

Children of Colour Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Sharon Lewis Payne
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Date of last inspection	09 May 2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Children of Colour fostering service is based in the London Borough of Croydon. It is a privately owned, independent fostering agency providing services for children and young people from birth to 18 years. The primary aim of the agency is to provide high-quality foster placements to meet children's diverse needs.

Children of Colour provide emergency, respite, short and long-term foster placements. At the time of inspection there were 26 approved fostering households and 33 children were placed through the agency. The agency provides a service to a wide range of children, which includes sibling groups and children with disabilities.

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 are thriving in life-enhancing placements which provide them with a secure base. They are growing in confidence, independence and maturity which contributes to their increased self-esteem. Children receive effective emotional, physical and psychological support. They are making good educational progress and have realistic aspirations for the future.

Children benefit from dynamic, professional foster carers who take pride in their role and strongly advocate on their behalf. Meticulous matching ensures exceptionally

stable placements and good retention of foster carers. The agency's recruitment policy addresses the need to have a diverse range of foster carers.

Children benefit from well-trained foster carers, who have a good working knowledge of fostering. The agency offers good support to foster families, which includes addressing the personal impact fostering may have on their household. A key strength is the manner in which the whole family are involved in fostering. Back-up carers and a respite carer system further contributes to placement stability and forms a cohesive team around the child. Children benefit from an exceptionally independent, constructively challenged and diligent fostering panel.

Elements of the agency's safeguarding arrangements are good. However, there is a minor shortfall in the panel recruitment practices as all members of the central list do not have two references on file. All other checks are in place and they do not have unsupervised access to children so the impact of this shortfall is minimal. Foster carers receive an extensive range of training which focuses on safeguarding children. They understand it is one of their most important responsibilities to keep children safe. There is not an issue with children going missing. The agency appropriately addresses allegations and concerns about standards of care and, where necessary, de-registers foster carers.

Children benefit from an effective, enthusiastic leadership and management team, who are focused on providing a personalised child-focused service. Children benefit from an experienced, well-supported staff team. Strong relationships with placing authorities ensures effective partnership working. Staff undertake reflective, solution-focused social work which carefully considers children's needs. Leaders and managers are building on the strengths of the agency and are purposely tackling areas for further improvement. The agency are taking a more strategic approach to quality assurance and they have a very good capacity to further improve.

Children receive an overall good service. One requirement is made to ensure panel recruitment is more robust. Recommendations are made to further involve children in service development, standardise record keeping and address the need for a higher degree of strategic oversight. Recommendations focus on improving practice; ensuring the needs of children are at the centre of the service and contributes to the drive for further improvement.

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
20 (3)	Ensure full and satisfactory information is available in relation to panel members as specified in Schedule 1. This relates to	01/08/2015

(c)	the need for two references.	
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Recommendations

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

ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)

ensure information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future (NMS 26.6)

ensure all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS. (NMS 25.3)

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

Judgement outcome: Good.

Children score their fostering experience '10 out of 10'. There are significant improvements from their initial starting points. Children are thriving in life-enhancing placements, which provides them with a secure base. They are growing in confidence, independence and maturity which contributes to their increased self-esteem. Children are developing their social skills; they are calmer and have improved emotional wellbeing. Schools highlight that children are 'smiling more' and have 'blossomed since being looked after'.

Children quickly settle in their foster homes. The agency advocates to ensure foster carers receive the necessary information to meet children's needs. Social workers highlight the 'positive attachment' children form with their foster families. They state this is 'the best environment' for their children. Children benefit from the agency's low placement breakdown rate. This enables them to enjoy valued stability for as long as they need. Foster carers work with young people to prepare them for living independently. Young people are also able to remain in placement on 'Staying Put' arrangements. This helps ensure a smoother transition into adult life.

Children express their wishes and feelings and know how to complain. They influence their day-to-day care and contribute to foster carer's annual reviews. Children also contact the agency's social workers independently and are seen regularly during supervisory visits. Children's social workers highlight that foster carers also 'advocate well'. The agency has plans to further involve children in decision making. They acknowledge that children can make a greater contribution to service development. This will enable the service to continue to develop in a child centered manner. Ensuring children's wishes, feelings and views influence the agency's continual improvement.

Children express pride in who they are and have a more positive outlook on life. They benefit from having an open dialogue where they can express their individuality. Foster carers assist with valuable life story work, which helps capture precious memories. Children receive support to follow their spiritual needs, attending places of worship and following religious practices. Young people receive non-judgemental support regarding their sexuality. Foster carers' training enables them to help young people tackle discrimination. They also receive assistance with their personal identity and immigration status.

Children receive effective emotional, physical and psychological support. Foster carers actively promote a healthy life style and they excel in the management of children's health needs. This includes closely liaising with health professionals, enabling children to have a better quality of life. Medical staff positively comment on children's progress and their improved health outcomes.

