**.

The Registered Manager and responsible individual are both qualified social workers and have a wealth of experience between them. Despite the great creativity of staff and managers, there are some fundamental flaws in the Registered Provider's operation of the agency. Although the agency is delivering a service that is improving outcomes for children and young people, the management systems and processes do

not effectively support the functions of the agency. For instance, the reviews of foster carers take place approximately every year, but not within 12 months as required. Foster carers' records do not contain the essential information about children and young people placed with them. This has led, on one occasion, to a failure to obtain an exemption certificate and on other occasions foster carers exceeding their terms of approval for short periods. While no foster child was at risk, this indicates the Registered Manager's lack of understanding of the legal responsibility for placements, processes, and records.

The agency is effectively resourced. Staff receive regular supervision and feel well supported. The use of social work students ensures that the service is up-to-date with professional developments. Managers are committed to improving lives for children and young people and have a clear vision for the development of the agency. They challenge placing authorities when needed to ensure clear action to improve the experiences and outcomes for children in their care. The previous recommendations from the last inspection have been met. These relate to policies and procedures, panel members and recruitment checks for foster carers and staff.

Since the last inspection, the agency has moved premises and are now located in the middle of Wolverhampton. The office premises include an education room with computers for young people's use and a therapy centre for children and young people to relax and communicate with each other. The centre is used for contact, individual work, and group activities, and caters for the various age groups of the children visiting the centre.

Foster carers and children and young people continuously shape and improve the agency. They have been actively involved in the development of specialised areas in the office where foster carers and children and young people can meet. In addition, evaluation forms are sent out to prospective foster carers during the recruitment, assessment, and approval process in order to gain their views and improve the service.

The agency invests heavily in children and young people. The agency has bought a house in readiness for the placement of a large sibling group. They have a holiday caravan for carers and children to use. They also support community projects children and young people are involved in. For instance, they have donated money to schools to purchase audio/visual equipment and have sponsored a football team's kit. One local authority social worker commented, 'The service that has been provided has been of upmost value to the children...'

An accurate Statement of Purpose reflects the functions of the agency. A comprehensive range of policies and procedures, alongside the agency's website and the Foster Carers' Charter, ensures staff and foster carers understand the aims and objectives of the service. There are two children's guides covering all ages. Young people have been instrumental in designing the young person's guide to include a citizen's passport.

Partnership working is good. Managers have developed positive relationships with

placing social workers and local authority commissioners. One placing social worker stated, 'Communication from the supervising social worker is good and they work in partnership with the local authority.'

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.