Children are making good educational progress within placements which unearths their potential. Some foster carers have obtained private tuition for children to enable them to improve their grades. Other carers have enabled children to obtain part-time employment. Children respond positively to the encouraging attitude of their foster carers. They are achieving numerous certificates and awards. Children are successfully completing their exams. They are attending college and have high aspirations for the future, which includes going to university. Young people also have the opportunity to focus on their personal development through their involvement in citizenship schemes and international charitable work.

Children benefit from arrangements which enable them to maintain relationships with their relatives. The agency actively promotes and facilitates contact between children and their birth families. They work well with groups of brothers and/or sisters and where possible they are placed together. Even if children have to live in separate fostering households, they live near to each other and foster carers then take turns to ensure they meet-up regularly. Birth families appreciate foster placements, an example, a father refers to foster carers as their child's 'parents'. Children are treated as part of the fostering family; this extends to wider family members. Children know they are fostered; however, some affectionately refer to their female carers as 'Aunty' or 'Mamma'. Foster carers express great pride in children's progress and strongly advocate for them, as if they were their own.

Children enjoy an extensive range of social, educational and recreational activities. These help children develop their talents and learn new skills. Activities include swimming, martial arts, dance, drama, ice hockey and learning Mandarin. Irrespective of any disability, they find a hobby to positively engage in. The agency also organises group activities, including bowling, attending pantomime and a summer outing. This enables children to socialise together, widening their friendship groups. Children also enjoy going away on holiday with their foster carers, which provides an opportunity to visit different parts of Britain and other countries.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good.

Children state foster carers are 'really nice'. Their social workers describe foster carers as 'absolutely great' and 'child focused' and 'very supportive and nurturing'. Professionals highlight that 'both the agency and the carers are proactive in considering the needs of children'. They describe this as being the agency's 'motivating factor'. Children benefit from dynamic, professional foster carers, who take pride in their role and strongly advocate on their behalf. Children's social workers highlight that the agency 'looks out for the best interest of the children' and 'work well with professionals'. Meticulous matching ensures exceptionally stable placements and good retention of foster carers.

The agency's recruitment policy addresses the need to have a diverse range of foster carers, in accordance with the statement of purpose. Foster carers are able to meet the complex needs of children. Commissioners comment on the tenacity and resilience of carers to address children's challenging behaviours. Currently the agency is extending their advertising to the Hertfordshire area and different parts of London. The aim is to recruit carers from a wider range of ethnicities and professions to meet the referral demands.

Foster carers benefit from a structured preparation process. This enables them to obtain an in-depth understanding of fostering. The assessment process is sound and the quality of reports is continually improving. There is a marked effort to provide greater analysis and fully address competencies and applicant's capacity to care. Foster carers and their families value the support provided by the agency. The extensive range of support helps them to cope with the additional demands of fostering on their family life. Foster carers benefit from regular supervisory visits, which they describe as 'excellent'.

Children benefit from well-trained foster carers, who have a good working knowledge of fostering. Foster carers are kept up-to-date on developments within the field and topical issues affecting children. All foster carers have the necessary vocational training or are currently undertaking this course. There is continued personal development through a comprehensive training programme and the agency funds external courses. Carers describe training as 'brilliant' and 'valuable'. Due to caring or work commitments, some foster carers are unable to attend support groups or training events. The agency is aware of the need to creatively address this issue and there are plans to introduce more e-learning opportunities.

The agency holds regular support groups, with a specialist group available for men. Foster carers and children benefit from dedicated mentoring arrangements. The agency holds annual events where achievements are recognised. Foster carers appreciate the receipt of certificates, Christmas hampers and 'carer of the year' awards. The agency aims to promote a personalised, family atmosphere and also acknowledges significant events, birthdays, hospitalisation and bereavement. Foster carers appreciate that they are 'known individually', 'even if they are not 'my supervising social worker'. They highlight that the 'team are approachable and make time for me. All are warm, friendly, encouraging and supportive'.

Foster carers feel valued, stating they are happy to be fostering for Children of Colour. They work very effectively with the agency and children's social workers so that placements focus on promoting children's best interests. A key strength is the manner in which the whole family are involved in fostering, an example being that back-up carers are primarily relatives, which provides good continuity of care for children. There is also a respite carer system which is offered by another in-house foster carer. This further contributes to placement stability and forms a cohesive team around the child. Foster carers positively influence placement planning and have an efficient understanding of their delegated authority. The agency actively works with local authorities to ensure that full information is always shared with foster carers to enable effective placement planning. Where this is not possible, the agency persistently pursue this information.

Children benefit from an exceptionally independent, constructively challenging and diligent fostering panel. The panel has a very good working knowledge of the regulations and of improving practice. Panel decision-making focuses on safeguarding and promoting secure and stable placements. The panel chair is co-founder of an outstanding fostering service and is a highly experienced professional. This individual has an excellent command of fostering. Central list members include social work managers, a young adult who has experience of being looked after, a foster carer, health and other established professionals. Foster carers appreciate the fact that panel 'has someone who had been fostered'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

Elements of the agency's safeguarding arrangements are good. However, there are shortfalls in the panel recruitment practices. Although there are disclosure and barring checks, two references are not obtained. This does not reflect best practice and does not comply with regulations. Members of the central list do not have unsupervised access to children; therefore the impact of this shortfall is minimal. This appears to be an oversight by the agency as staff member and foster carer files demonstrate safe recruitment and detail all the required regulatory information.

Professionals highlight that the agency provides 'stable long terms placements in which carers work constantly to keep children safe.' There is not an issue with children going missing from care. Where children are not engaging in the placement, prompt referral to placing authorities ensures concerns are effectively addressed. The agency has strong and effective relationships with the placing authorities and other agencies to protect those children who engage in risk-taking behaviour.

Foster carers receive an extensive range of training which focuses on safeguarding children. They are aware of the dangers of child sexual exploitation, domestic violence, gangs, child trafficking, female genital mutilation and other aspects of safeguarding. Foster carers benefit from basic to advanced child protection training.

This deepens their awareness of abuse, enabling them to care for and take appropriate action to protect and support children. Foster carers demonstrate a sound awareness of the procedure relating to managing allegations. Foster carers are very assertive and will use complaints procedures. They report that the agency is very open, approachable and transparent, which enables a constructive, honest dialogue.

Children receive protection from the wide range of policies and procedures. An example is the household safe caring policy. This provides clear guidance for foster carers to provide a safe environment. Care and control guidance stresses the uniqueness of each child and their different life experiences. Foster carers are guided to use maximum flexibility in the care they provide. Foster carers and staff highlight the strategies they use to help children develop positive behaviour patterns. Bullying guidance includes cyber bullying. Foster carers learn from events within social care, an example being serious case reviews. This further equips them with the knowledge needed to protect children.

Foster carers understand it is one of their most important responsibilities to keep children safe. The agency staff make annual unannounced visits to foster carers and routinely ensure that children are spoken to without their foster carers. Allegations against or suspicion of harm by foster carers are referred immediately to the respective local authority. The agency appropriately addresses standards of care concerns and where necessary de-register foster carers. A good example of this is the independent reviewing mechanism upholding the agency's decision to de-register a foster carer.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good.

Children benefit from leadership and management arrangements which professionals describe as 'smashing'. They highlight that Children of Colour is a 'very good agency' and leaders are 'very professional', 'helpful and adaptable' and have a 'passion to serve this community'. Experienced foster carers profess the agency is 'the best professional body' they have 'ever dealt with in our fostering history'. They attribute this to the 'excellent management'. Foster carers appreciate the transparency of the agency. Highlighting that they feel they are 'part of a family' and management 'know children by name and not sight'.

This is an agency where leaders and managers learn from events and reflect on issues. Its service development plan details the improvement agenda. The agency have undertaken a consultation with all carers, the aim being to continually improve outcomes and the overall service provision. The commitment to quality of care reviews also contributes to their drive for improvement. The agency are taking a more strategic approach to quality assurance and staff have a good capacity to further improve. Leaders and manager have a sincere desire to provide an outstanding service. They demonstrate a commitment to a more meticulous management approach to ensure all fostering activity is consistent with regulations, standards and best practice. Leaders and managers understand the importance of stringent monitoring, which will enable them to continue to provide good outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers have a competent understanding of the need for good quality assurance systems and the need to regularly monitor and review children's experiences. The information technology system is able to track children's progress and produces data, as needed. Foster carers are also able to record on this database; however, this is not always happening due to technical issues or time constraints. Where this is not possible, they write records manually. Foster carers understand that information about each child must be recorded clearly and in a meaningful manner. This will assist when children access their files now or in the future. Record keeping which reflects children's day to day life, enables them to make sense of their care experience and provides an opportunity for them to reflect on their memories in adulthood.

Children benefit from an experienced staff team, who have access to regular training, individual supervision and performance appraisals. The agency provides a positive working environment for staff. Their opinions are valued and they contribute to service development. Staff highlight that leaders and managers are the 'best bosses' they have had in a long time. They comment that management are 'very compassionate', 'approachable' and 'get on board to get the work done'. Professionals comment on the 'lovely staff' and the 'good outcomes for the children placed'. The strong relationships with placing authorities ensure effective partnership working. Staff undertake reflective, solution-focused social work which carefully considers the needs of children.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose which is available on its website. This document clearly outlines their aims and objectives. Children benefit from their own age-appropriate guides, which helps them make sense of the fostering experience and details external parties they can contact if they have any concerns. The agency has effectively implemented the Foster Carers' Charter and foster carers write their own personal vow to their task, demonstrating heartfelt accountability. The agency's policies and procedures meet regulatory requirements and promote children's best interests.

Children benefit from an agency which has a good history of complying with regulations and standards. Notifiable events are reported to all relevant parties. The agency has effectively addressed the four recommendations made at the previous inspection. Children receive better protection from the agency's commitment to promoting safeguarding and safer caring through training, support and annual health and safety checks. The agency has an increased commitment to quality assurance and improving their service. It holds monthly meetings focused on the implementation and monitoring of panel recommendations. The out-of-hour's service is more effective and includes a rotation system involving all staff.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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. inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.